Evolving Public Discourse of Tenure and Academic Freedom, 1950’s-1990’s:
A Frame Analysis

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Evolving Public Discourse of Tenure and Academic Freedom, 1950s-1990s: A Frame Analysis

Introduction

The related topics of academic tenure and academic freedom, which are frequently debated among higher education leaders, the professoriate and higher education policy-makers, also appear in a broader public discourse advanced by the mass media. Although there has been substantial interest in tenure and academic freedom on the part of higher education researchers, relatively little attention has been directed to how the public rhetoric of these topics has evolved, or to how it has been connected to changing political and social developments in U.S. society. This paper is concerned with how these issues have been presented in public discourse, that is, in the rhetoric constructed for consumption by the public at large. In this paper, we focus on two questions. First, what has been the record of public attention to these issues from the 1950s to the 1990s? In answering this question, we examine publication records extending over a forty-year period beginning in the mid-1950s. Our second question asks: when the topics appeared in public rhetoric, how have they been portrayed? In addressing this question, we focus our attentions on developments since 1975. These questions are explored in the context of social and political context developments in U.S. society.

Conceptual Framework

It has long been realized that the mass media shapes the public's ideas about issues (e.g., Lipmann, 1922). The media play a major role in focusing public attention issues and in providing interpretive contexts for public understandings of issues (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). The rhetoric employed in the social constructions of public issues is not value-free. Embedded within the discourse of an issue are
assumptions about social and political life (Edelman, 1964). The 
dramatis personae in media accounts of events, for example, are often 
portrayed as heroes or villains, rather than neutral actors. Such 
portrayals are important in the construction of political 
interpretations of events and issues (Edelman, 1988).

Politics is in part a competition of ideas. As Gamson and 
Modigliani (1987, p. 143) suggest, "every policy issue is contested in 
a symbolic arena" and each issue takes on its own "special language and 
phrases." Advocates of one idea attempt to give their own meaning to 
the issue and to events that may affect its outcome. As events occur 
that affect policy outcomes, the symbols, arguments, and specialized 
language that are part of the symbolic contest become "clustered" or 
"packaged" around the issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).

Actors seek to attach their own symbols, hence meanings, to an 
issue, but because issues are contested, other actors attempt to 
modify, counter, or rebut these efforts. In this process, an issue 
"package" emerges. The package contains the whole stock of surrounding 
symbols and rhetoric. Thus within a single package various positions on 
the central issue are suggested (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Taken 
together, these suggest a "frame," a cognitive structure lying at the 
core of each issue definition that helps individuals make sense of an 
issue (Kinder and Sanders 1995).

Frames emerge in the clustered packages of symbol, rhetoric, 
ceremony and ritual surrounding reform. A frame thus can be 
understood as a mechanism that "allows its user to locate, 
perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of 
concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (Goffman, 1986 [1974], 
p. 21). Said differently, it is a "central organizing idea or 
story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, 
weaving a connection among them" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987:143).
Frames therefore provide meaning and political order, suggesting 
both the boundary of the issue and implying answers to what should 
be done about the issue (Schön & Rein, 1994).

In this analysis, frames represent interpretive structures 
that are embedded in political discourse. In that sense, frames
are rhetorical instruments, and while they are more implicit than explicit in suggesting certain actions, frames are central to political debates.

Mass media research has long asserted that the press plays an important role in directing public attention toward given issues. As Cohen (1963) stated, "the media may not tell us what to think, but they tell us what to think about" (p.7) McCombs and associates (1991) state that "the news is a manufactured commodity" (p. 25) and that "a good news item ... maximizes both information and drama" (p. 34).

Gans (1979) and others have noted that the media’s use of a few themes appear to account for most news coverage of an issue. In media accounts of political events, Zaller (1992) suggests that:

- political information carried in elite discourse is ... never pure. It is, rather, an attempt by various types of elite actors to create a depiction of reality that is sufficiently simple and vivid that ordinary people can grasp it .... [Political information] is unavoidable selective and unavoidably enmeshed in stereotypical frames of reference that highlight only a portion of what is going on (p. 13).

In packaging the news as a commodity for public consumption, news media adopt frames to organize their accounts. Neuman et al. (1992) state that media frames help "subjects to determine the personal relevance of the issue, to provide linkage among issues, and to formulate arguments from which opinions could be drawn" (p. 62).

Method and Data

Public discourse is evident in wide-ranging sources, especially in both print and electronic communications media. It emerges in the aggregation of sources with various types and sizes of audiences. A comprehensive review of all such sources is well beyond the scope of this study; instead, we restrict our investigation to mainstream print media, with a special emphasis on general mass audience news publications, such as Time.
Newsweek, U.S. New and World Report and to a lesser extent magazines such as National Review, Business Week and others.

In part, our method adopts procedures previously employed by researchers such as Gamson and Modgilani (1987) and Nelson (1984). We examine the publication records of U.S. magazines and periodicals as recorded in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature in order to establish patterns in print media attention to the issues of academic freedom and tenure. Our first step was to determine the frequency with which the topics have been addressed in the publications indexed. In order to accomplish this, we examined each index from 1955 to 1994 and searched under the appropriate headings. (In order to construct final counts, we included citations under "see" and "see also" references, as well.)

The second phase of analysis was a content analysis of articles selected from the first step. We focused on articles appearing in the three major news weeklies (see above), augmenting these with selections from more partisan or more special-focus magazines, again restricting this phase of analysis to widely circulated publications. The selections were made to reveal what use of framing was involved, rather than to strictly compare the relative occurrence of various frames in the articles.

Background

Historical research (Haskins 1923; Kibre 1962; Metzger 1974) traces the history of academic tenure and recapitulates the evolution of a distinctive institution. Tenure is portrayed as an institutional form that has preserved its internal logic relatively untouched by tumultuous historical antecedents. Metzger argues that the idea of tenure was institutionalized in the early era of the masters, where teaching in the university was a highly privileged occupation. In a turbulent period, rulers of the church and state took special pains to protect scholars and shield the university. Thus, the medieval idea of scholastic privilege was well cherished its beneficiaries.
As the British form of collegiate institution emerged in the seventeenth century, the idea of the university as a corporate institution emerged, in which faculty became employees to be compensated for their service. Metzger refers to this as the age of the employee, and it was an era when the terms of relationship were defined.

Modern academic life, however, is largely organized around the academic discipline. Because of the authoritative form of knowledge that academic specialists possess is valued, they are regarded as "essential to the well-being of society." They are also "free and independent" from any intrusions from external forces.

While these features contribute to definitions of tenure, and to an extent are at play in accounts of academic freedom, U.S. universities in the recent era have undergone major transformations, particularly since the 1960s. Higher education organizations have become increasingly influenced by congeries of external processes and institutions, all working in similar directions and aiming to achieve common ends. These processes might demonstrate how bureaucratization of philanthropy as a principal source of academic innovation has changed the nature of the university, or how the subordination of judgments of admissions officers to legislative judgments concerning civil rights might change university politics.

In many public issues, a crisis—or other focusing event that is directly related to the issue—generates strong public interest and awareness of the issue. In such cases, an understanding of the career of an issue's public discourse is relatively straightforward. The issues of tenure and academic freedom, however, do not fit this mold. These issues have the greatest saliency not to the general public, but rather to a relatively small circle of actors, many of whom have a direct stake in the issue. Yet the topics appear, at least at times, in accounts and editorials directed at the general public. What contexts led to the generation of a public discourse on the issues? And how were
the issues packaged and framed as public issues? In our analysis, unfolding political and social events are instrumental in answering such questions.

Many of the major political events since mid-century present some connection to U.S. colleges and universities. In the 1950s, for example, many academics were targets of suspicion during the McCarthy era. The views of Harvard President Pusey, who said that no communist had a right to be on any faculty, were widely held (New York Times, October 7, 1957, p. 5). Popular magazines of the period reflected a similar sentiment, as was evident, for example, in the title of the article "Those Left-Wing Professors Did Plenty of Damage," which was published in the widely circulated Saturday Evening Post (29 October, 1955, p.10).

By the late 1950s, the Soviet Union's Sputnik success was one of several events that reshaped the Cold War. One outgrowth affecting academe was the National Defense Education Act (1958), which promoted a defense-oriented educational program though funds directed to technologies with military applications and to "area studies" curricula that would produce graduates schooled about the geopolitical hotspots of the space-age world.

In the U.S., the Civil Rights movement had been building. The realities implied by the 1954 Brown v. Topeka Board of Education decision came to be realized in higher education settings, and social protest movements on several fronts gathered support. The introduction of Affirmative Action and the Civil Rights Act had profound consequences for the academy. Soon thereafter came the student movement, which challenged U.S. policy in southeast Asia, as well as the women's movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement. Both the profile of the academy and academic work were deeply challenged by each wave of activism. Much of the public was alarmed at the troubles that emerged on campuses nationwide. In this milieu, it was not uncommon for mainstream media sources to connect student unrest to the faculty. An article in Fortune magazine (January 1970, p.94), for example, concluded that "faculty is at the heart of the trouble."
In party politics, Watergate symbolized the deep crises in U.S. institutions that persisted for much of the 1970s. Moreover, by the mid-1970s, the U.S. economy began a downward spiral. For a time, wages were frozen, unemployment was high, and hyper-inflation greatly reduced the buying power of the dollar. Colleges and universities felt the economic pressure, and economic reshuffling created new conflict, as seen, for example, in lobbying efforts by universities and colleges that attempted to stop the age of mandatory retirement for professors from being raised to age 70.

The election of Ronald Reagan signaled a dramatic new era of fiscal conservatism and a substantial increase in political rhetoric about accountability and efficiency and the merits of privatization. These new ideas clashed with some programs and ideas about social equity that had been implemented two decades earlier, and the new conservatism began its rise as the academy was struggling to adjust to the new fiscal environment. At about the same time, national reports, such as A Nation at Risk, and reports issued by the National Endowment for the Humanities, found alarming institutional failure across the educational spectrum, with the assertion that the rise of liberalism was a fundamental cause. Another manifestation of the new conservatism was the mid-decade emergence of Accuracy in Academia (AIA), a watchdog group that publicly challenged what its members believed to be the excesses of leftward-leaning faculties.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the perspective that would become known as "political correctness" began to coalesce. At the same time, however, a series of mass audience books deeply criticized U.S. higher education generally, and its faculties specifically. Books with provocative titles such as ProfScam (Sykes, 1988), Tenured Radicals (Kimball, 1990), The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education (Sykes, 1990) and Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America (Smith, 1991) portrayed faculty as either the culprits behind, or accomplices in, a purported demise in U.S. higher education. Whether through
laziness and inefficiency, or as the result of leftist thinking, faculties on U.S. campuses had run amok, according to the views presented in these books.

**Print Media Attention to the Issues, 1955 to 1994**

An examination of magazines indexes from 1955 to 1994 shows that both academic freedom and tenure to have relatively low-saliency in terms of print media attention. Of the two issues, academic freedom received more index entries, but even in this case there was never a year in this period when the number of entries exceeded 53 (in 1965-1966), when the Angela Davis tenure controversy was a high-profile issue.

The publication pattern of articles concerning academic freedom shows that attention to the topics is not consistent, but instead quite varied. As shown in Figure 1, in the mid-1960s--during Johnson administration and the escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict--there was relatively more attention to the issue than immediately before or after. Although by the mid-1970s, the issue attracted very little attention, the situation changed in the mid-1980s, when there was another wave of attention on the part of the print media, especially after the emergence of the Accuracy in Academia group in 1985. Although attention then lessened again to some extent, the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s (upon the emergence of "political correctness" as a public issue) kept academic freedom issues in print.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2, which narrows the period of time covered to a beginning date of 1965, shows that print attention to tenure issues in higher education was much less evident. Although there is much variation evident, the number of occurrences
falls within a small range, never exceeding 11 citations in a
two-year period. Overall, this minimal amount of interest
that the topic has generated outside of higher education-
related circles is worthy of note and clear evidence that the
various advocates of tenure as a public issue had difficulty
in moving the issue to the public agenda.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Tenure and Academic Freedom Frames

We now turn to the question of how the issues of academic freedom
and tenure have been framed in public discourse. Informed by
Metzger's (1973) history of academic tenure and Clark and Youn's
(1997) discussion of academic power in the Middle Ages, our review
of widely consulted print news media sources leads us to propose
that discourse about tenure and academic freedom in the post-War
era can be organized according to two macro-level frames as shown
below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Issue(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>scholastic privilege</td>
<td>The academic professoriate is framed as a highly privileged occupation, based on extensive credentials. In turbulent periods, institutions take special care to ensure rules that protect the scholarly position (Metzger, 1973).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judiciality</td>
<td>The academic profession is protected by laws because it is &quot;essential to the well-being of society.&quot; The academic profession also provides society with &quot;authoritative expression&quot; in the problems that society faces (Metzger, 1973).</td>
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Figure 2. Number of Readers' Guide Entries listed under the topic of "Tenure," 1965-1994.
In our analysis, then, scholastic privilege is a frame that emphasizes privileges or rights as the most salient features that are involved in tenure and academic freedom arrangements. The central issue revolves around an understanding of the academic profession as a privileged profession by its nature, with the implication that a meaningful academic profession could not exist apart from such arrangements. Discourse is categorized into this frame if it focuses on this central issue, despite the specific position that is taken.

We employ the term judiciality to indicate a frame that emphasizes the arguments for or against academic freedom and tenure as arrangements that are related to the well being of society. Again, the frame could be adopted when taking opposing positions on the central question. (More about the frames below.)

**Shifting Frames from the mid-1970s to 1994**

Discourse about tenure and academic freedom shifted between the two frames of scholastic privilege and judiciality from 1975 to 1994. As was shown previously, during the period from the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s, factors such as internal U.S. responses to the Cold War in its various manifestations largely informed the framing of tenure and academic freedom issues in public discourse, as they did about many other issues. The gradual decline of American involvement in the Vietnam conflict, however, signaled changes to the social and political contexts in which tenure and academic freedom were to be portrayed and perceived.

The slumping American economy in the mid-1970s refocused public attention to an increasing emphasis on economic well-being. In events such as the oil embargo and the period of hyper-inflation, the precariousness of economic success was keenly felt...
by large segments of the population. At the same time, with the schism over war in southeast Asian fading from public view, student activism waned, and public attention that previously focused on campus troubles drifted to other matters. As evident in Figure 1, print attention to either tenure or academic freedom issues reached a low point during this time.

The election of Ronald Reagan and the following conservative "revolution" provided a new context in which such issues were constructed in public discourse. As McCarthyism, Vietnam and Watergate receded into history, new interpretations and meanings were attached to the tenure and academic freedom issues. Yet, while the policy positions and details may have undergone a transformation, the frames organizing the discourse remained durable. Thus, while the underlying arguments for or against tenure, for example, were constructed by connecting the issue to current social, economic and political conditions and world views, public discourse about tenure remained organized primarily according to the two frames.

Scholastic privilege frame. The frame that we call scholastic privilege includes the range of discourse which portrays tenure and academic freedom events as functions of academic privilege. Rhetoric utilizing this frame centers around the deservedness of faculty receiving special treatment in terms of employment conditions and the expression of views that may at times be objectionable to the society at large. From this standpoint, differing positions, or stances towards the appropriateness of the accorded privileges, are possible, and within the frame there is rhetoric on both side of the issue. The meanings that derive from this frame lie in a differentiation between perceived perquisites associated with faculty, on the one hand, compared to a lack of the same that are found in "average" walks of life, on the other. Thus, we classify in this frame discourse which implies that tenure and academic freedom issues are centrally related to privileges associated with being a faculty member.
During the period from 1975 to 1994, this frame was often adopted by writers in leading general audience news magazines. Sometimes the frame was used by members of the academic community to explain an insider point of view. Writing in *Newsweek* (May 23, 1983, p. 11), for example, the president of Georgetown University defended academic freedom and the general disorder of academe. His defense includes statements such as "where our most serious work is done, messiness, not to say a kind of anarchy, is part of our nature" and a claim that the academic's life of research leads to "a solitary and chaotic orbit of speculation, hypothesis and doubt. Anarchy and loneliness go together." Statements such as this imply that the faculty occupation is, at its core, fundamentally special and quite different from ordinary experience.

In the same article, the writer continues to emphasize the other-worldliness of faculty life and finds its origins in undergraduate experience, where the job of the university and its faculty is "to put students in touch with beauty or thought and then watch what happens. A young mind seeing for the first time into Virgil, Plato or Burke undergoes an intellectual chain reaction that is uncontrollable." In such world, according to the writer:

neither faculty member nor student has much time for the dull business of keeping the world, even the world of the university, in good trim. To learn and to teach are beautiful things, but at their best, like laughter of pain, they distort. (p.11)

The same frame appears in a later article, although in this case the position on the issue is clearly different and less indulgent of institutional assumptions about the merits of tenure and academic freedom. In a discussion of high-profile tenure cases that appeared in a 1988 issue of *Newsweek* (April 4, pp. 66-7), for example, it is stated that "academics have long enjoyed at least one perk that neither movie stars nor bond traders ever will: job security." Again, the language highlights a perceived difference between faculty members and, presumably, common people.

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Significantly, the comparison here asserts that academics enjoy an advantage, simply for being academics, that is rare even among cultural elites.

Such articles, however, offer little to capture the attention of a public that has never shown a keen interest in the details of academia. However, in other print appearances, the frame of privilege is used to more ideologically imbued effect. Although in the early years of the 1980s, much discourse about tenure and academic freedom was cast in terms of a judiciarity frame (see below), one frame never completely eclipsed the other. With the emergence of a conservative "watchdog" group, Accuracy in Academia in 1985, and the publication of books and reports critical of the U.S. education system and higher education, the scholastic privilege frame again found currency. During this time the incidence of print media attention to the question of academic freedom intensified.

Mid-1980s framing of the issues sometimes recalled the political stances of the early Cold War, with an allegedly leftist professoriate contrasted with mainstream society. The major print media portrayal of the Accuracy in Academia group, while in some respects reserved, was reminiscent of earlier debates that centered around questions of whether policies such as tenure and academic freedom allowed (correctly or incorrectly) such persons to find refuge within universities. For example, a brief article about AIA appearing in *Time* (December 23, 1985) approached the issue under the cover of reporting about a meeting of the American Association of University Professors. Such meetings were "normally staid" as portrayed by the article, but the activities of AIA had prompted "an impassioned address during a day long symposium on academic freedom." The article presents the views of AIA, which claimed "some 10,000 Marxist professors are imposing their views on American students" but later asserts that the "political right" had distanced itself from the group, quoting William Bennett, then Secretary of Education, as stating the AIA was "a bad idea."
By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the emergence of policies such as speech codes and various harassment policies led to the construction of "political correctness" in public discourse. As constructed in the public arena, the issue was highly dramaturgical and acrimonious. Heroes and villains were produced for public consumption (Edelman, 1988). "PC," as it soon came to be known, reoriented rhetoric about issues such as academic freedom and tenure, primarily within the frame of privilege. (It is true that some accounts frame the essential issues of political correctness in terms of a utility function--i.e., as necessary to promote the efficiency of higher education goals--but the inherent rights involved in academic inquiry are typically portrayed as the central issues.)

In its mid-80s incarnation, the frame of privilege was often used to organize accounts of tenure and academic freedom stories in the familiar pattern established during the early Cold War, again stressing a moral dimension. The central question was whether these arrangements in academia, when bestowed as privilege or rights, appropriately or inappropriately protected professors when they were at odds with societal opinions or prevailing employment conditions.

As reconstructed during the period of the "political correctness" debate, there was something of a role reversal in the framing of the discourse. As framed since the 1950s, the conservative perspective within the privilege frame tended to portray academics as enjoying too much privilege; the liberal perspective had been that the nature of academic work necessitated such privilege for the protection of a class of individuals (scholars) who were engaged in work unlike that of ordinary people. In rhetoric surrounding the "political correctness" issue, it became more common for advocates of the conservative perspective to assert that (conservative) academics did not have enough academic freedom, and that their prerogatives were unjustly lost in the PC environment that, it was claimed, dominated U.S. campuses. By contrast, the liberal side of the issue was
constructed as asserting that too much protection (e.g., allowing completely unrestricted speech) produced a "chilling" or "hostile" environment for students, scholars and others who were not males and not of European descent.

An editorial originally appearing in The Wall Street Journal and subsequently reprinted in National Review (September 30, 1988, p. 18) is an example of the transformation of shifting emphases and positions within the frame of privilege. Leftist faculty, once portrayed as an anomalous and undesirable opposition group within the academy, were now presented as a ruling elite themselves. In the editorial, author William E. Simon expressed a sense of frustration over how U.S. universities are manipulated by the belligerent tyranny of the Left. To Simon, members of the Left were determined to dominate the academic world. The system of academic tenure shelters the Leftists, according to Simon, and on many campuses the assault on academic freedom was condoned by these Leftist faculty with tenure.

In this vein, articles appearing in the conservative National Review argued that more academic freedom was needed in colleges and universities. As recounted by John R. Roche (1989), the central issue was that:

over the past decades there has been a development in American higher education which I find profoundly disturbing: the widespread threat to academic freedom from allegedly "radical" lynch mobs within the groves of academe (p. 34).

In his construction of the events, Roche asserts that in the Vietnam era "Academic freedom thus became an invidious excuse for perpetrating immoralism" with the result that by 1989 "the current assault by New Left vigilantes constitutes the most serious threat to academic freedom since World War II, one far less visible to the general public that the [McCarthy-era] congressional search for 'subversives.'" In this construction, then, conservative academics were portrayed as being denied the privileges that would protect them.
The issue was portrayed somewhat differently, but perhaps to the same effect, in a series of U.S. News and World Report columns by the commentator John Leo. In pieces published in January, May and June or 1992, for example, Leo constructed a picture of political correctness as "institutionalized silliness" (June 22, 1992, p.29) or as evidence that "respect for free speech is declining" (May 11, 1992, p.16). In January, he had characterized events of the year 1991 as follows:

Political Correctness had a banner year in 1991. A batch of new "isms" was announced, many new oppressions were discovered and opponents were soundly thrwacked and occasionally gagged so that a kinder, gentler campus might emerge (January 27, 1992, p. 22).

The same attitude is evident in the various section titles of the essay, such as: "Dead painter harasses prof"; "Arizona battles nerd oppression"; and "How many racists can dance on the head of a pin?" Mocking in tone, these items employ the frame of privilege to reinforce a view of how the experience of academics, ensconced in this new version of their ivory towers, is profoundly alien to ordinary citizens.

The frame was also employed in articles taking a different position on the issue, as seen, for example, in the Mother Jones article, "PC? B.S. Behind the Hysteria How the Right Invented Victims of PC Police" (Beers, September-October 1991). Rosa Ehrenreich, writing in Harper's Magazine (December 1991) also employed the frame in an essay which describes the threat posed by political correctness to academic freedom as exaggerated.

In summary, then, within discourse adopting the scholastic privilege frame the mass audience is reminded that society treats academics as a rarefied group. In pointing out the perceived discrepancies between academic and everyday experience, moreover, there is an implicit challenge to this situation. Debate framed in terms of privilege and rights, because it is focused on core attribution and definitions, is resistant to arguments citing
efficiency or utility. The basis of the discourse is cultural, and the rhetoric of morality is frequently invoked.

Judiciality frame. In contrast to the scholastic privilege frame, the judiciality frame encompasses discourse about tenure and academic freedom which emphasizes the degree to which the academic profession is (or is not) protected by laws and procedures in order to enhance the amount of benefits that would accrue to the society as a result of having (or not having) these arrangements. The essential difference between this frame and the frame emphasizing privilege is that in judiciality, the issue is not whether the academic profession is inherently one of privilege, but rather whether or not academic and freedom and tenure have utility in achieving societal goals, whether the awarding of legally-sanctioned protections to faculty will result in some realized benefit to society. Therefore, while the frame of scholastic privilege concerns whether privilege is in the essence of academic status, the frame of judiciality focuses on the matter awarding specified benefits in return for societal benefits. Said differently, scholastic privilege focuses on a cultural attribution; the frame of judiciality focuses on an economic transaction involving potential costs and benefits. There is, of course, some overlap between the two frames, but as we show below, discourse organized along the lines of one frame has a somewhat different complexion that of the other.

For example, a 1982 commentary appearing in Newsweek portrayed professors as "overprotected" (Robertson, 1982, p. 17). In the following year, the same publication contained the article "Getting Off the Tenure Track" (Newsweek, January 31, 1983, p. 50), in which it was stated that:

"a college professor's tenure these days may be about as meaningful as an autoworker's seniority. Tenure has never guaranteed lifetime job security . . . . But now, constructive state budgets and declining enrollments are prompting many universities to re-evaluate their tenure policies."
are prompting many universities to re-evaluate their tenure policies.

In constructing the issue of tenure this way, there is little connection of privilege to academic tenure. This article goes on to point out alleged absurdities which are ascribed to a university's effort to "keep them [faculty] on the payroll." And so, when it is shown that "one politics professor, for example, is now in the physics department," the implication is that the tenure system is to blame. Tenure is also presented as hindering managerial performance, and the article's authors write that:

Other universities, anticipating the need to eliminate unpopular departments, have considered a variety of proposals to modify the tenure process. "I now see the constraints that tenure places on a school," says Peter Steiner, a former professor and now an academic dean at the University of Michigan. "I still believe in it, but from the point of view of an administrator, tenure is inconvenient." (p. 50)

As tenure arrangements came under increasing scrutiny during the Reagan years, writings such as this emphasized perceived managerial inefficiencies inherent in tenure. During this era the economic segment of U.S. society was undergoing restructuring. For a segment of the population, the 1980s were boom years, but at the same time long-standing employment relationships, generally, were challenged by corporate down-sizing and the beginnings of economic globalization. The sudden replacement of air traffic controllers was one of the events signaled to the U.S. workforce that one could not count upon the persistence of previously implied understandings in employment relationships. Just as a theme of the new conservatism was a stance against entitlements throughout society, in academe the Supreme Court's Yeshiva decision--which classified professors with managerial employees--further eroded perceptions of faculty as being legitimately entitled to special dispensation. These developments undercut much of the relevance of scholastic privilege frame, reasserting an emphasis rooted in the utility of legally- and organizationally-sanctioned procedures and protections for academics.
One illustration of this line, for example, is found in a 1990 article in *Time* (Painton & Tifft, 1990), in which two senior reporters present tenure as "an entrenched institution" that allows even "grossly incompetent teachers" to continue in their jobs. Attempts to reduce the proportion of tenured faculty have met with resistance, they note, and removing tenure for actively publishing scholars—regardless, apparently, of teaching performance—is not easily accomplished. In the authors' view, tenure is defended in the name of academic freedom, but it really is focused on "economic security" for the professors.

Similarly, the traditional emphasis on research in tenure decisions is shown to hinder teaching, for example, as portrayed in a *Business Week* article in 1991 (May 20). Stanford's president, Donald Kennedy, is portrayed as striving to return the university to its "primary mission" which is "to transmit knowledge." Yet, according to the article, "Stanford culture" and the traditional facets of the tenure system (i.e., emphasis on research) stand in the way. "The old system [tenure] is stubborn, judging by the outrage Kennedy's campaign is provoking."

Another application of the judiciality frame emerged during the early 1980s in accounts of federal regulatory actions involving the distribution of scientific and technological information. In such accounts, the need of society to protect its interests by formally controlling what and to whom scholarly material could be distributed was the organizing principle employed. Academic freedom, in this construction, is presented as existing in a more or a less regulated condition depending upon the overarching interests of national security. Absolute privilege or rights in terms of scholarly activity is relegated to a lesser position in the discussion.

**Toward a Theory of Public Discourse on Higher Education**

The dynamics of public attention to social issues is rooted in the public's understandings of the way social institutions function in our society and in the way major communications media
interact with the public over the issue. Some issues capture public attentiveness as is evident after dramatic events. For other issues, the public becomes less interested as the mass media fails to bring interests at the level of alarmed discovery. In this way, some social issues become "pseudo-issues" and never become public agenda items, remaining instead "pseudo-agenda" items (Cobb et al. 1976).

Even though an issue may be sufficiently articulated by an aggrieved group and amply debated in the mass media, the issue might be framed in such a way that the issue is far removed from the public's ability to translate it into "specific public demands" and to expand the issue to the policy-making arena. Our study reveals that despite widespread attention to tenure and academic freedom issues within higher education circles in the past 40 years, on the basis of print media attention to the subjects it would be difficult to argue that either issue has consistently found a place on the public agenda. At some times (e.g., the Angela Davis tenure controversy), print media have approached the subjects with more intensity than at other times, but overall, public discourse on both issues has been limited.

We conclude that the ways in which these issues consistently have been framed in public discourse leads to a further distancing between the general public and the issues. Embedded within discussions of other topics, academic freedom and tenure issues are framed vaguely. The durable frames of privilege and judiciality, which have deep roots in the history of higher education, have failed to significantly resonate with the public at large. The public rhetoric that has developed around these issues, taken in the aggregate, has been unfocused.

Press accounts shows that these remain relatively low-saliency issues, seldom awakening much public interest. Social, political, and economic crises in society have resulted in accounts that raise tenure and academic freedom issues, but the connect has been presented as indirect. Tenure and academic freedom are therefore connected to issues in public rhetoric more
than they are the actual issues. If an item asserts that tenure or academic freedom inappropriately protects leftists, the 
"politically correct, or some other faction within the academy, we would argue that this rhetoric tends to connect more with broader, ongoing rhetoric about those other issues (i.e., the place of Leftists or political correctness in society) than it does with any consistent thread of public argumentation concerning the issues of academic freedom and tenure. In this way, tenure and academic freedom are lesser and seldom free-standing issues in public discourse.

As constructed in the public arena, tenure and academic freedom are aspects of university and college organization that are presented as far removed from most people's lives. Although a reader might agree with a magazine article criticizing either arrangement in academe, the issues themselves essentially remain academic questions, both literally and figuratively.

This study suggests that accounts of higher education issues such as academic freedom and tenure produced by mass media for the general public are likely to attach their discussions to other controversies.

Notes

1We include in this frame discourse pertaining to "rights," which as "inalienable" in U.S. traditions, can be understood as the most culturally permanent incarnation of privilege.

2A tentativeness is some accounts of Accuracy in Academia was perhaps due to the fact that the AIA group was an outgrowth of the very conservative Accuracy in Media organization, which posited that the mainstream media had a liberal bias.

3The executive director of the group is reported to have cited the case of an Arizona State political scientist who was accused of "taking too strong a stance against nuclear war in his lectures" as an example.
References


Note: There is a duplicate on page 17.