

Woodstock: How the Media Missed the Historic Angle of the Breaking Story

Sheehy, Michael, Journalism History

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair in August 1969 was an iconic moment of the 1960s for a generation of young people. However, coverage of the breaking story by major newspapers and magazines did not emphasize the events cultural significance, focusing instead on crowd size and related logistical problems and public safety issues. This study of breaking coverage by six daily newspapers and three magazines examines how prominently the story was displayed, the sources who were quoted, and to what extent the cultural angle was reported. A key finding was that each publication relied mostly on official sources and consulted few young festival attendees for their perspective. The breaking coverage thus focused on the negative aspects of the massive assembly, overlooking the cultural perspective that has come to characterize the event in history.

One of the iconic cultural events that defined the 1960s was the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, which drew an estimated 450,000 young people to a vast sloping meadow in rural New York state over the weekend of Friday, August 15, to Monday, August 18, 1969. The young crowd came to witness an unprecedented rock music extravaganza, and the unexpected turnout overwhelmed the preparations of promoters. Tens of thousands of concert-goers were caught in traffic jams on narrow country roads several miles from the rural festival site near the town of Bethel, about 100 miles northwest of New York City, and could not reach the concert grounds. For those who did arrive, a crisis was unfolding. Food, water, and sanitation facilities were insufficient for the large crowd, widespread drug use was resulting in overdoses and bad "trips," and heavy rains were turning the festival grounds into a muddy quagmire.

In one sense, Woodstock was the story of a mass gathering that became a potentially dangerous logistical and public safety nightmare. But from a cultural perspective, it represented a transcendental moment, a coming of age, for the young generation of Americans in the late 1960s.¹ Not surprisingly, many Americans of older generations - as well as many journalists - did not immediately recognize the passage of that transcendental moment and its impact on young people. The New York Times, for instance, initially dismissed Woodstock in an editorial as "a colossal mess" and "a nightmare of mud and stagnation."² To be sure, the American media would quickly come to regard it "as the birth of a new 'nation.'"³ But the breaking news coverage failed to acknowledge the festival's historic cultural significance.

This study examines how six newspapers and three magazines in the United States covered and framed the breaking story of the Woodstock festival. The newspapers were the New York Times, the nation's newspaper of record; the Washington Post, a major metropolitan daily with a strong national focus; the Wall Street Journal, a national daily focusing on economic and political news; the Chicago Tribune, a major metropolitan daily focusing on the Midwest; the Los Angeles Times, a major metropolitan -daily focusing on the West; and the Cincinnati Enquirer, a mid-size metropolitan daily that was

typical of newspapers of that class and which relied almost entirely on wire services for national and world coverage. The magazines included Time, the nation's largest news weekly, with a circulation of about 4.1 million, based in New York; Life, the nation's largest general interest weekly, with a circulation of about 8.5 million, based in New York; and Rolling Stone, the liberal biweekly journal of the 1960s counter-culture and a rock music publication, based in San Francisco.⁴

Newspaper coverage was examined from Friday, August 15, through Sunday, August 24, 1969. For the magazines Time, Life, and Rolling Stone, the issue that first contained Woodstock coverage was examined. The relevant editions were the Time and Life issues of August 29 and the Rolling Stone issue of September 20. Each publication's Woodstock coverage was examined with regard to story placement, author, focus, and sources. This study sought only to produce a snapshot of the breaking coverage of Woodstock by a mix of national and local publications, including some of the most influential U.S. newspapers and magazines of the era. It did not attempt to be a comprehensive examination of Woodstock coverage over time or across a broad range of media. As such, the study sought to answer three research questions:

- * How prominently was Woodstock displayed in the publications?
- * Who were the sources for the coverage?
- * How was its cultural significance reported?

From the perspective of journalism and mass communication research, this study is important because it critiques the coverage of one of the major news events of the 1960s, examines how the media framed the story and thereby helped shape the historical perspective, and looks at the conventional media routines and the related news values of the era. The study found that the conventional media routines and news values were inadequate to facilitate coverage of Woodstock's cultural impact on the young generation in attendance. If anything, the media's coverage demonstrated the need for journalists to go beyond the conventional media routines in order not to miss a potentially historic, but underlying, story angle.

Framing theory is the basis of this analysis of Woodstock news coverage. A frame, according to William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani in 1987, is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue."⁵ Another perspective, proposed in 1991 by James W. Tankard, Laura Hendrickson, Jackie Silberman, Kriss Bliss, and Salma Ghanem, suggests that a frame is "a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration."⁶ The media's framing of Woodstock, which focused on public safety and problems associated with the massive crowd, is thus important because it shaped public perception of the festival as it unfolded and thereby influenced the initial historical perspective of the event. The framing also reflected the era's prevailing news values in which the perspective of the

youth culture often received little attention in mainstream media coverage of the events of the turbulent 1960s.⁷

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair has been the subject of much popular literature and journalism over the past five decades, including such works as *Back to the Garden: the Story of Woodstock* by Pete Fornatale in 2009; *Woodstock, an Encyclopedia of the Music and Art Fair* by James Perone in 2005; and *Remembering Woodstock*, edited by Andy Bennett in 2004.⁸ But little has been written about the event in a scholarly context from a journalism or mass communication perspective. News coverage of Woodstock was addressed in a secondary manner in some popular works such as *Back to the Garden*, in which Fornatale briefly discussed coverage by the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone* but did not critique the coverage from a journalism perspective.⁹ Simon Warner, in a chapter in *Remembering Woodstock*, discussed but did not critique festival coverage by several newspapers and magazines in his effort "to put together a flavor [sic] of the reports that arose from the event."¹⁰ The publications included the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, and, from the United Kingdom, the *Guardian*, the *Melody Maker*, and the *New Music Express*. In the *New York Times* on the festival's fortieth anniversary, Joshua Brustein discussed some of the paper's coverage of the breaking story.¹¹

How prominently was Woodstock displayed in the publications? Considering how it eventually came to be regarded as a defining moment of a generation, it was expected that the story would lead page one in all of the newspapers and dominate the covers of the magazines. But this did not happen. Among the newspapers, Woodstock at best was an off-lead story on page one in some of them and an inside-page story in others. The coverage during the third weekend of August 1969 gave the impression that Woodstock was a bizarre, yet historically insignificant, event unfolding in the aftermath of the landmark Apollo 11 moon landing just four weeks earlier. It also was competing that weekend with coverage of a massive hurricane bearing down on the Gulf Coast and deadly violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants.

The most prominent Woodstock coverage among the examined publications appeared in the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. For the *Times*, it was a local story because the festival was occurring about a two-hour's drive from Manhattan and many attendees were from the city. The event received page one exposure with stories and photographs in the *Times* from Saturday, August 16, through Tuesday, August 19, yet the gathering of nearly 500,000 young people never merited the status of a lead story. The page one leads Friday through Monday reported on unrest in Northern Ireland, and Tuesday's lead focused on Hurricane Camille, which had struck the Gulf Coast late in the weekend. All of the *Times*' Woodstock stories were written by staff reporters led by Barnard L. Collier, who was the first reporter on the scene for the paper. Other *Times* reporters who eventually joined the coverage and filed stories were William Farrell, Mike Jahn, Michael T. Kauffman, Richard Reeves, and Murray Schumach.

The Times essentially stumbled onto the breaking story on Friday as an unexpectedly large crowd began to gather at the festival site. In a 2009 article published on the New York Times website, Collier said Times editors initially did not believe that Woodstock warranted coverage. As Brustein wrote in the Times:

Collier . . . described a tension among his editors first about whether [the Times] should even cover Woodstock, then about what the story was. His original pitch to write about the festival was rejected. But his brothers, who worked in the music industry, told him that it was worth attending, so he went anyway. After the size of the crowds forced highway closings, he called his editors again, who relented. When he started his reporting, Mr. Collier quickly realized that it was not only the Times that had initially ignored the event. He walked into a trailer that the organizers had set up for the press and found it completely vacant.¹²

Rolling Stone gave extensive coverage to Woodstock, as would be expected from a publication focusing on the counter-culture and rock music and produced by members of the Woodstock generation. Moreover, as a biweekly publication, Rolling Stone had more time than daily newspapers and weekly magazines to reflect on and write about the significance of the story. Its September 20 cover featured a black-and-white photograph of a nude man with long hair wading in a pond and holding the hand of a young child. The image symbolized how Woodstock was, in a sense, the story of generations in transition, reflecting the social tension arising from the so-called generation gap of the 1960s and how this tension likely influenced the news media's coverage of the festival. The cover headline said, "Woodstock: 450,000." Inside, the magazine devoted nine pages of staff-written text and photographs to the festival. In Rolling Stone's irreverent style, the headline on the first page of coverage declared, "It Was Like Balling for the First Time."¹³

Compared with the New York Times, Woodstock received much less attention in the other five newspapers examined in this study. During the Woodstock weekend, they generally published one story a day, if at all, and it often was on an inside page. Of the Woodstock stories published from Friday, August 15, through Tuesday, August 19, in all six newspapers, 40 percent appeared on page one. Only two papers other than the New York Times - the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times - had correspondents on the scene, and their writers focused on feature topics and did not provide breaking news coverage. Thus, papers other than the New York Times relied on the Associated Press and the United Press International for hard news coverage of the story.

The Washington Post published five Woodstock stories as the festival progressed from Friday through Monday. The newspaper initially covered Woodstock with feature stories filed from the scene by Post correspondent BJ. Phillips that appeared in the Style section on Friday and Saturday. On Sunday, the Post published a hard-news story, compiled from wire reports, on page one above the fold with a four-column photograph. The Post on Monday published on page one another hard-news story, compiled from wire reports, with a three-column picture. Also that day it carried a feature story written by Phillips in the Style section.

The Chicago Tribune published only two hard-news wire stories about Woodstock over the weekend. On Sunday, it carried an AP story on page one at the fold with photographs inside. On Monday, the coverage consisted only of a UPI report on an inside page.

The Los Angeles Times published four hard-news wire stories about Woodstock from Saturday through Tuesday. It carried on Saturday a UPI story on an inside page, on Sunday a UPI story above the fold on page one with a three-column photograph, on Monday an AP story at the bottom of page one, and on Tuesday an AP story on an inside page. In addition to the wire story on Monday, the Times included a sidebar on an inside page by freelance correspondent Arlie Schardt, who filed from the scene. That piece was a news-feature that described the scene at Woodstock but did not discuss its cultural implications.¹⁴ On Friday, August 22, the Times published a page one news-feature by staff writer David Felton about Beverly Hills Police Chief Joseph Paul Kimbles experience at Woodstock. He had gone to the festival as an observer but ended up assisting with Woodstock security, and the story focused on crowd control and other security matters. At forty-five paragraphs, it was the longest of all the articles published in the Times about Woodstock.¹⁵

The Cincinnati Enquirer published on Saturday a stand-alone Woodstock photograph on page one and an AP story inside, and on Sunday, a photograph and an AP story appeared on page one below the fold. A single UPI story was published inside on Monday, and a single AP story appeared inside on Tuesday.

The Wall Street Journal reported on the festival only as a low ranking paragraph in its page-one "What's News" column on both Monday and Tuesday. Interestingly, the name "Woodstock" never appeared in the Journal on those days; the paper obliquely referred to a music festival occurring in "New York's Sullivan County."¹⁶

Among the magazines, Times post-Woodstock cover on August 29 featured a photograph of Defense Secretary Melvin Laird with the headline, "Shaking Up the Pentagon." Woodstock was not mentioned on that cover, which reflected the fact that 1969 was part of the Cold War era and political news generally took precedence in Time (as well as the New York Times). Inside, it did publish a thoughtful unsigned essay on the cultural significance of Woodstock.¹⁷

Life magazine gave Woodstock a ten-page spread of stunning photographs in the August 29 issue. Even so, writer Norman Mailer was pictured on the cover with the headline, "A Major Report on the Moon Venture by Norman Mailer." The cover did note, in small type, "The Woodstock Rock Festival." Life would publish a special edition devoted to Woodstock in September 1969.

Who were the sources for the Woodstock coverage? The study found that they were mostly festival and public officials, not the young people attending the event. From the staff reports in the New York Times to the wire stories appearing elsewhere, the breaking newspaper coverage of Woodstock included remarkably few comments from young

people in attendance. Among the six newspapers, of 132 sources quoted in breaking Woodstock stories from Friday, August 15, through Tuesday, August 19, only thirty-two (23 percent) were festival attendees, and almost all of these were unnamed (see table 1). The others were official sources, namely festival organizers, public safety officers, and health professionals as well as Bethel-area residents and business people. Among the three magazines, a slightly higher proportion of attendee sources - 32 percent - was observed in the initial Woodstock coverage in Time, Life, and Rolling Stone. Surprisingly, the overall magazine trend held true specifically for Rolling Stone, a publication that sympathized with the Woodstock generation, which quoted only nine mostly unnamed attendees among twenty-eight total sources in its lengthy coverage (see table 1).

It was ironic that the young people who made Woodstock so historic were largely ignored by reporters covering the breaking story. The newspapers especially overlooked the historic cultural implications of the festival by following the conventional media routine for covering mass gatherings. In doing so, they largely focused on official comments regarding public safety issues and the massive crowd size. Had reporters inquired about what young people at Woodstock were thinking, the breaking coverage may have captured the historic angle that would ultimately come to characterize the event. Even so, those few attendees who were quoted typically commented on the physical conditions of the event, not the cultural implications of it.

The New York Times, which quoted the most sources of the publications studied, included numerous comments from official sources in its stories from Saturday through Tuesday, but only six attendees were quoted in twelve stories, and only one of those attendees was identified by name. The same trend was observed in the Washington Post's feature stories by Phillips, who quoted three unnamed festival-goers in four articles, and in the various wire stories published in the other newspapers.

Among the handful of young people's remarks that did appear in the New York Times, some of the more insightful were gathered in Manhattan on the day before the festival began. A story on Friday, August 15, by Fosburgh described the scene at the Port Authority Bus Terminal on Thursday as buses were shuttling thousands of young people to the event:

Carrying sleeping bags and tents, canned food and guitars, dressed in beads, leather, bandanas and long gowns, the young people spoke of sleeping out under the stars and possible riots.

Vicki Kamp, 18 years old, of Philadelphia, was one of the many who had to overcome parental opposition in order to attend.

"They were so upset," she said. "I've never done much traveling and they were so afraid of riots and police trouble and drugs. We had to sit down and talk it all out."¹⁸

Perhaps the most poignant comment in the Times story on Friday came from an unidentified sixteen-year-old, who expressed unease about the forthcoming experience: "I know there'll be drugs everywhere, and I wonder what it will all be like. I've never been away from home before. I wonder what will happen to ail of us."¹⁹

How was Woodstock's cultural significance reported? The study found that the breaking coverage was framed in a way that virtually ignored the cultural perspective of how the event impacted the young generation in attendance. From a theoretical perspective, this framing can be viewed in the context of conventional media routines and the prevailing news values of the era. When reporting a news event, journalists typically adhere to conventional routines that involve certain methodologies and standards.²⁰ For example, the routine for covering a mass gathering is to frame the story in the context of public safety from the perspective of official sources. This occurred with most of the Woodstock coverage; reporters relied on public safety and festival sources for stories primarily about the crowd size and its problematic consequences, including deaths, injuries, arrests, lack of food and water, and drug use.

The conventional media routines and the emphasis on the public safety angle were reflected in the lead sentences of the page one stories in the examined newspapers. For example, the New York Times reported on Saturday: "A crowd estimated at more than 200,000 poured into this Catskill Mountain hamlet today for a three-day rock and folk music festival, creating massive traffic jams and a potentially serious security problem."²¹

On the next day, Sunday, the page one story began: "Despite massive traffic jams, drenching rainstorms and shortages of food, water and medical facilities, about 300,000 young people swarmed over this rural area today for the Woodstock Music and Art Fair."²² On Monday, the page one story said: "Waves of weary youngsters streamed away from the Woodstock Music and Art Fair last night and early today as security officials reported at least two deaths and 4,000 people treated for injuries, illness and adverse drug reactions over the festival's three-day period."²³

Despite the angle that appeared in the leads of his stories, the Times' Collier said years later that he battled with editors on the perspective of the stories that appeared under his byline. The Times' editors wanted the stories to reflect a strong public safety angle - a disaster in the making - while he believed the civility of the crowd was the important perspective that needed to be addressed. As he put it:

To me it looked like an amazingly well behaved bunch of folks. And I was in the situation where the editors of the paper, although they wanted me to cover the story, the spin they wanted was of catastrophe waiting to happen. . . . And I had to say, "Look, I'm the only one here" - I had some leverage since I was the only one there. I said, "If that's what you want, I won't write the story." And this caused a big furor in the building. Eventually it went up to the editor, James Reston, and he was one of my severest critics inside the paper. But he said, "If that's the way Barney sees it, that's the way we'll write it."²⁴

The lead stories written by Collier in the Saturday, Sunday, and Monday editions reflected a strong public safety angle, but the civility of the crowd was mentioned prominently in the Monday lead story: "For many, the weekend had been the fulfillment of months of planning and hoping, not only to see and hear the biggest group of pop performers ever assembled, but also to capture the excitement of camping out with strangers, experimenting with drugs and sharing - as one youth put it - 'an incredible unification.'²⁵ This theme also appeared in Times' sidebars, such as the Monday article by Kauffman that reported, "What has happened in Monacello in the last two days resembles a family reunion in which crisis has brought estranged parents and children together."²⁶

Further evidence of the influence of conventional media routines and the public safety angle was reflected in the published comments of Naomi Rock, a twenty-eight-year-old reporter for the AP. "I am only six years out of college. I just missed being part of this hip generation of long-haired boys and shaggy girls," she wrote in a first-person account of her experience for the AP. "I came here expecting to report on trouble.' I told my boss I thought the kids would 'take the town apart.' The kids proved me wrong."²⁷

In another sense, conventional media routines and related news values can reflect the interests of the ruling elites in society - or to use the jargon of the 1960s, "the Establishment" - as they seek to maintain their dominance and diminish potential challenges to their power. This perspective has been used to describe news coverage of other culturally significant stories during the turbulent 1960s, including student activism and the New Left movement.²⁸ One can argue that the media's focus on the Woodstock public safety angle may have partly reflected the Establishment's nervous response to the perceived threat to the social order posed by the young generation. This can be demonstrated by the media's preoccupation with the presence of illegal drugs at Woodstock. The use of marijuana, LSD, and other illegal drugs by young people helped define the generation gap of the 1960s. The media's coverage of drugs at Woodstock thus be viewed as an attempt by the Establishment to marginalize the political power of the young generation.

Most of the examined news stories mentioned drug use, and the New York Times went so far as to publish a sidebar that explained the slang and practices of the drug culture to its uninitiated, highbrow audience. Under the headline, "Bethel Pilgrims Smoke 'Grass' and Some Take LSD to 'Groove,'" the unbylined story reported:

A billowy haze of Sweet smoke rose through purple spotlights from the sloping hillside where thousands of people - their average age about 20 - sat or sprawled in the midnight darkness and listened to the rock music.

The smoke was not from campfires.

"There was so much grass being smoked last night that you could get stoned just sitting there breathing," said a 19-year-old student from Denison University in Ohio.²⁹

Citing unnamed festival-goers as sources, the story speculated that 99 percent of those at Woodstock were smoking marijuana. It was an unsubstantiated assertion at which even Rolling Stone scoffed.³⁰ The Times story, with breathless alarm, noted, "Many people who are not, as the young people say, 'into the drug scene,' find it incredible that marijuana can be so prevalent and so widely used despite the fact that its sale or possession is illegal." The article then defined terms such as "grass," "stoned," "joints," and "groove" and explained the supposed purpose of using drugs while listening to rock music. "A number of the youths have said the so-called 'soft drugs,' like marijuana, some milder forms of hashish and on the strongest side, mescaline, were used primarily because they produce a euphoria and, in the setting of rock music, allow the users to 'groove' on the sounds," the Times reported.³¹

Beyond coverage of drug use, the Woodstock news reports noted to a lesser extent die public nudity and the casual sex occurring at the festival. This further reflected points of tension between the generations and what older Americans might have perceived at the time as additional threats to the social order.

Although the New York Times as well as the other newspaper coverage overlooked the young generation's perspective, the Times briefly touched upon the festival's cultural implications in some of its stories published on Sunday through Tuesday. But those references were not the central focus of the stories and came primarily from the perspectives of the organizers and local dairy farmer Max Yasgur, who owned the festival site and was later immortalized in the song "Woodstock" by folk singer Joni Mitchell.

In a sidebar published on Sunday, the Times quoted one of the four Woodstock promoters, John Roberts: "There was a business, and also a sociological, purpose to the event. I had felt for a long time that the polarization of the generations is a very serious threat to our society, and we felt that a cultural exposition created by youth could be of inestimable value in bridging that gap."³²

A Times sidebar on Monday again referred to the Woodstock promoters, who "said that they created a great event in the development of a new American 'youth culture.'" The story quoted another promoter, Michael Lang: "Today is a time to think about what happened here - the youth culture came out of the alleys and the streets. This generation was brought together and showed it was beautiful. The peace they were screaming about is what they really want - they're living it. They value each other more than material things."³³ In another Monday sidebar in the Times, a "Man in the News" feature focused on Yasgur, who offered this perspective: "I never expected this festival to be this big. But if the generation gap is to be closed, we older people have to do more than we have done."³⁴

On Tuesday, after the festival had ended, the Times finally published in a page one story significant comments by an unnamed festival attendee who addressed the cultural implications of Woodstock:

One man explained his presence and persistence: "I'd be crazy to fight traffic all day to park five miles from where I'm going just to hear music. Especially when if you're late you can't get within a quarter mile of the stage and can only hear an occasional note. But it's more than that. I'm here for the same reason that Indians used to have tribal gatherings. Just being here with people like me makes it all worthwhile. I guess it will reinforce my lifestyle, my beliefs, from the attacks of my parents and their generation."³⁵

In the same Tuesday story in the Times, there were more comments from Yasgur: "What happened at Bethel this past weekend was that these young people together with our local residents turned the Aquarian festival to a dramatic victory for the spirit of peace, goodwill and human kindness."³⁶

In the Washington Post, Phillips touched upon the cultural implications of Woodstock in her feature-oriented Style section reports. In a Saturday piece about the festival's opening day, before the event had become overwhelmed by the enormous crowd and pouring rain, she wrote: "Their parents may consider these kids to be in revolt, and the kids may consider themselves to be rebels. But both premises fell apart when one saw the regimented way hundreds of thousands of them arranged themselves in this once bucolic field. They spread out in definite rows - not so far away from the days of lining up for recess, after all."³⁷ Then on Tuesday, she began her Style section piece with an observation: "Everything has fallen apart at the Woodstock Pop Festival except the most important thing - the people. If anything, they are more together than they were when the festival began Friday."³⁸

In the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, and the Cincinnati Enquirer, wire service coverage of the festival followed the conventional routine and was unremarkable. But later in the week, in the aftermath, on Sunday, August 24, the Enquirer published a pair of insightful Associated Press first-person stories side-by-side. The package appeared on an inside page under the headline, "Two Views of Art Festival 'Shocking.'" In an apparent reference to the "shocking" nature of an Enquirer editor's note explained that the "open use of drugs and nude bathing took place in an atmosphere that was somehow outside the law." This editor's note served as yet another example of how tension arising from the generation gap influenced the establishment media to focus on the public safety angle and a negative perception of the event. The side-by-side stories were written by the AP reporter Rock and forty-four-year-old Sunna Rasch, a self-described "prude of the first order," who attended Woodstock because of her son's interest in going.³⁹ Neither story featured the perspective of a young person attending the festival, but Rasch's piece illuminated the cultural implications:

If anyone doubts that a revolution is in progress in this country, he should have attended the Woodstock Music and Art Festival. . . .

It was a scene of children trying to say something to us - demonstrating their faith and trust in each other. I felt ashamed when I heard on the radio that some people were

gouging the kids, charging a dollar for a quarter of milk, 25 cents for a glass of water - giving truth to what the kids have been protesting all along! . . .

Asking me to describe how the exposition changed me is like asking somebody to define a spiritual experience. For that is what it was to me ... to the young people I met . . . and eventually to those of the community who gave of themselves and their food. We all became richer.⁴⁰

The Chicago Tribune on that same Sunday also published the Rasch article by itself, without the accompanying article by AP reporter Rock, on an inside page. The Los Angeles Times did not publish any kind of retrospective article in its Sunday edition.

Oddly, in the New York Times, no story focused on the aftermath of Woodstock in the Sunday, August 24, edition, even though an article in the "Week in Review" section would have been an appropriate vehicle to discuss the cultural implications of Woodstock. The Washington Post followed up on that Sunday with a Style section reflection piece by Phillips, headlined "Impressions after Woodstock." The article touched upon many themes, including the revolutionary thread that ran through the cultural fabric of Woodstock: "Politics? They were there on tables with brochures, leaflets, petitions, but there were fewer people with causes than on a given sunny day in front of Sproul Hall at Berkeley. But then you don't need pamphlets when you can cheer while Tim Hardin sings, 'What are we fighting for?'"⁴¹ It was one of the few references to the politics of the Woodstock generation in coverage examined in this study.

Among the magazines, Time used an essay, rather than a news story, to present one of the more thoughtful early accounts of Woodstock and what it meant to society. In the 2,300-word unsigned piece, "The Message of History's Biggest Happening," Time said:

What the youth of America - and their observing elders - saw at Bethel was the potential power of a generation that in countless disturbing ways has rejected the traditional values and goals of the U.S. Thousands of young people, who had previously thought of themselves as part of an isolated minority, experienced the euphoric sense of discovering that they are, as the saying goes, what's happening. Adults were made more aware than ever before that the children of the welfare state and the atom bomb do indeed march to the beat of a different drummer, as well as to the tune of an electric guitarist. The spontaneous community of youth that was created at Bethel was the stuff of which legends are made.⁴²

For Rolling Stone, Woodstock was important on two levels: the social implications of the huge gathering and the performances on stage. On page one, it published an eleven paragraph lead-in to a long article inside by Greil Marcus. The lead-in established a historical context for Woodstock with a reference to the violent street protests at the Democratic National Convention in the previous summer:

Chicago was only the labor pains. With a joyous three-day shriek, the inheritors of the earth came to life in an alfalfa field outside the village of Bethel, New York. Slapping the

spark of life into the newborn was American rock and roll music, provided by the Woodstock Music and Art Fair. . . .

Out of the mud and hunger and thirst, despite the rain and the end-of-the-world traffic jams, beyond the bad dope trips and the garish confusion, a new nation had emerged into the glare provided by the open-mouthed media.⁴³

The story, accompanied by Baron Wolman's photographs, began with this descriptive opening paragraph:

It was Sunday afternoon and Joe Cocker and the Grease Band had finished their powerhouse set and suddenly the sky turned black and everyone knew it was going to rain again. It did. The ground on which two or three hundred thousand kids were sitting was begging to be turned back into mud and it got its wish and it couldn't have mattered less to anyone. The wind hit, then too; it seemed to come from some half-forgotten Biblical apocalypse but no one was ready for the Last Judgment so we turned calamity into celebration.⁴⁴

Throughout the piece, Marcus wove together elements drawn from festival-goers' experiences, the artistry of the performances, and the overall panorama. The Rolling Stone article also explored the cultural implications of Woodstock on a personal level. It discussed how Woodstock represented a coming of age of personal freedom:

At the festival, thousands were able to do things that would ordinarily be considered rebellious, in the terms of whatever current nonsensical sociological theory one might want to embrace. Selling and using all kinds of dope, balling here, there and everywhere, Swimming, canoeing or running around naked, and, believe it or not, staying up all night - one could do all of these things simply because they were fun to do, not because such acts represented scoring points against parents or Richard Nixon or Readers' Digest.⁴⁵

Another noteworthy trend emerged from the examination of coverage in the newspapers and magazines. In the summer of 1969, the Vietnam war was in full force, in the news virtually every day, and on the minds of young people across the nation and no doubt those attending Woodstock. Even though the festival has come to be associated with the peace movement of the 1960s, the Vietnam war was not explicitly mentioned in any of the examined coverage, not even in Rolling Stone. But the counter-culture magazine did lob at least one barb at the president in the observation that the rebellious actions of the Woodstock revelers were not about "scoring points against parents, Richard Nixon or Readers' Digest!"⁴⁶

In assessing the media's breaking coverage of Woodstock, festival organizer Lang declared in a 2009 interview, "The media got it wrong from the very beginning." He noted that few reporters were at the festival in the first place. "Those who were there couldn't get their stories filed. I know the guy from the New York Times [Collier] was trying to file a positive story, and the editors were telling him no, we don't want that story, we want a negative story." He said the initially negative public perception of

Woodstock began to change "about two or three days after the festival when kids started coming home and word started getting out what an amazing thing had happened."⁴⁷

This examination of Woodstock coverage confirms Lang's assessment, showing that several important media organizations, especially the six daily newspapers, followed conventional media routines and overlooked the historic cultural significance of the festival in reporting the breaking story. The reliance on conventional routines was seen in the media's reliance on official sources, the focus on the public safety angle, and the presentation of the story in off-lead and inside-page positions. The coverage of the New York Times stands as a good example with its off-lead presentations and overview stories that emphasized crowd size and related logistical problems. By taking this approach in covering the story, the Times as well as the rest of the media, particularly the newspapers, failed to consult and quote the young people at Woodstock who could have helped illuminate the festival's long term cultural implications. As journalism students have learned for generations, reporters must look beyond official sources for the complete story. Many news organizations failed to observe this cardinal rule of journalism at Woodstock, and the result of their incomplete sourcing was coverage that ignored important cultural perspectives and missed the historic angle of the breaking story.

In the case of Woodstock, it also can be argued that the media's reliance on official sources and the public safety angle served the purpose of reinforcing the control of the ruling elites in society. This argument has been made with regard to coverage of other 1960s stories involving the young generation. Todd Gitlin, in his examination of New York Times and CBS News coverage of the New Left and student activism in 1965, discussed how story framing can reinforce the political status quo. As Gitlin pointed out, "When the power to define news is, in effect, turned over to the police, the media are serving to confirm the existing control mechanisms in society."⁴⁸ This was the case with much of the Woodstock coverage and its focus on public safety: law enforcement officials served as key sources and thus framers of the New York Times' and wire service reporting. Moreover, as one student activist noted in describing the mainstream media's coverage of the New Left in the 1960s, "There was a general assumption that since we weren't part of the Establishment, we wouldn't be covered by the Establishment media."⁴⁵ Woodstock was not a top priority of the establishment media, as reflected by the few reporters initially dispatched to the scene, until the negative aspects of the story became evident.

Woodstock was not an event of the New Left, and the festival's focus was music, not politics. Still, the festival represented a moment in which a generation of young people attained a critical mass for three days in a rural New York meadow. As such, it had far-reaching political implications and could be construed to pose a threat to society's ruling elites. Thus, by focusing on negative, threatening images, such as the widespread drug use and deteriorating public safety at Woodstock, the coverage tended to reinforce the social order of the establishment. At the same time, the coverage posed disturbing questions about the mindset of Woodstock attendees and consequently appeared to marginalize the young generation's political standing.

Further research on this topic could expand on the breaking coverage and the small sample of publications examined in this study. Instead of just examining a snapshot of the initial coverage, future research could follow the story over the long term to determine when Woodstock began to emerge as an iconic event in the nation's consciousness. Moreover, the sample of news organizations could be expanded to include the broadcast networks ABC, CBS, and NBC, other major newspapers, and additional magazines. A community newspaper published near the festival site also could be added to the sample to provide the perspective of local journalists.

[Sidebar]

Richie Havens performs before a massive crowd to open the Woodstock Festival in August 1969.

[Sidebar]

"The most prominent Woodstock coverage among the examined publications appeared in the New York Times and Rolling Stone. For the Times, it was a local story because the festival was occurring about a two hour's drive from Manhattan and many attendees were from the city. The event received page one exposure with stories and photographs in the Times from Saturday, August 16, through Tuesday, August 19, yet the gathering of nearly 500,000 young people never merited the status of a lead story. "

[Sidebar]

"How was Woodstock's cultural significance reported? The study found that the breaking coverage was framed in a way that virtually ignored the cultural perspective of how the event impacted the young generation in attendance. From a theoretical perspective, this framing can be viewed in the context of conventional media routines and the prevailing news values of the era."

[Sidebar]

"Beyond coverage of drug use, the Woodstock news reports noted to a lesser extent the public nudity and the casual sex occurring at the festival. This further reflected points of tension between the generations and what older Americans might have perceived at the time as additional threats to the social order. "

[Sidebar]

"Oddly, in the New York Times, no story focused on the aftermath of Woodstock in the Sunday, August 24, edition, even though an article in the "Week in Review" section would have been an appropriate vehicle to discuss the cultural implications of Woodstock. "

NOTES

- 1 "It Was Like Balling for die First Time," Rolling Stone, Sept. 20, 1969, 1.
- 2 "Nightmare in the Catskills," New York Times, Aug. 18, 1969.
- 3 Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 339.
- 4 *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, 1970), 174.
- 5 William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, "The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action," in Richard G. Braungart and Margaret M. Braungart, eds., *Research in Political Sociology*, vol. 3 (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1987), 143.
- 6 James W. Tankard, Laura Hendrickson, Jackie Silberman, Kriss Bliss, and Salma Ghanem, "Media Frames: Approaches to Conceptualization and Measurement" (Paper delivered to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Boston, Mass., August 1991).
- 7 Todd Gitlin quoted in Joshua Brustein, "Woodstock in Newsprint," *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 2009.
- 8 See Pete Fornatale, *Back to the Garden: The Story of Woodstock* (New York: Touchstone, 2009); James Perone, *Woodstock: An Encyclopedia of the Music and Art Fair* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005); and Andy Bennett, ed., *Remembering Woodstock* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).
- 9 Fornatale, *Back to the Garden*, xx-xxiii.
- 10 Simon Warner in Bennett, *Remembering Woodstock*, 56.
- 11 Joshua Brustein, "Woodstock in Newsprint," *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 2009.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 "It Was Like Balling for the First Time," 1 .
- 14 Arlie Schardt, "Music, Mud, Misery Made a 'Happening,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 18, 1969.
- 15 David FeitOn, "Catskill Art and Music Fair Was a 'Learning Experience,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 22, 1969.
- 16 "What's News," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 18 and Aug. 19, 1969.

- 17 "The Message of History's Biggest Happening," *Time*, Aug. 29, 1969, at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901295,00.html> (accessed on July 20, 2009).
- 18 Lacey Fosburgh, "346 Policemen Quit Music Festival," *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 1969.
- 19 "Ibid.
- 20 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (New York: Longman, 1991).
- 21 Barnard L. Collier, "200,000 Thronging to Rock Festival," *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 1969.
- 22 Barnard L. Collier, "300,000 at Folk-Rock Fair Camp Out in a Sea of Mud," *New York Times*, Aug. 17, 1969.
- 23 Barnard L. Collier, "Tired Rock Fans Begin Exodus," *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1969.
- 24 Barnard L. Collier, "Inside Media: Live from Woodstock (part I)," interview at the Newseum, Washington, D. C., Aug. 21, 2009, at <http://www.newseum.org/programs/2009/live-from-woodstock/live-from-woodstock.html> (accessed on Aug. 17, 2010).
- 25 Collier, "Tired Rock Fans Begin Exodus."
- 26 Michael T. Kauffman, "Generation Gap Bridged as Monticello Residents Aid Courteous Festival Patrons," *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1969.
- 27 Naomi Rock, "Two Views of Art Festival 'Shocking,'" *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Aug. 24, 1969.
- 28 Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
- 29 "Bethel Pilgrims Smoke 'Grass' and Some Take LSD to 'Groove,'" *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1969.
- 30 Greil Marcus, "The Woodstock Festival," *Rolling Stone*, Sept. 20, 1969, 24.
- 31 "Bethel Pilgrims Smoke 'Grass' and Some Take LSD to 'Groove,'" *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1969.

32 "Promoter Baffled That Festival Drew Such a Big Crowd," New York Times, Aug. 17, 1969.

33 Richard Reeves, "Fair's Financier Calls it 'Success,'" New York Times, Aug. 18, 1969.

34 "Fatmer with Soul, Max Yasgur," New York Times, Aug. 18, 1969.

35 "William E. Farrell, "19-Hour Concert Ends Bethel Fair," New York Times, Aug. 19, 1969.

36 Ibid.

37 B.J. Phillips, "That Rocky Road," Washington Post, Aug. 16, 1969.

38 B.J. Phillips, "People Together," Washington Post, Aug. 18, 1969.

39 Sunns. Rasch, "Two Views of Art Festival 'Shocking,'" Cincinnati Enquirer, Aug. 24, 1969.

40 Ibid.

41 B.J. Phillips, "Impressions after Woodstock," Washington Post, Aug. 24, 1969.

42 "The Message of History's Biggest Happening," Time, Aug. 29, 1969.

43 "It Was Like Balling for the First Time."

44 Marcus, "The Woodstock Festival," 16.

45 Ibid, 18.

46 Ibid.

47 Michael Lang, "Inside Media: The Road to Woodstock," interview at the Newseum, Washington, D. C, Aug. 9, 2009, at <http://www.newseum.org/programs/2009/road-to-woodstock/the-road-to-woodstock.html> (accessed on July 7, 2011).

[Author Affiliation]

MICHAEL SHEEHY is an assistant professor in the journalism program of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati. The author is grateful to Cincinnati historian and journalist Melissa Kramer for her advice, wisdom, and inspiration while working on this article.

Questia, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning. www.questia.com

Publication information: Article title: Woodstock: How the Media Missed the Historic Angle of the Breaking Story. Contributors: Sheehy, Michael - Author. Journal title: Journalism History. Volume: 37. Issue: 4 Publication date: Winter 2012. Page number: 238+. © Journalism History Winter 2009. Provided by ProQuest LLC. All Rights Reserved.