

CAN MOVEMENT TACTICS INFLUENCE MEDIA COVERAGE?

Health-Care Struggle in the Salvadoran News

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Abstract: This article analyzes Salvadoran newspaper coverage of a social movement struggle that emerged in 2002 to prevent the privatization of the health-care system. Movement groups pursued their policy goals through both extrainstitutional protest and formal legislative channels. Through an analysis of news content, this article examines whether these different components of the movement's claims-making repertoire influenced the portrayal of the movement's goals, actors, and actions by one of the major Salvadoran news dailies. The analysis reveals that, compared to protest events, legislative processes that the movement set in motion generated coverage that was more sympathetic to the movement and that presented greater interrogation of government and elite plans for health-care reform.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines Salvadoran newspaper coverage of a social movement struggle that emerged in 2002 to prevent the privatization of the Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social (Social Security Institute; ISSS) and the public health-care system. At the center of the struggle was a labor strike by doctors, health-care workers, and blue-collar staff at the ISSS that lasted from September 2002 to June 2003. The strike was supported by a multisectoral and cross-class movement that opposed neoliberal plans by government and business elites to restructure health care. The groups pursued their policy goals through both extrainstitutional protest and formal legislative channels. Through an analysis of news content, I address how the different components of the movement's claims-making repertoire influenced news coverage by the *Diario de Hoy*, one of El Salvador's two largest-circulation dailies. Specifically, I examine how the portrayal of the movement's goals, actors, and actions in coverage of protest events differs from coverage of legislative processes.

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For most social movements to have a chance of influencing national policy, they require the sponsorship of polity members. Alliances with actors such as opposition political parties, and the openings in the political system that this can create, constitute political opportunities for movements. Typically, political opportunity theory is employed to explain social movements' emergence, strength, and policy impact. In this comparison of protest and legislative process coverage, I seek to extend the theory's application to the realm of the news, to shed light on how political opportunities affect the attainment of a social movement's media goals. I hope that an understanding of whether and how news coverage of movements varies according to movement tactics, even within a news outlet that is closely tied to government and oligarchic interests, can help inform future movement strategizing vis-à-vis the mainstream press in El Salvador.

THEORIZING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS' MEDIA ASPIRATIONS

Providing a useful guideline for evaluating news coverage of social movements, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) outline three general goals that movements have in regard to the media. *Standing*, which refers to coverage that is extensive irrespective of its tone, signals that the press takes the movement seriously. *Preferred framing* is attained when a movement's views of the main issues are accurately and saliently transmitted in a given unit of news. *Sympathy* refers to the tone with which movement actors are covered. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) point out that in strategizing movement tactics, activists may have to trade off one goal for the others. This is substantiated in empirical studies of movements in North America (Entman and Rojecki 2003) and South America (Hammond 2004), in which movements attained favorable coverage of their issues at the expense of standing and sympathy.

Several scholars introduce a pragmatic nuance to the notion of preferred framing. In this view, the realistic question is whether the movement "succeed[s] in moving the discourse to a point where their frame is admitted as a contender and that the dominant frame is recognized as susceptible to challenge" (Hammond 2004, 67). Similarly, Ryan (1991, 4) argues that what movements seek in the media is to "turn news into a contested terrain." On this criterion, Hammond finds that the Brazilian Movimento de los Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement; MST) attained favorable coverage from the country's largest television network. This way of conceptualizing movements' influence on news content is particularly relevant to media systems in authoritarian or postauthoritarian settings.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE NEWS MEDIA

Content studies of news coverage of social movements are usually informed by the assumption that structural forces such as the political economy of the media and journalistic norms and routines affect whether and how movements are covered. As in several other Latin American countries, political and economic liberalization has recently transformed the environment of the media system in El Salvador. Several analysts of Latin American news media address the question of how these kinds of changes alter regime and oligarchic control over the news. Waisbord (2000) observes that there is no one-to-one relationship between political democratization and what he calls "watchdog" journalism. But the decline of authoritarianism raised many people's expectations that news media in the region might begin to facilitate and reflect political openings (Rockwell and Janus 2002). In some cases, Mexico being the best example, greater political democracy played a role in the emergence of a civic-oriented journalism that holds government and economic elites accountable, proactively conducts investigations instead of passively relying on authorities as sources, and presents a plurality of voices. But in other postauthoritarian settings, the legacy of state and elite grip on the media has thus far prevented the civic model from taking hold (Hughes 2006). In countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala, one reason for this is the incompleteness of the political transition; after their civil wars, the regimes have settled into a semiauthoritarian or "polyarchic" status (Robinson 2003; Rockwell and Janus 2002).

Market liberalization is also theorized to engender media autonomy from governing elites. Until neoliberal structural adjustment swept Latin America, a high degree of state ownership of various kinds of enterprises was a key mechanism of government control over news outlets (Rockwell and Janus 2003). The expectation that privatizations would decrease the media's dependence on the government for advertising revenue (Waisbord 2000) is borne out in Lawson's (2002) analysis of Mexico. However, privatization and market deregulation have not decreased the state's influence on media everywhere in Latin America. A primary reason for this is that governments remain an enormous source of advertising revenue for media organizations in many countries (Waisbord 2000). In Central America, they are the largest source, with advertising budgets uncut despite structural adjustment (Rockwell and Janus 2003).

In Central America, the market share that progovernment media organizations amassed during the authoritarian era is also a key determinant of the extent of media autonomy today (Hughes 2006). In El Salvador, advertising pressures are not exerted merely in one direction the way that Herman and Chomsky's (1988) corporate hegemony model would predict, with big businesses compelling media outlets to filter out unfriendly

copy. Rather, the market power of media giants aligned with ultraright forces that have held executive power since 1989 as the Alianza Republicana Nacional (National Republican Alliance; ARENA) allows them to coerce other businesses to advertise only with other pro-ARENA news organizations. Government and the pro-ARENA media have also banded together in joint advertising boycotts of upstart news outlets. Reporters, for their part, exercise self-censorship for fear not only of being fired but also of being blacklisted (Ladutke 2004). Thus, Rockwell and Janus (2003, 137) describe the Salvadoran media in the post-civil war era as “no different from a ministry of propaganda or at the very least a public relations firm with the central government’s account . . . making them not a watchdog for the public but a lapdog for the government.”

In the late 1990s, some departure from this overall pattern was seen in the Salvadoran print media. Executives at both the *Diario de Hoy* and *Prensa Gráfica*, the two major news dailies with a circulation of about one hundred thousand each, greatly updated their technology; overhauled their staff to bring in young, university-trained reporters; and adopted a more professional approach to journalism. They also allowed some divergence from oligarchic and ARENA perspective in their news content, particularly in coverage of the 1999 presidential election (Rockwell and Janus 2003). In more recent years, however, media analysts have noted a return to the traditional alignment with ARENA in their reporting on human rights atrocities, social movements, and political opposition forces, particularly the former guerrilla insurgents, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front; FMLN), whom they either ignore or attack (Ladutke 2004; Rockwell and Janus 2003; Umaña and Guzmán 2003). Playing on the assessment of the Salvadoran media by Rockwell and Janus, one analyst goes further in reference to *Diario de Hoy*, describing it as “hardly a lapdog of the corporate elites in El Salvador. Pit bull is the better metaphor” (comment by an anonymous review on an earlier draft of this article).

However, understanding how historically rooted structural inequalities surrounding news agencies mute oppositional viewpoints cannot tell us everything about social movements’ access to the news media. We also need to understand how movement groups interact with the media and the results of different efforts in this regard (Goodwin 1994; Ryan 1991). While political and economic forces may erect filters against certain perspectives and voices, we also need to know which of the filters that Herman and Chomsky outline is the most and least “porous” (Goodwin 1994, 110). The downfall of any pure political economy explanation of media behavior, such as the corporate hegemony model, is that it is frozen, insufficiently sociological, and overdetermined (Goodwin 1994; Ryan 1991). This would be the case even if it were modified to account for the extraordinary level of state influence in Latin American media systems. A crucial insight

from Rockwell and Janus's analysis of the media in Central America is that there have been moments and topics in the recent history of some pro-oligarchic news organizations in which government and business actions were presented critically.

THEORIZING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTESTATION

A number of analysts of movements and the media argue that, notwithstanding the impact of ownership concentration and advertising on news content, elite hegemony is not airtight (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992; Marchi 2005; Ryan 1991; Wolfsfeld 1997). Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1991, 12) regard hegemony as "produced out of transactions between superordinates and subordinates" such as reporters and movement groups. This is "lived hegemony as a process, not as a finished article." Furthermore, "there is a high level of conflict and contradiction in the discursive struggles of news production." Analyses of news coverage of several U.S. movements reveal that challenger groups have interrupted the hegemony of powerful actors by bringing policy issues that had been unquestioned or invisible into the realm of debate, often with clear impacts on public awareness (Gamson et al. 1992; Marchi 2005). Such instances suggest that "even an uneven contest on a tilted playing field is a contest" (Gamson et al. 1992, 382). To put it another way, even a pit bull occasionally takes a break from its duties, or even snaps at its master. The argument that news coverage is a site of struggle between movement groups and the media usually refers, at least implicitly, to the United States. One might question the relevance of this conception of the media in Latin America. But Hammond's (2004) analysis of Brazilian television portrayal of the MST finds favorable coverage of the movement's issues, if not always of the actors. This is all the more striking given the nature of MST demands and the links between the Globo network and the rural oligarchy.

If even those news outlets lacking a civic orientation are an arena of contestation, the question for content analysis is whether there are any social movement organization (SMO) traits or actions that can lead to standing, sympathy, and debate on the issues that movements care about. Some scholars suggest that SMOs with specialized structures dedicated to media outreach and monitoring have the best chances of an accurate representation of their message (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Rohlinger 2002). This capacity for media work is an outcome of SMOs' access to resources. At the coalition level it also depends on participation by a diversity of types of SMOs and how well they coordinate and divide the tasks of a given campaign (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), such as communication with the public, policy makers, and their own members. But Klandermans and Goslinga (1996) find that, despite the elaborate professional structures

and practices for media work that Dutch labor unions possess, the press still misses major components of their message. This suggests that the effect of SMO resources on news coverage of the movement is complex and not necessarily direct.

Alternatively, it may be through particular claims-making tactics that a movement can influence the media's portrayal of its goals, actors, and actions. Political opportunity theory provides a useful framework for understanding how this works. A central premise of this theory is that events and structures in the political environment expand or constrain the ability of movements to emerge, mobilize, and attain policy objectives. Two phenomena that are commonly agreed to constitute political opportunities are (1) the openness of the political system to social movement demands, sometimes referred to as access to policy making; and (2) movement alliances with some element of the elite (Brockett 1991; McAdam 1996). Elite supporters or allies of social movements are defined as outsiders to the movement who have superior material or network resources or better access to the political system. Such actors would include members of the polity such as legislators in opposition parties. Gamson and Meyer (1996) argue that the media should also be included as a component of the political opportunity structure, on the grounds that favorable news coverage enhances movements' influence on policy makers. However, it may be more useful to regard the media as a separate arena of movement impact on societal perceptions that influences, and is influenced by, several others: the governmental or policy-making arena, the electoral arena, and the arena of public awareness (McCarthy, Smith, and Zald 1996).

Phenomena that offer opportunities for movements to influence legislative agendas can also be opportunities to influence news content. Movements can benefit from elite sponsorship in seeking access to the media arena, just as they do in their efforts to shape legislative debate and decision making (McCarthy et al. 1996; Ryan 2004; Wolfsfeld 1997). Given the mutual influences among various arenas, elite sponsorship of movements in the media arena may occur indirectly, through legislative processes in which movements enjoy the support of polity members. Some claims-making tactics are likely to be more useful than others for tapping into elite alliances as a political opportunity.¹ Efforts to activate elite endorsement may be "a more effective strategy than is protest for activists

1. This is a way in which movement resources may be indirectly relevant to accessing the media, as well-resourced SMOs are more likely to use institutionalized political channels than less affluent ones. At the same time, well-off SMOs and coalitions need not forfeit the non-media-related benefits of extrainstitutional and mass-based actions, as they "have the luxury of using many approaches to disseminating their frames" including protest (McCarthy et al. 1996, 306).

trying to get sustained attention to their framing of an issue in the general audience media" (McCarthy et al. 1996, 306). A main disadvantage of protest events as a focus of news coverage is that movement demands, issues, and arguments are typically downplayed or omitted (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustyn 2001). A substantial literature attests to this tendency for news on protest to be much more episodic than thematic (e.g., Boyle et al. 2004; Iyengar 1991; McLeod and Hertog 1999; Smith et al. 2001). Moreover, the participants in protest actions commonly become grist for an array of techniques by the press to delegitimize and marginalize the movement (see, e.g., Boyle et al. 2004; McFarlane and Hay 2003).

It is reasonable to anticipate that news stories on legislative processes launched in response to a movement's demands, in contrast to coverage of protest, may be less pejorative of the movement and provide more treatment of conflicting perspectives on the themes of the conflict. This would in turn offer greater possibilities for the disruption of hegemonic perspectives on these issues. At the same time, greater success in converting news into a contested terrain is most likely to come at the expense of movement standing, as movement actors are not likely to be mentioned as often as they would be in news stories on protest. Though it has been observed that in El Salvador's *Diario de Hoy*, electoral campaign events are depicted as a "Roman circus" or a "reality show" (Umaña and Guzmán 2003), the less dramatic day-to-day business of the legislative assembly may be treated more seriously.

ROOTS OF THE ANTIPRIVATIZATION STRUGGLE

The Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS) encompasses 12 hospitals, 180 clinics, and 35 medical units throughout the country. Funded mainly by the contributions of workers and their employers, it receives additional support from the state through the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.² Most of those insured through the ISSS, known as *derechohabientes*, have formal-sector jobs. They make up 21 percent of the economically active population, or 15 percent of the total adult population. The other major component of the public system is the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MSPAS), with thirty general and four specialized hospitals, and dozens of primary care clinics. Its patients are those who lack employment-based health insurance and cannot afford private clinics and hospitals (Cruz-Saco Oyague 2001).

2. Employers and employees make monthly contributions of 7.5 percent and 3 percent of the latter's salary, respectively, while the state, through the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, was contributing approximately US\$600,000 annually in the late 1990s. The absolute value of employees' contributions is capped so that no one pays more than US\$78 per month (Cruz-Saco Oyague 2001).

A rejection of neoliberal restructuring of health care was one of the motives for a five-month strike by ISSS unions in 1999 and 2000. In the 2002–2003 strike it was the central cause. The unions' opposition to privatization was shared by the Medical College, patient groups, health-care nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and many others. While there was broad consensus among many analysts and stakeholders, including business elites, right-wing think tanks, and international financial experts, that health care was in dire need of reform, movement activists believed that privatization would exacerbate the existing shortcomings. Perhaps the worst of these was the high percentage of the population lacking access to care. Although Salvadoran law allows anyone to be insured through the ISSS, in practice it leaves out those who are employed or self-employed in the informal sector, including most agricultural workers. In addition, those with ISSS coverage face obsolete equipment, medicine shortages, and very long wait times for needed procedures (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador 1998). Testament to the quality of ISSS services is that those *derechohabientes* who can afford it often turn to the private, for-profit sector of health care (Cruz-Saco Oyague 2000).

It is also clear from survey data that many of those who are left out of the ISSS cannot rely on the MSPAS system. Only about 54 percent of the population seeks care when sick or injured (Cruz-Saco Oyague 2000; Mesa-Lago 2001). Workshops conducted on rural people's experience with MSPAS facilities reveal several obstacles to timely and effective care, including limited hours, poor supplies and equipment, the limited presence of qualified personnel, discourteous treatment, and fees for appointments and procedures (Comité de Incidencia para el Desarrollo Agrario y Rural 2004). Although the MSPAS system theoretically provides the full gamut of services at no charge, these nominally "voluntary" fees were introduced in the late 1990s in response to health-care reform recommendations by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Moreover, many observers believed that the government created problems in the public system, such as artificial shortages of drugs, to justify privatization (Schuld 2003). Similarly, according to health-care activists, employers affiliated with the proprivatization *Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada El Salvador* (National Association of Private Businesses; ANEP) withheld their contributions to the ISSS (*Entrevista al Día* 2002b).

Fees for services in the public hospitals and increasing outsourcing of ISSS auxiliary services (e.g., laundry, food preparation, janitorial, maintenance, security) to private firms throughout the 1990s marked the state's incipient retrenchment of its role in health care. Health-care activists anticipated that further reforms in this direction under any of the neoliberal formulas implemented elsewhere in Latin America would produce an even sharper decline in access to care. Along with cutting state funding of public facilities, the measures have included mandatory health insurance

packages varying in cost and coverage, as well as a greater role for insurance companies and for-profit health-care providers (Ewig 2006). Salvadoran activists made reference to the impacts of these kinds of reforms in countries such as Chile, where the cost of services increased without the promised improvement in quality (Amaya 2002c, 4), and some categories of patients pay discriminatory premiums (Laurell 2000). Furthermore, Salvadorans had already experienced skyrocketing prices for services along with an erosion of service quality and provider accountability with electricity and telecommunications privatizations in the 1990s.³

The ARENA government's privatization plan for the ISSS was brought sharply into view in July 2002. At its second annual Encuentro Nacional de Empresarios (National Encounter of Private Businesses; ENADE), the entrepreneurial elite unveiled a recommendation to deepen health-care outsourcing beyond auxiliary services to medical care. Endorsing the entrepreneurs' stance, President Francisco Flores announced he would create several working groups to turn their proposal into a blueprint. Although ISSS was the main focus of the ENADE document, a series of elite-produced reports on the system since the mid-1990s provided grounds to suspect that the MSPAS would eventually also be affected. This was a bitter grievance for groups that wanted reform without privatization. In moving toward privatizing medical services, President Flores was turning his back on the very consultative process he had initiated a few years earlier involving numerous stakeholder groups, including the ISSS unions. Effectively, he was ignoring his own agreement to create a follow-up commission on health-care reform to continue this broadly participatory process.

MOVEMENT ACTORS, MOVEMENT TACTICS, GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Union of ISSS Workers, called the STISSS, with 4,800 members consisting of blue- and white-collar health-care workers, declared an indefinite strike on September 18, 2002. Joining them less than a week later was the 1,300-member Union of ISSS Doctors, SIMETRISSS. Starting in early October, doctors in the public hospital system, organized in the National Association of Doctors (AMENA), threw their support behind the two unions, carrying out work stoppages and a variety of other workplace and street actions. The health-care workers' demands were also supported by organizations and individuals from a diverse range of social sectors, including labor unions, the medical college, students, teachers, women's groups, environmentalists, consumer rights advocates, campesinos, com-

3. In the aftermath of electricity privatization in 1996, the price to residential consumers increased by an average of 85 percent (SAPRIN 2000). In the case of telecommunications, privatized in 1998, the price of fourteen hours of telephone usage increased by an average of 1,200 percent.

munity associations, rural service NGOs, church congregations and parishes, informal-sector vendors, bus drivers, and medium-scale coffee growers. Most of these groups were brought together in several coalitions, the largest of which was the Citizen's Alliance Against Health-Care Privatization. The two other major groupings were the Popular Social Block (BPS), and the October 12 Revolutionary Popular Movement (MPR-12).⁴ The most visible show of social movement support for the strikers' demands were six "white marches" in the capital city, in which participants wore clothing that symbolized the doctors' lab coats.⁵ Numerous additional marches and rallies took place in San Salvador as well as in other towns and cities.⁶

In the Salvadoran legislative assembly, debate regarding health care was at its most intense during the first three months of the strike and centered on two specific events. One of these was an explicit executive plan for restructuring the ISSS, announced by President Flores on October 12, titled "Democratization of the Health-Care System." This executive bill promised several key improvements to ISSS services that the unions and many others had long been calling for, but according to Flores required no increase in government, patient, or employer contributions. ISSS patients would now have a choice between going to the regular ISSS facilities and seeking care from a private provider. Despite this component, Flores and other defenders of the bill insisted that this did not entail privatization (Huezo 2002; Tenorio 2002b). (As movement actors pointed out, this assertion was rooted in an overly narrow definition of privatization as the transfer of physical infrastructure.) ISSS coverage would expand to a greater number of people by including occupational groups traditionally

4. Formed in 2003, the BPS's main members at the time of the health-care strike were the National Association of Agricultural Workers (ANTA), the teacher's union Andes 21 Junio, and the STISSS. Interestingly, while STISSS and SIMETRISISS went on strike together, the former belonged to the BPS and the latter to the Citizen's Alliance. Compared to the Citizen's Alliance and the MRP-12, the BPS was regarded as more closely linked to the FMLN. The MRP-12 was made up mainly of rural organizations that had been strategizing closely for many months together with other Central American participants in the Foro Mesoamericano (a transnational popular movement coordinating body) on ways to oppose the impending Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). This coalition, whose largest participants were the Asociación para el Desarrollo de El Salvador (CRIPDES) and the Confederación de Federaciones de la Reforma Agraria Salvadoreña (CONFRAS), named itself after the date of a massive 2002 protest against both health-care privatization and free trade.

5. The white marches took place on October 16, October 23, November 9, December 6, February 6, and March 13. "Strikers" refers only to ISSS union members, not to MSPAS doctors who conducted work stoppages.

6. Las Dignas documented twenty-one major protests in addition to the white marches. Several of these were highway blockages in the interior of the country.

left out of the system, such as domestic servants, agricultural workers, and subsistence farmers, and by raising the maximum age of the children of contributors from six to twelve. Private providers would be paid out of a special fund into which US\$60 million from ISSS's technical reserve savings would initially be channeled.

The other major proposal presented to the legislative assembly in this period was a movement-authored bill that would prohibit further contracts with private firms for medical or auxiliary services in both the ISSS and the MSPAS facilities, except in particular circumstances. The Law of State Guarantee of Health and Social Security, better known as decree 1024, was presented to the Assembly on October 3. Energetically championed by the FMLN, the bill won the votes of the other opposition legislators on October 18 and then awaited the executive response. President Flores, who withdrew his own ISSS reform proposal on October 31 in the face of criticism from numerous quarters, did not veto decree 1024. Instead, he tried to water down its antiprivatization content through direct negotiations with the strikers and by proposing a set of modifications to key clauses of the law to the assembly. On November 15, opposition legislators rejected the modifications, again showing their support for the movement's main demand in a ratification vote that turned decree 1024 into law.

Bitterly critical of the right-of-center Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), on whose support Flores had been relying to defeat decree 1024, Flores immediately incited critical stakeholders to fight its implementation. Over the next several weeks, private citizens, firms, and even a new organization formed in response to the law filed a wave of court challenges against the law—thirty-two in total according to the *Diario de Hoy* (Moreno and López 2002). This countermovement assault succeeded in freezing the law's application and in compelling many legislators to reconsider their earlier support. On December 19, the PCN reversed its position on the antiprivatization law and voted with ARENA for a new law that nullified decree 1024. This killed the prospects for an imminent end to the strike, which continued for another six months. In the resolution of the ISSS strike on June 13, 2003, the government committed to finally creating the Follow-up Commission on Comprehensive Health-Care Reform, which was to continue the work of the multisector council created in 1999. Although an outright prohibition on privatization had slipped out of the movement's grasp, it did achieve a moratorium on all further outsourcing until the commission completed its mandate. The unions also won the government's agreement to rehire all ISSS personnel who had been fired or replaced during the strike.

Clearly, the FMLN was a crucial ally of the movement, acting to sponsor and champion its demands within the legislature. The party's plurality position within the body both before and after the 2003 legislative election

enhanced the importance of the relationship.⁷ The FMLN also supported the movement outside the legislature, openly participating in the white marches and other protest events. The decision by Guillermo Mata Bennett, the head of the medical college and of SIMETRISSE, to stand as the FMLN's vice-presidential candidate for the 2004 presidential election, was a further signal of ideological affinities between the doctors' union and the party.

METHODOLOGY

I chose the *Diario de Hoy* (hereafter referred to as the *Diario*) as the sole source of news for this study because of its large circulation, national scope, and the fact that its only real rival in the business, *La Prensa Gráfica*, is very similar in format and ideological slant. The only news daily that is markedly autonomous from government and elite control, the *CoLatino*, has a circulation of only a fifth that of the *Diario*, making it less than ideal for a comparative study. The pro-ARENA orientation of the paper makes it the most challenging print-news outlet for an anti-neoliberal movement to achieve favorable coverage. But evidence of some loosening of oligarchic control over the *Diario's* news in the past decade makes it a fitting subject for analysis of whether and how movements can convert news from being merely a "stenographer for the powerful" to a site of struggle and debate (*Nation* 2008, 3).⁸

A research assistant scoured every back issue of the *Diario* from July 2002 to June 2003 to find all articles pertaining to the health-care conflict. For the present analysis of how particular claims-making tactics influenced coverage of the movement, I further selected from this saturation sample of 676 items all the regular news articles (excluding editorials, opinion columns, and other non-news materials) that covered protest events and legislative processes related to the movement. I defined protest articles as those focusing on events such as marches, rallies, and the like, in which groups outside the ISSS unions took part alongside the striking ISSS employees.⁹

7. When the strike started, the FMLN had thirty-one seats; ARENA, twenty-nine; the PCN, thirteen; and the Christian Democratic Party, six. Small centrist parties held the rest. Although the FMLN's position held steady in the 2003 election, ARENA lost two seats and the PCN gained three.

8. This reference to the U.S. mainstream media is equally fitting in regards to El Salvador.

9. I excluded items covering workplace strike activities by union members, such as the occupation or symbolic abandonment of a hospital. Because these articles focus mainly on the breadth or intensity of the strike or on patient impact, and only briefly mention the actions of striking doctors and workers, they are less comparable with the coverage of broader social movement action.

Legislative processes turned out to be of two major types. One set, covering what I will call legislative procedure, consisted of stories whose main focus was a plenary session of the legislative assembly, the workings of the legislative Committee on Health and Environment, or comments by *diputados* (representatives of the legislative assembly) pertaining to their parties' positions, actions, and debates on the health-care bills. I excluded articles featuring interviews with *diputados* in other contexts. A second set of legislative articles focuses on the two bills proposed to the assembly in the first month of the strike—President Flores's bill and the movement's decree 1024. The articles examine and evaluate the content of the two pieces of legislation, and/or report on the responses of citizens, institutions, politicians, experts, and other actors. Many of these articles present forecasts of the likely outcomes of the legislation, particularly of decree 1024 after its ratification by the assembly. To avoid double-counting the ten or so articles that cover both legislative procedure and legislation, I placed these in the latter group. There were 66 protest articles, 50 on legislative procedure and 71 on legislation (27 on the executive bill and 44 on the movement's bill), for a total of 187 items.

I compared the three sets of articles for the movement's achievements on standing, sympathy, and converting news into a "contested terrain," the latter a pragmatic modification of preferred framing. Standing was assessed according to whether a movement organization, category of participants (e.g., striking doctors), or specific individuals were mentioned in the article or depicted in an accompanying photograph. Following Hughes's (2006) analysis of "tone" in Mexican news content, I categorized sympathy toward the actors or their actions as either negative, positive, mixed, or neutral. Characterization is neutral when the actors are mentioned without any characterization and mixed when there are both negative and positive elements. In this analysis, a negative characterization of the actors entails maligning their motives or the use of pejorative language, by the reporter him- or herself or by a source being quoted, pertaining to their character, integrity, or intelligence. An additional element of negative characterization that is particularly relevant to coverage of protest concerns disruptive and/or destructive actions by protestors. Admittedly, it is tricky to decide whether reporting on harms caused by disruptive collective action crosses a line from neutral, factual reporting to an unflattering character portrait. Protest is intended to interrupt the flow of social life and institutional functioning, and health-care workers who go on strike know that patient care will be disrupted and diminished. I deemed news articles on health-care protest to convey an overall negative impression when harmful outcomes to bystanders are attributed to protestors' actions without acknowledgement of the reasons for the protest, or when violence or vandalism is attributed to the movement without any attempt to verify this with leaders and organizers.

To analyze news as contested terrain, I examined articles in all three sets for whether and how they (1) evaluate executive proposals and plans for health-care reform (which encompass recommendations by President Flores to the legislative assembly to revise decree 1024), (2) evaluate the movement's health-care bill, and (3) evaluate other government action (apart from health-care policy proposals) related to the conflict. Many news stories present more than one side of an issue, and in so doing, they may either take sides, or present divergent viewpoints in a balanced way (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991; Porto 2002). Following this assumption, and in keeping with other analysts of Latin American news content (e.g., Hughes 2006), I examined the articles for whether, on each of these three themes, they present an exclusively progovernment position, an exclusively promovement position, or a mixture. Where a mixture was presented, I looked for whether this was balanced, movement dominant, or government dominant.¹⁰

RESULTS

Standing

Compared to the use of legislative channels through political party sponsorship, the health-care movement achieved far greater standing in the news through protest actions. As Table 1 shows, movement actors were mentioned in all but one of the sixty-six articles on protest, but in only half of the legislative procedure stories, and in only 28 percent of the seventy-one articles on legislation.

Sympathy

Compared to legislative channels, protest made the movement much more vulnerable to unsympathetic treatment. Table 1 shows that movement participants were cast in a negative light in well more than half (thirty-nine) of the protest articles. Seventeen protest stories were neutral toward the movement, three were positive, and seven were mixed. In contrast, only three legislative procedure articles and four legislation articles characterized the movement negatively. In the rest of the articles in the two sets, the characterization was neutral. It might be thought that a main reason for the lower frequency of unflattering portrayals is the lower degree of standing, as movement actors are mentioned far less often than in

10. To assess the reliability of the five-item coding scheme, a research assistant analyzed 19 randomly selected articles from the set of 187. On one item the percentage of agreement was 0.7. On the other four items the agreement ranged from 0.75 to 1.00.

Table 1

<i>Movement goals</i>	<i>Protest (N = 66)</i>	<i>Legislative procedure (N = 50)</i>	<i>Legislation (N = 71)</i>
I. Standing	65	25	20
II. Sympathy			
Positive	3		
Neutral	17	47	67
Negative	39	3	4
Mixed	7		
III. Contestation			
(1) Executive proposal ^a			
Progovernment	1		14
Promovement			6
Mixed, government dominant		1	1
Mixed, movement dominant			2
Mixed, balanced		1	3
Neutral ^b			3
(2) Movement proposal			
Progovernment		1	36
Promovement		1	4
Mixed, government dominant			1
Mixed, movement dominant			
Mixed, balanced			
Neutral			3
(3) Other government actions			
Criticized only	2	2	1
Criticized and defended			1

^a The third column in the legislation set adds to 29, not 27, because 2 items dealing with the movement proposal also discuss the president's recommended changes to that proposal.

^b *Neutral* signifies that the proposal is described with neither critique nor defense.

protest coverage. But a number of the neutral legislative procedure and legislation articles mention or even cite movement activists.

In protest coverage, the negative characterizations correspond mainly with three main themes: (1) acts of vandalism or outright violence, (2) having an ulterior political motive (supporting the FMLN or communism more generally), and (3) causing enormous inconvenience to members of the public. Exemplary of the construction of the movement

as violent is an article on a street demonstration outside the largest MS-PAS hospital in San Salvador in the eighth week of the strike. The article clearly blames protestors for initiating violence that left twenty people suffering the effects of tear gas and pepper spray, and several riot police officers badly injured. It also conveys a hair-trigger aggressiveness toward authorities and a disregard for the safety of bystanders:

It all started when a group of union members tried to enter the cancer facility by force at one of the emergency gates. One unionist verbally confronted a UMO [riot squad] officer who was posted at the hospital. Then he threw an enormous rock that caused his protective shield to break, for which the other agents responded with gas. . . . What was clear is that the rain of rocks toward the inside of the cancer facility did not hesitate. From First Street West, demonstrators threw explosives at the agents, while out in front the unionists tried to knock down the door of the hospital. . . . At 10:30, Agent David Lozano was evacuated from the cancer hospital by two other agents. His face was bathed in blood. (*Diario* 2002d, 2–3)

Although this was one of the worst and most visible incidents of police repression of protestors during the strike, the article does not question the appropriateness of deploying riot police, nor does it entertain the possibility that police provoked protestors or that agents provocateurs might have been present. Given that a photograph and accompanying text reveal a masked and hooded stone thrower, it would have been reasonable to question whether organizers of the event sanctioned such an act.

Typifying articles that emphasize enormous inconvenience to the public, especially to the poor, disadvantaged, and weak, is an article in which the first paragraph refers to “unionists” and “leftist groups” causing “colossal congestion that paralyzed vehicle traffic for three hours.” The article continues: “Doña Reyna Pérez was another person affected by the highway blockages. Carrying her one-year-old son in her arms, she walked across Boulevard del Ejército. She said she had walked from Hospital Bautista to her house in San Felipe, in San Bartolo [a distance of about fifteen miles]. Her little son has bronchitis” (García 2002, 2).

As will be described in more detail subsequently, FMLN sponsorship of movement demands proved highly useful in influencing legislative debate, which had a positive effect on news coverage. But affinities and friendly relations with the party did not make for a flattering portrayal of movement actors’ motives. On the contrary, the movement-FMLN relationship became grounds for ARENA members and *Diario* writers alike to pillory the movement, especially in the protest coverage. Several of these articles link radical actions to health-care activists, and then track the latter’s guerrilla past. For example, when a group of youths took over the national cathedral for several days in support of the strike, a *Diario* article stated, “The occupation must have been decided by STISSS leader Ricardo Monge (an FMLN militant, linked to the old Armed Forces of Liberation, the armed wing of the Communist Party)” (*Diario* 2003, 18). A few weeks

later, a story on a group of hooded men who boarded a city bus, threatened the driver's life, and set fire to the bus with some passengers still aboard, states that these are the same people who carried out the cathedral occupation. One of the thugs, getting off the bus, is reported to have shouted, "We're from a guerrilla group that opposes health-care privatization" (Rivas and Sorto 2003).

Illustrating protest coverage that mixes negative and positive characterizations of the movement is an article in the third week of the strike reporting that ISSS nurses were considering joining it (which many of them did). The nurses are portrayed almost as saints, one of them explaining that they had stayed on the job "because [they] don't want the patient to suffer more than he is already suffering without his doctor." But the article makes clear that the nurses have been placed in this position by the striking doctors, who have left them overloaded by abandoning the patients (Amaya 2002b, 6). Finally, three protest articles construct a positive impression of the movement, describing preparations for an upcoming white march. One of these describes STISSS President Ricardo Monge earnestly striving to ensure that the event will be peaceful and orderly: "the unionist stated that he had asked each sector that will accompany the march to monitor their people to avoid incidents" (Sánchez and Joma 2002, 12).

News as Contested Terrain

If the health-care movement's use of institutionalized tactics shielded it from unflattering character portraits, it was not a superior strategy for deflecting attacks on its policy proposals. In particular, coverage of the major legislative proposals presented much more frequent criticism of the movement's bill than did protest coverage. None of the protest articles present any evaluation of decree 1024 or the executive proposal, even though many of the protests in the last two months of 2002 were aimed at pressuring diputados to vote in support of movement demands on the bills. This absence of discussion of the policy issues is consistent with a widespread tendency for protest coverage to be more episodic than thematic. Surprisingly, the legislative procedure articles also contain little analysis of either of these two major bills.

Criticism of the movement's proposal is most prevalent in the articles on legislation. Of the forty-eight articles focused on decree 1024, thirty-six present only critical views. The main line of attack on the antiprivatization law was that it violated the constitutional guarantee of the right to freedom of contracts. Many articles assert that by prohibiting the renewal of existing contracts for the provision of auxiliary services, the law would bring imminent havoc to both the ISSS and the MSPAS systems, as contracts for essential services, such as the collection and incineration of hospital waste, would soon expire. Several articles predict and then

graphically document the accumulation of bioinfectious waste. Many articles also present estimates of the staggering cost of installing the in-house capacity to provide these services and to pay out compensation for cancelled contracts. A few articles emphasize lost jobs for health-care personnel and jeopardized patient care. A common source of these views is President Flores, but hospital administrators, legal experts, ANEP, the ARENA-linked think-tank staff, and the news writers themselves also take part in catastrophizing decree 1024. Many of the items report on a mounting wave of court challenges to the law by ordinary citizens, and by the Comité de los Afectados del Decreto 1024, which consisted mainly of entrepreneurs.

The legislation articles, however, also present many more contradictions of government and countermovement views on health-care policy. Five of the articles rebut the attacks on decree 1024, one alongside a predominant antimovement perspective but four with no competing perspectives. The defenders of decree 1024 point out that the decree does allow for outsourcing, even of medical services, when it can be clearly shown that the facility lacks the capacity to provide the service or when there is a national health emergency. The only contracts that decree 1024 would suspend, the SIMETRISSS president Guillermo Mata points out, are those made “at the margin of the law” (*Diario* 2002c, 12). This is an allusion to ISSS officials having taken advantage of the strike to outsource medical services at exorbitant costs, a revelation that is much clearer in *CoLatino* coverage.¹¹ Mata is also paraphrased making the observation that “the MSPAS and ISSS have created a campaign of manipulation and misinformation on the decree [1024].” In a quotation he comments on the media-facilitated hysteria: “ISSS takes out an ad in which they can’t buy water, telephone service, electricity, which borders on the ridiculous” (Amaya 2002a, 6).

A greater disruption of oligarchic control over news content is seen in coverage of the executive proposals and plans for health care. This critical perspective is found in twelve of the legislation articles. Several of these are counterposed with a defense of the executive proposal, but the government’s perspective is dominant in only one of these. The challenges to Flores’s proposal do three main things: (1) assert that the bill allows privatization (contradicting Flores’s protestations), (2) question its internal coherence and feasibility, and (3) forecast harmful outcomes of its key components. On this first point, striking doctors and other critics of the bill, some of whom call it “privatization in disguise,” state that the president is being disingenuous in equating privatization only with the transfer of

11. Doctors’ press conference to reveal corruption in ISSS’s contingency plan covered in *CoLatino* on November 19, 2002. The allegation that the government took advantage of the strike to deepen privatization is echoed by a staff member of the Human Rights Ombudsman Office, interviewed by the author April 1, 2004.

bricks and mortar (e.g., *Diario* 2002b, 4). It is noteworthy that throughout the 2002–2003 strike, the prevailing framing of health-care reform, even among government officials, was that privatization was undesirable. This was evident in assertions by the president, top ISSS and MSPAS officials, and ANEP early in the strike that the business-ARENA intention for the system did not encompass privatization.¹² The terms of the debate were such that the question was not, Should there be privatization? but rather, Is this privatization or not? Arguably this was at least partly attributable to the ISSS unions' campaigns and strike action of several years earlier.

Illustrating doubts about the feasibility of Flores's bill, one article describes the reactions of several people apparently interviewed in the street, representing a cross-section of Salvadoran society. One of these:

Benjamín, a specialist in computer science, is the one who best summarizes these positions. "The perception I have, according to what the president of the republic proposed, is excellent. What I don't understand is how, with the same fee which currently gets you poor attention in ISSS, they're going to attend to me better somewhere else. Private business never loses."

The reporter continues with a comparison of the new administrative entity proposed by Flores, and the recent privatization of the pension system: "the perception . . . of hundreds of other employees [ISSS beneficiaries] is the same: they see the new Health Provision System as what happened with the Pension Fund Administrator (AFP)." He quotes a blue-collar worker, "'At the beginning they came to talk really nice to us, and with the passing of time they raised the fees. That was in the law, but they didn't tell us.'" Remarkably, the reporter himself validates the skepticism, concluding, "Let the happiness be comforting. And the mistrust, legitimate" (Tenorio 2002a).

A third form of challenge to the government's perspective that emerges in the legislation articles are warnings about the suffering of patients and the system as a whole under Flores's proposal: a decrease in the quality of care, increased fees, the draining of ISSS reserve funds as these are transferred to private businesses, and increased risk of corrupt behavior by top administrators. Flores's plan is also criticized for the apparent haste with which it was devised, with no evidence of prior financial studies. As to why the government perspective should be more highly contested in the articles on legislation than in the coverage of legislative debate, it should be noted that the latter tends to be more concerned with the interactions among legislators than on the actual policy issues. Their main focus is the

12. For example, on the program *Entrevista al Día* (2002b) about a week after the strike began, the subdirector general of ISSS stated, "We have always underscored that there is no such process of privatization."

interparty machinations involved in forming and trying to maintain voting blocs on the bills.

Apart from its health-care reform plans, several additional government actions provided grounds to reproach authorities. Given the general tone of the protest coverage, it is surprising that implicit criticism of repression seeps into an article that follows up on a protest event. In the piece, an ISSS paramedic recovering in a hospital from a rubber-bullet injury to the head tells the reporter that he was trying to help a protestor. While portraying the man, a bystander to the demonstration, as a good Samaritan, the article also quotes him in a way that highlights police brutality: "I saw that they had a doctor on the ground. The police were hitting him with their clubs and kicking him. I tried to help him when an agent shot me" (Posada 2002). In the proposal coverage, another article comes close to invalidating the countermovement claims about the impact of decree 1024, while raising serious doubts about the integrity of ISSS officials. This story reports that the company supplying electricity to ISSS hospitals was ordered by ISSS's chief of maintenance to cease work on some forty electricity units even though its contract with ISSS was not set to expire for a few more months. A company spokesperson quoted in the piece says the order came as a surprise given the risk that a power outage would pose to patients undergoing surgery and to vaccinations and other medicines that needed refrigeration. In this piece, the reporter gives ISSS authorities the opportunity to deny this allegation, but the prevailing message is an indictment of ISSS (Rodríguez 2002, 16).

In many ways, both sets of legislative articles fall far short of an activist's ideal aspirations for press coverage. For example, the movement's statements on decree 1024 are entirely defensive, focused on specific clauses and on battling the predictions of catastrophe. They are not presented as positively advocating decree 1024 as part of the unions' vision for a health-care reform that would broaden access and improve the quality of care. In addition, movement supporters are often quoted in a way that obfuscates their arguments, particularly on complicated technical matters for which clarity is essential for assessing the competing proposals. An example is the following barely comprehensible quotation of a movement lawyer regarding the changes that President Flores wanted to make to decree 1024: "We have analyzed the president's observations and we see that his argument is that the Constitution allows the outsourcing of public services, and the decree created by the diputados [decree 1024] has been created based on privatization and outsourcing, in other words, that they are related, therefore, there is no contradiction" (*Diario* 2002a, 8). The reporter makes no attempt to clarify the two key terms here, for example by means of a boxed insert commonly used in *Diario* news stories. It is not surprising that, overall, *Diario* coverage reflected the government and

big-business perspective and gave short shrift to the movement. However, news coverage clearly became a contested terrain in some instances in the movement's use of legislative channels, certainly much more so than in its use of protest.

DISCUSSION

The content analysis indicates that movement tactics make a difference in news coverage outcomes, and that some tactics were more likely than others to disrupt the hegemony of powerful interests within the news. While pursuing demands through the legislature was less effective than protest for raising the profile of movement groups, it proved a much better means of avoiding unsympathetic treatment of movement actors and turning news into a contested terrain. By bringing its health-care reform battle into the legislative arena, the movement occasionally attained coverage in which various actors interrogated, criticized, and rejected government and elite positions. These instances reveal that on the health-care conflict, oligarchic control over the most conservative print news outlet in the country was not airtight.

The findings point to the usefulness of political opportunity theory for understanding how movements can break through governmental and elite control over news content, particularly when these powerful groups are being directly challenged by the left or from below. The movement organizations' good relations with the major opposition party, the FMLN, served as the mechanism for attaining meaningful access to the political system. The movement drew upon its affinities with the FMLN to secure the party's sponsorship of its demands in the form of a legislative bill. Furthermore, the FMLN also spoke for the movement within the legislature in responding to Flores's neoliberal proposal. Both in its championing of decree 1024 and in rallying opposition to the president's bill, the FMLN's support expanded the movement's opportunities for transforming national policy.

Clearly, the policy victory won through legislative channels was short lived; the movement-authored law could not withstand a multipronged assault by the governing party, business elites, and the mainstream media. But the fact that the movement's position on both of the key pieces of legislation was so well represented within the assembly indirectly shaped news content, transforming it, in some of the reporting, from a government propaganda tool to a site of struggle. Essentially, the movement's achievements in the policy arena spilled over into the news media. The fact that most of the print news coverage pertaining to the health-care movement clusters in the first three months of the strike, a period when legislative debate on the issues was most intense, is further suggestive

of the influence of the policy-making process on the media arena.¹³ This echoes Oliver and Maney's (2000) finding that protests are more likely to be covered when they are linked with congressional debates. The media may certainly be a component of the political opportunity structure that influences policy-making processes for or against a movement, as Gamson and Meyer (1996) observe. But the *Diario* findings support a view of the news media as a distinct arena of discourse that does not just influence, but is also influenced by, policy debate.

CONCLUSION

Circumstances particular to the health-care movement would caution against optimistic generalizations about movement influence on news content in El Salvador. The struggle emerged around two powerful labor unions whose strike capacity, together with the crucial place of health care in Salvadorans' experience of development, earned the movement an unusual degree of government and public attention. It was the crisis generated by the strike that prompted the government to respond (via Flores's proposal) to the movement's grievances about its policy intentions undoubtedly much sooner than it had intended to do. It is rare for movements in El Salvador to wield this kind of leverage, especially with the weakening of the Salvadoran union movement after the 1992 peace accords (Fitzsimmons and Anner 1999). It might also appear that the interrogation of the government's health-care agenda in the *Diario* represents only a small sliver of contestation in a news outlet that is overwhelmingly controlled from within by ARENA faithful. The debate and contention on Flores's bill, in particular, might be thought to reflect mere ripples of tension within the *Diario* over Flores himself, similar to those that emerged in both the *Diario* and the *Prensa* during the 1999 election campaign (Rockwell and Janus 2003).

Notwithstanding the features that make the health-care struggle unusual, its influence on policy makers, supporters, the broader public, and ultimately the mainstream media may offer lessons for future movement strategizing. Due at least partly to mobilization by the ISSS unions and their supporters in the late 1990s, widespread framing of health-care reform options evolved such that no one wanted to be associated with a proprivatization position. Furthermore, a majority of Salvadorans surveyed during the strike supported the unions' demands and disagreed with the government's handling of the conflict (University Institute of Public Opinion 2002, Table 28; Washington Office on Latin America 2003).

13. I found this pattern not only in the *Diario de Hoy* but also in the *Prensa Gráfica* and *CoLatino*.

This evidence of the movement's legitimacy, and the active support the movement obviously attracted, indicate that it was able to sway public discourse and awareness over time. If there were hairline fissures in elite control over the *Diario's* news that could be pried open by a movement deploying an array of tactics, it may be due to this cultural shift in the understanding of privatization.

In general, movements have used various means to circumvent news coverage that either ignores or distorts their perspectives. By forming diverse coalitions, having a well-coordinated division of labor, making use of alternative media, and using low-tech, nonmediated forms of communication, movements have been able to reach broad audiences and sometimes alter the amount and quality of mainstream press coverage (Marchi 2005; Klandermans and Goslinga 1996; Smith et al. 2001). All of these interrelated strengths characterized the health-care movement. Its diverse composition allowed for a multiplicity of tactics, each of which could be effective in particular ways. Protest, for example, which Salvadoran activists undoubtedly do not expect to draw good press, can nonetheless help build the identity and internal solidarity of participants (Schock 2005). Future research should examine how this movement, and other large and sustained anti-neoliberal struggles in the region, makes use of traditional media such as community radio, popular education posters and fliers, and face-to-face communication to build broad support. What sorts of social networks, resources, actors, and organizational forms make this possible, allowing movements to mobilize opinion and action despite campaigns of disinformation and repression?

It is clear from events in El Salvador since the ISSS strike ended that such questions continue to be relevant. Despite the creation of the follow-up commission, no real progress has been made in reforming health care, and the government maintains a program of incremental privatization. In addition, this has been a period of ongoing popular struggle against neoliberal policy in several realms, particularly trade and potable water. At the same time, the government has become increasingly intolerant of dissent against its policy plans. In 2007, the police cracked down on a rural rally against water privatization, arresting and jailing more than a dozen people under a new law that defines nonviolent protests as acts of terrorism. Health-care union members have been rounded up and jailed, and their supporters deported. Social movement activists and FMLN members have been assassinated. In this context, influencing the mainstream press may be a low priority for activists. But the media system in El Salvador is neither monolithic nor unchanging. Recognizing where elite control over news content is weakest, and what actions can exploit these small openings, may hold clues for shaping public opinion and policy in the longer term.

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