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# Reframing the runway

A case study of the impact of community organizing on news and politics

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses newspaper coverage of a plan by the Massachusetts Port Authority to construct a new runway that would triple the amount of flights at Boston's Logan International Airport. The project was supported by the Boston business community, the hospitality and airline industries and the Republican state leadership – who because of their status as elite sources, had the power to create the initial framing of the issue in terms of 'economic progress' vs 'stagnation'. Early coverage in *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Herald* reproduced this frame, failing to elucidate larger social justice issues involved for working class and minority communities abutting the airport. Through community organizing and media work enhanced with new communications technologies, a volunteer-run coalition of Boston area residents drew attention to issues of equity concerning the project's environmental impacts, and helped educate elected officials, journalists and the general public about alternatives to the runway. This affected the framing of the issue in the news and, more importantly, broadened the policy debate in ways that stimulated regionalized transportation planning aimed at reducing environmental impacts for the communities around Logan.

KEY WORDS ■ community organizing ■ environmental justice ■ new media and activism ■ news frames ■ news sources ■ social movements and news

## Introduction

How do working-class communities come to be heard in a 'public sphere' in which the agenda and validity of viewpoints are largely determined by corporate and state interests? In order to influence public policy, marginalized constituencies must not only make their voices heard in the mainstream media but must also make those voices seem rational, valid and morally compelling. As is well known, there are formidable structural, administrative

and ideological forces that circumscribe coverage of working-class and other minority perspectives in the mainstream news media (Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991; Eliasoph, 1998; Bagdikian, 2000). Nevertheless, dissenting groups can affect news coverage in consequential ways. This article analyzes the media strategies of a working-class constituency to reframe the Massachusetts Port Authority's plan to increase flight capacity at Boston's Logan International Airport. I argue that the community's use of new communications technologies enhanced their organizing and educational efforts, helping them to influence news coverage of the issue and broaden the scope of public deliberation regarding state-wide transportation planning.

The case study is based on a textual analysis of 224 articles published in Boston's two major dailies, *The Boston Globe* and *The Boston Herald*, from January 1999 (when plans for a new runway at Logan became public) until July 2001, when the issue went to court.<sup>1</sup> I analyzed these articles for framing, sources, content and style of coverage, comparing stories written in the first two months of 1999 with those published after Communities Against Runway Expansion (CARE) began to organize. Statistical and historical data on flight delays and transportation policies was acquired from websites maintained by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Massport and CARE. Flyers, brochures and other printed materials distributed by Massport and CARE were also examined. As a resident of one of the communities heavily impacted by Logan, I was present at the founding meeting of CARE and regularly attended meetings, hearings, press conferences and other events related to the proposed runway, including presentations given by Massport and CARE. I also conducted interviews and informal discussions with CARE members, city officials, and Massport representatives.

### **Background on airport expansion**

From the 1930s to the late 1950s, the growth of Logan Airport required the destruction of homes, businesses and green space<sup>2</sup> in the working-class and immigrant community of East Boston.<sup>3</sup> In 1967, Massport bulldozed 75-acre Wood Island Park, the jewel of 19th-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted's 'Emerald Necklace' of urban oases surrounding Boston's perimeter (Sammarco, 1997: 52). For East Bostonians, who lived on limited incomes in densely packed triple-deckers, the popular park had been the community's only remaining public green space. Soon after the park's destruction, residents of Neptune Road, a street bordering the former park, received notices to vacate

their homes by order of eminent domain to facilitate additional airport expansion. Despite community demonstrations to halt the evictions and appeals to Governor John Volpe, non-compliant residents were forcibly removed by state police.

As Logan Airport continued to expand, radically altering quality of life for its neighbors,<sup>4</sup> concerned East Bostonians joined the Greater Boston Committee on the Transportation Crisis (GBC),<sup>5</sup> a city-wide coalition of Boston residents being negatively impacted by various state transportation policies. The GBC urged and eventually won a city-wide moratorium on all highway and airport-related transportation projects in Boston until a comprehensive study could be conducted to detail the area's projected transportation needs and evaluate the environmental impacts of proposed projects on local neighborhoods. These studies ultimately resulted in a state ban on Logan's further geographical expansion. Yet Massport continued to expand its capacity by building new terminals on existing property and extending hours of flight operation around the clock, bringing local residents the increased noise, traffic and air pollution that the ban was meant to prevent. As part of this intensified use of its existing footprint, Massport attempted to build a new runway called '14/32', which would triple landings and take-offs at Logan. In 1974, East Boston residents filed a lawsuit and won a court injunction against runway 14/32 that would remain in effect for the next 25 years.<sup>6</sup>

In December 1998, with support from a pro-business Republican state government,<sup>7</sup> Massport resurrected the runway proposal and initiated a massive public relations campaign, spending \$3 million to lobby businesses, political leaders and newspaper editorial boards (including those of the *Globe* and *Herald*);<sup>8</sup> over \$250,000 on TV, radio and direct mail advertising campaigns; and \$30,000 on a direct mail campaign targeting 60,000 frequent flyers.<sup>9</sup> Aiming to downplay demonstrably negative environmental impacts,<sup>10</sup> the agency framed the proposed \$25 million runway as a 'progress package' (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 7), crucial for the region's economic well-being, in which objectionable 'expansion' was framed as efficient 'modernization'. Claiming that 120,000 business hours and \$300 million dollars were lost each year due to flight delays, airport administrators argued that the discomfort of a minority of citizens was necessary 'to bring Boston into the 21st century' and compete with other cities for convention and tourist dollars. This well-publicized utilitarian reasoning preemptively cast the opposition of local communities as selfish when compared to the economic needs of the region as a whole. The Boston Chamber of Commerce, the airline and hospitality industries, 19 unions from the Greater Boston Labor Council, and thousands of frequent flyers supported the plan.

## Early coverage

During the first six months of 1999, more than 50 percent of runway coverage published in the *Globe* and *Herald* was framed as a contentious battle between opponents and proponents. Journalistic 'balance' consisted of illustrating the presence of conflict, without providing more than a superficial analysis of the dispute.<sup>11</sup> Typical of the tone employed was a *Herald* article that opened with the words 'Foes and backers of a new runway at Logan Airport are expected to face off this morning at a contentious State House hearing.'<sup>12</sup> The story listed the names of proponents and opponents slated to 'face off', but failed to illuminate opposition concerns in terms other than 'noise'. The 'anger' of community residents was a recurring theme in both papers, where runway opponents were described as 'extremely angry',<sup>13</sup> 'perennially angry at Massport',<sup>14</sup> 'burned up'<sup>15</sup> and 'the people under the planes with long memories and short fuses'.<sup>16</sup> By associating opponents with their emotions, rather than with the complex reasons for their anger, as Graham Knight observes, critical focus was pointed away from state administrators, who were depicted as acting strategically for the universal 'benefit of all', and onto residents, who appeared reactionary and interested in 'particularistic' rather than 'universalistic' goals (Knight, 2001: 75). An alternative frame might have portrayed concern for environmental health, rather than economic profit, as being in the universalistic interest of the city. While a conflict-centered style of reporting provided the narrative drama valued by journalists, it marginalized historical and technical analysis and informative political debate.

Compounding the problems of conflict-centered reporting were the constraining conventions of newsgathering. From the viewpoint of journalists, an analysis of the validity of statistical information provided by state officials, and research on complicated topics such as airline deregulation, transportation policies and environmental justice legislation, would have transgressed the traditional methods used to gather information (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Kaniss, 1991). According to routine news judgment criteria, the technical nature of FAA flight delay statistics was less 'newsworthy' than the tug-of-war between runway supporters and adversaries. As long as there appeared to be consensus among powerful sources such as top state and business leaders, journalists generally reiterated such Massport claims as: 'Logan [is] one of the busiest and most delay-prone airports in the nation',<sup>17</sup> or 'The same rising economy that makes urban homesteads so valuable . . . depends on fast, timely access to air travel'.<sup>18</sup>

In an example of official arguments and assumptions being taken for granted by journalists, the *Globe* published an early editorial that reproduced Massport's framing of the runway as a boost for the economic health of the

region, concluding: 'Not to allow Massport to make the best, fairest, and most efficient use of its space would be to the detriment of all'.<sup>19</sup> With similar concerns for 'the good of the region', a *Herald* editorial warned that, to the economic peril of 'all of Greater Boston', Logan was 'in danger of slowly strangling by takeoff and landing delays'.<sup>20</sup> No *Herald* article and only one *Globe* article published during the first two months of 1999 (before CARE emerged) mentioned issues of environmental justice<sup>21</sup> for the working-class neighborhoods abutting Logan. Absent from early news coverage were comprehensive discussions of Massport's historical ill-treatment of abutting communities, statistical information on the staggering levels of noise, air pollution and traffic these areas already faced, or the fact that those worst hit by Logan's past, present, and predicted environmental impacts were predominantly lower-income and minority residents. Journalists did not seek independent analyses of Massport data, nor did they research alternative delay prevention strategies, including suggestions made by the FAA to develop a second major airport in Massachusetts and implement Peak Hour Pricing policies.<sup>22</sup> By reproducing Massport's framing of the runway, journalists avoided asking vital questions about the severity and causes of Logan's congestion, or the effectiveness of a new runway to solve delays.

Besides neglecting to examine causes of airport congestion and provide lucid information on alternative delay-reduction solutions, early coverage did not discuss the legal obligation of policymakers to balance transportation planning with environmental justice. Alternative news frames might have drawn attention, early on, to the dictates of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, requiring federally funded government agencies like Massport to 'identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects of its programs, policies and activities on minority and low-income populations'.<sup>23</sup> They might also have discussed President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order on Environmental Justice, which ensured the rights of low-income and minority communities to clean air, water and land. However, none of the early articles discussed these statutes or the history of class and race discrimination in transportation development projects that made such legal protections necessary in the first place.

### **CARE's impact on the news: reframing the runway discussion**

Local residents sought political help from their elected officials, but most politicians, wary of controversy, were publicly silent on the issue for more than two months following Massport's announcement to build the runway.<sup>24</sup> This silence created an absence of elite opposition (Hallin, 1994), so that most

high-level sources cited in early coverage were runway proponents representing the views of business. In light of the favorable framing the runway received in the news and a paucity of opposition from their elected officials, residents of East Boston and other communities abutting the airport joined together to see what they could do to counter Massport's campaign. The type of news framing an issue receives is important to activists because it can help educate the general public, pressure decision-makers and show levels of support for an issue. Residents sought to recast the discussion from a simplistic 'economic development' vs 'noise' polarity to a more complex framing that would emphasize environmental justice and the need for regionalized transportation development.

From the community perspective, a new runway would disproportionately saddle inner city populations with more noise, traffic and air pollution, and ultimately worsen airport congestion by increasing the runway capacity and number of overall flights. Residents felt that air traffic overflow should be resolved by implementing a comprehensive, regionalized transportation plan to decrease flight demand at Logan. This plan, they argued, should include strategies such as a high-speed rail service between major eastern seaboard cities to diminish the demand for short commuter flights; the development of a second 'reliever' airport in Massachusetts to absorb some of Logan's existing flights; and the implementation of Peak Hour Pricing. Responding to news depictions of runway opponents as belligerent and reactionary, CARE's chairperson noted, 'We don't want to be a group that is seen as being *against* development and progress, but as being *for* fair and comprehensive transportation planning for the region.'<sup>25</sup>

Residents wanted news frames that focused on the shortsighted nature of the proposed runway and how it would aggravate the already inequitable class distribution of the airport's most severe environmental impacts. They sought to educate politicians and the general public, including people in the surrounding suburbs, about ways that the runway would negatively impact the entire region. Until this point, coverage of runway opponents had focused primarily on East Boston, the community closest to Logan, inadvertently implying that other areas would be little affected by the project. Less mentioned in early coverage was the fact that other nearby communities, including some wealthy urban neighborhoods and suburbs of Boston, would also experience increases in noise if 14/32 were built. As they had done with the GBC 25 years earlier, East Bostonians understood the need to work in coalition with other communities, rather than as a solitary neighborhood struggling against established political and economic powers. Members of an existing East Boston community group, Airport Impact Relief (AIR),<sup>26</sup> together with residents from Chelsea and Winthrop, the two next closest communities

abutting Logan, began contacting community leaders from other areas of the city and surrounding suburbs to explain how the proposed runway would affect surrounding communities. Citizens from across the city, including many former members of the defunct GBC, began meeting regularly to create a coalition that would be known as Communities Against Runway Expansion (CARE).

One of CARE's first actions was to form a media committee with the goals of getting the group's perspectives into the news and expanding their organizing base. Lacking funds for office space and staff, an early priority was to create a website that would serve as a virtual headquarters for the movement. While it is often assumed that residents of lower income communities lack Internet access, the vast majority of CARE members, including all but one person on the 10-member steering committee,<sup>27</sup> had Internet access either at home or work. An East Boston youth worker knowledgeable in web design volunteered to create [www.stop1432.com](http://www.stop1432.com), a user-friendly site that contained information about CARE, including announcements of upcoming meetings and events. The website explained the history of the runway proposal and its projected environmental impacts on surrounding communities. It also included explanations of airport delay data with hypermedia links to FAA and EPA websites, excerpts of relevant federal civil rights and environmental justice legislation, and discussions of delay reduction alternatives. Urging readers to contact elected officials and decision-makers from the FAA and the EPA, the site provided contact information (automatic email links, phone numbers and addresses) for all relevant officials, along with color-coded 'traffic light' icons indicating which elected leaders supported, opposed, or were undecided on the runway issue. For laypersons (including politicians and journalists) seeking information about the runway, the website provided one-stop shopping.<sup>28</sup> With the advent of the website, elected officials began to receive a profusion of letters, phone calls and visits from constituents.<sup>29</sup> Historically, 'resource poor' groups have faced organizing difficulties due to their lack of money for offices (Goldenberg, 1975). At the same time, reporters have had difficulty trying to locate activist groups with no offices (Gans, 1979). Because it listed contact information for CARE representatives, the website made it easier for journalists to locate CARE members as sources.

The Internet was a useful tool for CARE in a number of other ways, particularly in facilitating access to airport-related data. For example, when residents logged on to the FAA website to investigate the delay statistics cited by Massport, they found that delays at Logan had slightly *decreased*, rather than increased, over the previous seven years.<sup>30</sup> The rapid availability of this information online made it possible for residents, who had a more immediate motivation than journalists for investigating the validity of Massport's data, to



expose the erroneous statistics much sooner than would have been possible using traditional research methods. After residents brought the discrepancies to the attention of journalists, news coverage of Massport delay statistics became more critical, such as a front page *Globe* article noting: 'Massport chose to develop its own method of assessing late flights, rather than relying on an FAA formula that yields far fewer delays',<sup>31</sup> and an *Associated Press* article stating that claims that 25 percent of flights at Logan were delayed had been found by independent analysts to be closer to 3 percent.<sup>32</sup>

The Internet was also useful in maintaining regular group communication among activist residents. People on the CARE listserv (living in neighborhoods spread across the city and surrounding suburbs) posted articles, updates, and personal communications on a daily basis, holding regular debates and strategizing conversations without having to physically convene. While this did not eliminate the need for face-to-face meetings, it reduced the number of meetings, travel time, childcare expenses, and related organizing obstacles for this volunteer organization whose members had full-time jobs and family responsibilities. It also kept members updated on new arguments and data, so that when speaking to the press, politicians, or others, they could more easily convey consistent information.

CARE used new communication technologies in several creative ways. In a matter of hours and at little cost, a member who worked as an administrative assistant at her regular job used her desktop skills to design a 'Stop 14/32' pin. She printed hundreds of logos, placed them in clear plastic casings and began distributing the pins at neighborhood sports events, public concerts and community festivals. Another local woman used her home computer to adapt the pin design for a bumper sticker that included the address of the CARE website. Still another resident used his computer to graphically enhance a 'Stop 14/32' poster that had been hand drawn by a neighbor. It was soon reproduced and posted on bulletin boards and windows of local homes, shops and community organizations. When CARE eventually raised funds (through spaghetti suppers, benefit concerts, raffles, etc.), the pins, bumper stickers, and posters were reproduced by the thousands at a fraction of the cost of conventional offset printing. Volunteers distributed them in shopping malls, parking lots and other public places. While seemingly a minor strategy, these items were an inexpensive way to rapidly publicize the issue and stimulate symbolic unity among runway opponents throughout the Greater Boston area.

Observing that social justice issues were not being adequately addressed in the mainstream news, CARE members formed a strategy to achieve better access and influence, given their relative lack of economic and political power. Their first group action was to create a high profile event to attract media attention. Aware that the Boston City Council had no legal authority over the

runway decision-making process, residents nonetheless requested a hearing at City Hall as a way to create a 'newsworthy' event where their views could be publicly transmitted. At their constituents' request, the City Council convened a hearing on March 2, 1999, where hundreds of local residents aired a host of health, environmental and equity concerns related to the proposed runway. Because 'events' are considered more newsworthy than 'issues' (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980), the media arrived in full force.

For five hours, residents spoke about the need to decrease rather than increase the existing environmental impacts caused by the airport. They urged Massport to develop high-speed rail services and regionalize air traffic by diverting a certain percentage of commuter or cargo flights to other regional airports.<sup>33</sup> Until this event, none of the 13 councilors had publicly expressed an opinion about the runway. Yet, by the end of the evening, amidst cheers from the audience, they voted unanimously to oppose it and passed a resolution urging the Governor to abandon the project. While seemingly a symbolic victory, the event signaled a turning point in the subsequent 'coming out' against the runway of other elected leaders. Perhaps emboldened by the overwhelming resident support that city councilors received when they opposed the runway (noted in newspaper and TV coverage), other politicians began to take a public stand shortly afterwards. The change in the political tide after the hearing was, itself, a newsworthy event noted in both the *Globe* and *Herald*. A front-page *Herald* article commented on the Mayor's sudden 'stepped up involvement in the runway battle',<sup>34</sup> while a *Globe* article noted 'a shift in the political substrata underlying what had been the Massachusetts Port Authority's momentum to build a new runway at Logan Airport'.<sup>35</sup>

Four days after the City Council hearing, US Representative Michael Capuano, whose district included several communities impacted by Logan, submitted an Op Ed piece to the *Globe* criticizing the runway proposal on the grounds that it would triple noise in already heavily impacted neighborhoods and would be a 'Band-Aid solution' to the larger problem of national airport delays. Hinting at the need for federal regulation, Capuano argued that airlines should be required to 'use larger aircraft rather than more frequent smaller flights' and 'experiment with peak hour pricing as a way to encourage a more evenly spread-out flight schedule, thereby reducing delays'.<sup>36</sup> He also urged Massport to reduce flight delays by constructing high-speed rail between Boston and other eastern cities, and by increasing the use of secondary airports in the New England area. These suggestions had been made by community people at the hearing, but were not noted in news coverage of the forum which, instead, emphasized contention between proponents and opponents. They did not become 'news' until spoken by a prominent elected leader.

A week after the publication of Capuano's piece, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino publicly denounced the runway for the first time. The theme of environmental justice was at the forefront of his dissent, discussed in a front-page article in the Metro/Region section of the *Globe*, where he argued: 'The state should stop trying to expand Logan at the expense of Boston's neighborhoods.'<sup>37</sup> Echoing residents' views, the Mayor urged Massport to develop a regionalized transportation plan that would include the development of a second airport in the state. Shortly after, the *Herald* reported that Massachusetts Speaker of the House, Thomas Finneran, had serious doubts about the runway proposal.<sup>38</sup> As new elite sources began to publicly criticize the runway, opening up 'the sphere of legitimate controversy' (Hallin, 1994), the news included more critical discussion of the runway and increasingly employed 'equity' frames that moved beyond the simple 'noise' complaints focused on previously. While early runway coverage featured pro-runway advocates as the main sources and headliners, articles throughout the rest of 1999 and 2000 reflected a more critical framing of the issue (e.g. 'Menino urges moratorium on expansion, wants regional transportation plan';<sup>39</sup> 'EPA slams Logan runway plan';<sup>40</sup> 'Public still not sold on runway';<sup>41</sup> 'Runway campaign faulted, Capuano says Massport pitch misleads';<sup>42</sup> and 'Menino asks FAA to stop plans for new runway'<sup>43</sup>).

The *Globe* ran a front-page article in which Frederick Salvucci, a professor at MIT's Center for Transportation Studies and former Massachusetts State Secretary of Transportation,<sup>44</sup> was the headline and lead subject. Accusing Massport of renegeing on previous promises to reduce environmental impacts in East Boston, Salvucci said, 'It's outrageous. If this were Weston [an affluent Boston suburb], there'd be 22 environmental impact statements before such changes in government commitments could be made.'<sup>45</sup> Salvucci was also the main source in another *Globe* article published 10 days later, in which he refuted the purported effectiveness of Massport's plan, explaining that many of the causes of Logan's delays (such as aging fleets, lack of regulations concerning the use of Logan by small planes, lack of another international airport in the state, and late arrivals from other cities) could not be solved by a new runway. He pointed out that nearly 50 percent of Logan's flights were small aircraft with fewer than 50 seats, representing just 10 percent of passengers. Since small planes clogged up runways and created delays for large aircraft carrying 90 percent of Logan's travelers, he argued, Massport could drastically reduce delays simply by implementing regulations that would force small planes and/or cargo planes to use alternative regional airports.<sup>46</sup>

As additional anti-runway endorsements emerged from other powerful public figures, news coverage continued to cast doubts on the fairness and effectiveness of the runway plan. An April *Globe* article noted that Massport's

delay statistics were greatly inflated compared with FAA delay data and that, logging in at 90 and 100 decibels, noise levels in the communities closest to Logan were already 'substantially higher' than the FAA's highest acceptable noise category of 65 decibels.<sup>47</sup> The article, like numerous others published after CARE began to organize, observed that the most densely populated and low-income sections of the city would be hardest hit by the proposed runway. Another example of the expanded focus on equity was a front-page *Globe* article, in which a reporter who had spent considerable time talking with CARE members pondered the issue of environmental justice more blatantly than any previous news story published:

Beyond the technical arguments for and against Massport's plan is an issue more difficult to document with statistics, but more pertinent to something that has nagged at American society for much of its history. It is that matter of equity and fairness . . . These are places that are home to oil tank farms, heavy traffic, foul air, grating noise, halfway houses, jail cells, polluted waterways, abandoned houses, as well as more poor . . . This, protesters say, is why they sometimes chant, 'Enough is enough' . . . the backyard is pretty full these days and has been for some time.<sup>48</sup>

The relatively common availability of computers and desktop publishing programs among CARE members resulted in one of the group's most interesting strategies for reframing the runway issue. In response to a pro-runway PowerPoint presentation that Massport had presented to civic groups, politicians, journalists and business leaders in some 30 communities around Greater Boston, CARE members developed an alternative PowerPoint show that directly challenged Massport's information. Compiled with the help of pro-bono environmental consultants,<sup>49</sup> it included alternative technical and historical information on the runway, graphs of noise and air pollution levels, charts of current vs projected flight statistics, and examples of alternative delay reduction strategies. Preparing press releases and media packets, CARE invited reporters to attend the presentations, which were offered to dozens of community groups that had been previously visited by Massport's PR team.

Besides taking advantage of new communication technologies, CARE activists engaged in traditional organizing work such as writing letters to the editors of mainstream, community and alternative newspapers. They called *Globe* and *Herald* reporters, particularly those new to the airport beat, to invite them on walking tours of the impacted communities in order to 'hear the noise, smell the fumes and receive a crash course on the history of Logan expansion'.<sup>50</sup> This gave reporters an opportunity to get to know residents as sources for future stories, and stimulated regular contact between them and CARE, helping to increase oppositional frames in the news. As the closest access point most activists have in the corporate media tier, journalists

represent an important opening where activists can intervene in news coverage (Hackett, 1991: 280; Ryan, 1991: 186). Rather than dismiss journalists as lackeys of the establishment, CARE illustrated the usefulness of cultivating relationships with reporters to educate them on issues.

To attract news coverage, CARE also held rallies and press conferences, publicized via the website, email and traditional flyer-ing. The first rally was held in front of the Massachusetts State House on 29 March 1999. Recognizing the importance of visuals in gaining media attention, residents built a mock airplane that belched black smoke and sported the logo, 'Asthma Airlines'. They also made photo-posters of children with cotton balls glued over their ears. The rally was covered by all local TV stations and became the front-page story, complete with color photographs, in the next day's *Globe*. Noting the predominantly working-class Italian and Latino composition of the 'crowd of about 1000', the article quoted legislators concerned with the disproportionate impact the runway would have on minority and low-income people.<sup>51</sup>

At the rally, senior US Representative Joseph Moakley, with whom CARE members had been meeting regularly, publicly denounced 14/32, saying: 'the areas that are most negatively impacted by the new runway are the densely-packed, poor, minority communities'. His comments were prominently reported by both the *Globe* and the *Herald*. Soon, the President of the Massachusetts Senate, Thomas Birmingham, US Congressman Barney Frank, and a growing number of other elected state officials announced their opposition to 14/32, mentioning environmental justice concerns and calling for a regionalized air traffic policy that would direct some of Logan's planes to other New England airports. Mayor Menino and other politicians who addressed the rally crowd credited CARE with turning the public tide of opinion on the issue. State Representative Byron Rushing praised the activists for their work and was quoted in the *Globe* saying: 'You have done a remarkable thing. You have turned this issue around.'<sup>52</sup>

Whereas early runway coverage was dominated by economic frames, by April these frames were replaced or balanced by environmental justice frames. For example, an April 4 *Globe* article opened by discussing how Representative Moakley 'charged Massport had violated a presidential executive order by failing to identify minority and low-income populations affected by Massport's proposals'.<sup>3</sup> An April 8 *Herald* article balanced the economic arguments of runway proponents with equity-related arguments from the Mayor and state congress members concerned that the runway 'unfairly slaps low-income and minority neighborhoods'.<sup>54</sup> An April 27 *Globe* article praised Peak Hour Pricing and quoted former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, under whose tenure Massport successfully implemented the policy: 'When Massport experimented . . . in 1988, the effect was dramatic. [Dukakis said] "Within a

matter of months we went from 18th to second in on-time performance at major airports in the United States".<sup>55</sup> The growing opposition to the runway from elected officials and general residents helped carry CARE's arguments to the EPA. After receiving a landslide of emails, phone calls and visits from residents and politicians, the Massachusetts director of the EPA was quoted extensively in both the *Herald* and the *Globe*, saying that a new runway could not be justified 'at the expense of already overburdened neighborhoods'.<sup>56</sup>

CARE members believe that their organizing strategies were instrumental in gaining the attention and support of elite news sources. Within four months from the time they began organizing, the mayors of more than 14 towns within a 30-minute radius of Logan publicly opposed 14/32. Within less than a year, five out of eight US representatives, seven out of eight state senators, and 29 out of 30 state representatives publicly criticized the runway as environmentally unsound. Roughly a year after publishing its first editorial in favor of the runway, the *Globe* reversed its position in an editorial called, 'Logan Report Falls Short.' This editorial called the runway a 'blinker approach' that would increase the total number of flights at Logan and compound environmental impacts. It argued for 'Massport to wait until a state Department of Public Health study of the airport's effect on neighbors' health is completed.'<sup>57</sup>

By May 1999, the State Environmental Affairs Office had received more than 1000 comments from the public on the proposed runway – the second-highest number in state history. In June 2001, yet another *Globe* editorial against the runway was published. Called 'Questions for Massport',<sup>58</sup> it expressed 'uncertainty about the runway's delay reduction potential' and urged Massport to 'try demand management measures as a way to cut delays before investing in this \$70 million project'. The *Herald*, though still in favor of the runway, publicly recognized the existence of many unanswered questions and supported the formation of a blue ribbon commission to resolve them.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Journalism routines have historically privileged state and corporate perspectives, as reporters communicate more with elite than non-elite sources and rely more on official press releases and other bureaucratically derived information than on their own independent research (Sigal, 1973; Entman, 1989; Kaniss, 1991; Entman and Rojecki, 1993). As is well documented elsewhere, reporters often give official frames the benefit of the doubt, and when these frames are challenged, it is the challenger groups who bear the burden of proof (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 7). In the past two decades, this tendency has been

intensified by the growth of an increasingly profit-driven model of news production in which journalists are expected to produce shorter and more numerous stories in less time, forcing them to rely more heavily than ever on state and corporate press packets (Stauber and Rampton, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 2004). Thus, there is now an even greater onus on grassroots groups to research information with which to advance alternative news perspectives.

What accounts for CARE's success in reframing the runway issue? Three factors seem to be key. First, the activists were experienced. Gitlin has contended that 'people *as producers of meaning* [sic] have no voice in what the media make of what they say or do, or in the context within which the media frame their activity' (1980: 3). While this may feel true for inexperienced social movements, the example of CARE illustrates that it is not always the case. Although CARE was a new organization, most of its members had been involved in transportation-related activism in Boston for over 30 years, and were experienced in organizing work – including a division of labor, media relations and legal procedures. Their level of organizational maturity allowed them to maintain momentum in circumstances where less experienced actors often fail, illustrating Gamson and Wolfsfeld's hypotheses that the greater a social movement's organization, coordination and strategic planning, and the greater the division of labor among movement actors, the more prominent its preferred frame will be in media coverage (1993: 121).

Second, CARE utilized new communication technologies to enhance their organizing strategies. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld note, 'movements will be most successful at getting their message across when they are both clear and consistent' in their framing. Through the website and daily email postings, CARE members were able to keep updated on the latest data and arguments, thereby maintaining consistency in their communication with journalists, politicians and the public. Media technologies helped them to meet the needs of journalists by enabling the production of quick and professional press releases, fact sheets, graphs and other media materials, fulfilling another condition for success emphasized by Gamson and Wolfsfeld: 'To compete with sophisticated rivals, movements must be ready to make it as easy as possible for journalists to send their message with a minimum of alteration' (1993: 121). Because the world of news production is extremely time sensitive, government and corporate actors have traditionally been advantaged in their ability to rapidly produce publicity materials and press releases. The Internet was a useful tool for CARE in terms of coalition-building, accessing state and federal data, letter writing, event planning, fundraising, and networking with journalists and politicians. It allowed them to accomplish work faster, at a lower cost, and on a larger scale than would previously have been possible.

Third, as residents of working-class, inner-city communities, activists had the resource of close-knit neighborhood networks of people who shared a collective memory of institutional abuse and had strong enough relationships with each other to sustain exhausting political work. Collectively involved in transportation policy issues for decades, CARE members had become lay experts in airport-related legal, policy and environmental issues. They were adept at translating these issues into non-technical language useful in communicating with elected officials, journalists, and the wider community.

In the case of 14/32, residents took advantage of 'the tension between constraints and possibilities' (Ryan, 1991: 11), using their years of political organizing experience together with new communication technologies to exploit the 'cracks' in the mass media 'where some idea of collective action stays alive' (Gamson, 2001: 61). CARE provided elite news sources with informational 'tools' (Swidler, 1986) they could use to publicly oppose the runway. Following norms of objective journalism, reporters began to provide more critical coverage of the runway project once a lack of elite consensus was evident among high profile news sources. As in Robert Entman's model of Cascading Activation (Entman, 2004: 10), the issue was first framed by state administrators from Massport and the Governor's office, where it cascaded to other elites (less prominent state officials, some elected leaders and the business community) and was reproduced by the media. As frames cascaded from journalists to the public via news coverage, some of the public (CARE) organized to impact elected officials and journalists, ultimately helping to reframe the issue.

In May 2002, a Massachusetts judge denied Massport's request to lift the then 28-year-old injunction against building the runway, ordering the issue to trial. The final outcome of runway 14/32 is still unresolved,<sup>60</sup> but CARE activists were able to draw enough attention to the issue to make '14/32' a common household term in the Boston area. Their work was significant in altering news framing of the runway from 'efficiency and progress' to 'environmental justice' frames. Even if the runway is eventually built, the shift in news framing and broadened public debate that CARE helped bring about, particularly the focus on a need for comprehensive regional transportation planning in lieu of new runways, helped pressure Massport to: (a) invest millions in upgrading the highly underutilized Worcester airport located an hour west of Boston, and (b) accelerate support for high speed rail to New York and DC.<sup>61</sup> Both are steps that will help reduce flights at Logan and benefit abutting communities. Moreover, due to the advocacy work of CARE, the FAA has mandated that if the runway is built, Massport will be required to implement Peak Hour Pricing – a regulatory step the present agency administration has strongly resisted. All of the above are policies that Massport had



not actively pursued before CARE activists placed the agency's transportation projects under a critical spotlight.

If the success of social movements is measured *only* in terms of achieving singular goals, meaningful political progress can be overlooked regarding activists' ability to impact the framing of issues and widen the parameters of public debate (Ryan, 1991; Sampedro-Blanco, 1998; Schudson, 2003). This case is not meant to typify the situation of all grassroots groups and the media, but to show what can sometimes be done. It adds to a cautiously hopeful literature exploring the conditions under which activists may successfully impact news coverage (Ryan, 1991; Hackett, 1991; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993), and to a growing literature on how ordinary citizens are utilizing new media technologies to promote perspectives that are marginalized in the mainstream media (Dahlgren, 2001; Villareal-Ford and Gil, 2001; Hick and McNutt, 2002; Schwartz, 2002; Howley, 2005). Historically, media space for oppositional perspectives has expanded because social movement activists have forced that space to expand, one case at a time.

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## Notes

- 1 Not surprisingly, the year 1999 generated the highest volume of news stories, representing more than half of the total coverage, (94 articles in *BG* and 32 in *BH*). After 1999, news coverage tapered off significantly. The year 2000 netted only 31 articles in *BG* and 34 in the *BH*, while 2001 brought only 16 articles in *BG* and 17 in *BH*.
- 2 From 1931 to 1958 nearly 200 homes were destroyed, representing a loss of over 1000 units of housing (Lupo et al., 1971: 35; Nelkin, 1974: 64; Sammarco, 1997: 52). In 1959, Massport began a massive airport expansion project, filling in marshlands used by the community for recreational purposes. An airport-related expressway literally dissected the neighborhood.
- 3 A community of 30,000, East Boston's population consists today of older Italian immigrants and their second and third generation children together with recent immigrants from Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East.
- 4 Neighborhood territory was expropriated for roads, parking lots, rent-a-car agencies and oil tank farms. By the early 1970s, the airport occupied two-thirds of the land in East Boston (Nelkin, 1974: 64).

- 5 From the late 1960s to the present, East Bostonians have formed resident organizations to oppose airport expansion and win mitigation (such as sound proofing for schools, funding for youth programs and new parks). Lack of space prevents a discussion of these groups or the GBC, but it is important to note that the cumulative knowledge and networks gained during 30 years of activism provided residents with a level of organizing expertise that allowed CARE to function as effectively as it did in 1999.
- 6 In the midst of the environmental and civil rights consciousness of the 1970s, and with strong logistical and fiscal support from the liberal administration of Boston mayor, Kevin H. White, the political climate in 1974 was optimal for such a legal victory.
- 7 The leadership of Massport's board of directors and the governor's office had changed by the late 1990s from mainly Democratic to solidly Republican, representing a significant pro-business, anti-environmental mindset among key state policy-makers. Massport's director, Peter Blute, was a former GOP congressman widely known for his effective lobbying of the Greater Boston power structure.
- 8 J. Battenfield, 'Massport spent \$3M to lobby for runway at Logan', *BH*, 14 April 1999, News, p. 1.
- 9 C. Macero Jr. and R. Washington, 'Critics hit Massport runway campaign', *BH*, 2 June 2000, News, p. 5.
- 10 As many as 120 planes per hour already passed over the abutting communities ('Hourly flight comparison data', FAA website, [www.asc.faa.gov](http://www.asc.faa.gov), consulted January 5, 1999), interfering with phone and TV reception and disrupting work, school and sleep. Airport traffic overflowed onto East Boston streets and corrosive soot from airplane 'contrails' (fume condensation trails) accumulated on vegetable gardens, windowsills and surfaces of homes and cars. According to the Mass Department of Public Health, communities closest to the airport had some of the highest rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses in the state.
- 11 For more on this journalistic practice, see Eliasoph, 1998: 210–19; and Rojecki, 1999.
- 12 L. Brown, 'Runway foes, backers plan State House battle', *BH*, 23 March 1999, p. 15.
- 13 P. Gelzinis, 'Lady's fighting spirit is what Winthrop needs', in *BH*, 2 February 1999, p. 4.
- 14 T. Cassidy, 'Logan's new approach; Massport's plan for another runway may fly this time', *BG*, 30 January 1999, p. B1.
- 15 D. Nyhan, 'Hard sell for new runway', *BG*, 12 February 1999, p. A25.
- 16 B. C. Mooney, 'New Logan runway may become path of most resistance', *BG*, 13 February 1999, p. B3.
- 17 T. Cassidy, 'Logan's new approach', *BG*, 30 January 1999, p. B1.
- 18 D. Nyhan, 'Hard sell for new runway', *BG*, 12 February 1999, p. A25.
- 19 'Progress at Logan', *BG*, Editorial, 11 February 1999, p. A26.
- 20 'Logan's future on the line', *BH*, Editorial, 11 January 1999, p. 20.
- 21 'Environmental justice' is a term for efforts to ensure that low-income and minority communities are not forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden of negative health and environmental impacts (such as pollution, traffic and other environmental hazards) often caused by development projects.

- 22 Widely used in Europe, Peak Hour Pricing charges airlines higher landing fees during peak flying hours to encourage a wider distribution of flights, resulting in a significant delay reduction. See the FAA website, [www.asc.faa.gov](http://www.asc.faa.gov)
- 23 Excerpt from Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- 24 This was noted by A. Lupo in, 'Area legislators slow to take a stand on runway', *BG*, 28 February 1999, City, p. 1.
- 25 Personal observation at CARE meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, 14 February 1999.
- 26 Members of this group had participated in past efforts to stop the evictions on Neptune Road in 1968, prevent 14/32 from being built in 1974, and successfully win airport impact mitigation from Massport during the 1980s and 1990s.
- 27 CARE included White, Black and Latino residents working in predominantly blue-collar jobs such as child care, administrative support, construction, elementary education, and youth work. The majority of core activists were veterans of the anti-airport activism of the 1970s.
- 28 The website was publicized via flyers, radio, cable TV, newspapers, bumper stickers, posters, pins and word of mouth.
- 29 I do not contend that the website was the sole cause of letter writing, phone calls and visits to elected officials. However, it made it possible for those with Internet access to rapidly carry out such activities on an individual level and transmit the contact information to those without Internet access, via announcements and flyers at community meetings and events.
- 30 An independent analysis of national flight data concluded that delays at Logan were not significantly worse than at many other major airports in the country (*Expanding Impacts: Environmental and Human Costs of Logan Expansion*, Spring 1999. Cambridge, MA: Greenworks Inc.).
- 31 S. Ebbert, 'Delays at Logan seen as overstated', *BG*, 3 April 1999, p. A1.
- 32 'Massport officials blast recent report on airport delays', *AP*, 4 April 1999.
- 33 Personal observation, Boston City Hall, 2 March 1999.
- 34 J. Battenfield and S. Morantz, 'Menino vows to fight new runway at Logan', *BH*, 16 March 1999, News, p 1.
- 35 A. Lupo, 'Logan expansion plan hits more opposition', *BG*, 28 March 1999, p. 5.
- 36 M. Capuano, 'Massport must rethink new Logan runway', *BG*, 10 March 1999, p. A 23.
- 37 A. Flint and T. Cassidy, 'Menino suggests 2nd major airport', *BG*, 17 March 1999, Metro/Region, p. A1.
- 38 'Runway not clear for takeoff', *BH* Editorial, 4 April 1999, p. 25.
- 39 R. Kahn, 'Menino urges moratorium on Logan expansion', *BG*, 29 March 1999, p. B1.
- 40 S. Ebbert, 'EPA slams runway plan', *BG*, 23 April 1999, p. A1.
- 41 S. Lehigh and F. Phillips, 'Public Still not sold on runway', *BG*, 4 May 1999, p. B1.
- 42 L. Brown, 'Runway campaign faulted; Capuano says runway pitch misleads', *BH*, 1 July 2000, p. 5.
- 43 S. Morantz, 'Menino asks FAA to stop plans for new runway', *BH*, 1 December 1999, p. 25.

- 44 Salrucci served during the Dukakis Administrations of 1975–1979 and 1983–1990, and is an internationally prominent transportation policy expert.
- 45 C. Radin, 'Salvucci cites old promise', *BG*, 17 March 1999, p. A1.
- 46 S. Fishman, 'Residents hear from runway foes', *BG*, 28 March 1999, City, p. 7.
- 47 S. Ebbert, 'In runway push, agency cites delays', *BG*, 7 April 1999, p. B4.
- 48 A. Lupo, 'Logan neighbors share their backyard views', *BG*, 25 April 1999, p. 1.
- 49 Residents received technical assistance from legal and environmental consultants, some of whom provided pro bono services and others of whom were paid with mitigation funds earmarked for technical assistance, which Massport was required to provide to impacted communities as a result of earlier community organizing and law suits against the airport in the 1970s and 1980s.
- 50 Personal communication with a CARE board member, 20 March 2000.
- 51 S. Ebbert, 'Communities protest Logan plan at State House', *BG*, 30 March 1999, p. B4.
- 52 S. Ebbert, 'Communities Protest Logan plan at State House', *BG*, 30 March 1999, p. B4 and personal observation.
- 53 A. Lupo, 'Keeping track of the Logan runway addition controversy', *BG*, 4 April 1999, p. 5.
- 54 L. Brown, 'New runway gets backing of business at hearing', *BH*, 8 April 1999, p. 25.
- 55 S. Lehigh, 'Peak Period Pricing at Logan, a road not taken', *BG*, 27 April 2001, p. 19.
- 56 S. Ebbert and F. Philips, 'EPA Slams Logan Runway Plan', *BG*, 23 April 1999.
- 57 'Logan plan falls short', *BG* editorial, 21 March 2000, p. A 14.
- 58 'Questions for Massport', *BG* editorial, 3 June 2001, p. C6.
- 59 Editorial, 'Another Look at the Runway', *BH*, 11 February 2000, p. 30.
- 60 In November 2003, Suffolk Superior Court ruled to allow the construction of the runway on the condition that Massport submit to a list of court-enforceable requirements, including increased mitigation, emissions reduction, and limited use of the new runway so that take-offs and landings occur only over the harbor, rather than over local communities. This ruling is unusual in that it puts the force of Superior Court behind the requirements, preventing Massport from being able to petition the FAA to change these requirements in the future. While it looks as though the runway may likely be built, CARE members have appealed the ruling and the final outcome was still pending at the time of this article's submission.
- 61 In Spring 2002, high speed rail service began between Boston and New York City.

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