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Strong Press, Strong Democracy

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Demonstrations at CEO Mansions? Ho Hum

Can the media cover a movement that plays nice?

By Peter Dreier and Todd Gitlin

No one packed heat, no one screamed at a member of Congress, no one called anybody a Nazi, no fistfights broke out. So—no story.

All that happened was that on Thursday, Oct. 1, a moving van pulled up in front of the largest house in a Main Line neighborhood just outside Philadelphia—the home of H. Edward Hanway, CEO of CIGNA, one of the nation's largest health insurance companies—and eight demonstrators from Health Care for America Now (HCAN) got out. One was Stacie Ritter, a former CIGNA customer whose twin girls were afflicted with cancer at the age of four. Their treatment left permanent damage. CIGNA refused to pay for the human growth hormones that her doctor prescribed to help her daughters grow properly. When her husband was briefly unemployed, they were bankrupted.

No one was home at Hanway's mansion. Ritter left a note to explain that the van symbolized a request: "Can I stay in your carriage house until we get back on our feet financially?"

The same day, in Indianapolis, HCAN organized a house call on Angela Braly, CEO of WellPoint, the nation's largest health insurance company. And in Wayzata, Minn., fifty protesters, holding umbrellas and candles, stood outside the lakeside mansion of UnitedHealth CEO Stephen Hemsley, in the rain, and screened a video that was unkind to the company. (HCAN has tried to buy time to broadcast the video on CNN, but the network refuses to air it.)

Total number of print and broadcast reporters who showed up at any of the three events: Zero.

For several months, HCAN—a national coalition of religious groups, community organizations, unions, senior citizen groups, health care professionals, and consumer advocates—has been

organizing polite demonstrations, rallies, and public forums, trying to put faces on an industry that has spent multiple millions of dollars lobbying against reform, while angry protests at town meetings swelled August's big national story. On Sept. 22, HCAN sponsored about 150 demonstrations at various insurance company headquarters around the country. The *Los Angeles Times* did not bother to report about the several hundred demonstrators at WellPoint's California subsidiary office, located a few blocks from the newspaper's office; nor *The New York Times* those outside UnitedHealth in midtown Manhattan. *

The HCAN rallies did attract print and broadcast coverage in dozens of cities, but most reporters treated them as isolated local events rather than components of a nationally coordinated protest (its slogan, "Big Insurance: Sick of It") and a burgeoning grassroots movement.

HCAN hopes that these protests will pressure moderate Senate Democrats into supporting a public option by highlighting their financial and personal ties to insurance and pharmaceutical companies and their lobbyists. Since 2007, the insurance industry and HMOs have spent \$51 million in campaign contributions, targeted disproportionately to key members of the Congressional committees drafting health reform bills. They also spent at least \$191 million on lobbyists, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. HCAN wants voters to ask their elected officials: Which side are you on?

The reformers face a fundamental imbalance. Insurance companies don't need street protests to get heard in Congress. But HCAN faces a social movement's eternal problem of how to attract public attention without looking like disturbers of the peace. Last week, they reckoned that uninvited visits to CEO mansions ought to qualify as a man-bites-dog story, one with obvious relevance to a bigger ongoing story and therefore stamped with newsworthiness.

With Congress debating extensive health care reform, and companies like CIGNA, WellPoint, and UnitedHealth major protagonists, the organizers supposed that their protests would dramatize the exorbitant profits of the insurance industry and the imposing compensation they pay top executives (UnitedHealth's Hemsley made \$57,000 per day last year) while millions of Americans go without insurance or bankrupt themselves with medical bills.

HCAN was mistaken.

"At a certain point," *Indianapolis Star* senior editor Jenny Green told us, the demonstrators are "not adding to the debate. They're just one side saying exactly what you'd expect them to say."

Her colleague, Greg Weaver, the *Star's* deputy public service editor for business, maintained that the raucous town meetings of August, dominated by conservative activists shouting down Democratic Congressmembers, were newsworthy because they "are more of a public forum where you have many sides of the debate, whereas at the [HCAN] protest [at WellPoint CEO Bray's house] you have only one side of the debate."

“I did not think the protest at [Cigna CEO] Hanway’s house was news,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* business reporter Jane Von Bergen told us. “It was a staged event. It wasn’t real news. I avoid them. I can’t stand them. They don’t add anything. They don’t teach anything. If they go to his house, we don’t learn anything more about the health care debate.” The protest was “too manufactured,” said Von Bergen. “Just a bunch of people going blah-blah-blah.”

By contrast, said Von Bergen, who covered the rowdy town meeting in August where right-wing activists confronted Sen. Arlen Specter, the news value of that event was “readily apparent.” “It involved public figures”—members of Congress. So political reporters picked up the story.

Isn’t Hanway a public figure? we asked. He’s well known in the business community, she said, but not among the general public—a condition that HCAN is trying to change, but can’t do if the media won’t cover their events.

Karl Stark, the *Inquirer’s* health and science editor, insists that his paper has done a good job of covering the health policy debate. “We do a lot of investigative stuff,” Stark said. “We did a series on the uninsured. We’ve written lots of stories about people without insurance, people being under-insured. We’ve written about a guy about to lose a kidney because of the gaps of our health system. We did a story about Wendell Potter [the former CIGNA executive who turned whistleblower and has testified against the company before Congress and spoken at HCAN rallies]. We do a lot of in-depth reporting. We have three reporters covering health care, plus business reporters, on this story.”

Stark did not assign a reporter to cover the protest at Hanway’s house. For one thing, he said, “it crossed a whole bunch of boundaries”—it was a political story, a health care story, and a business story, producing a bureaucratic snafu over which desk is responsible for reporting a demonstration about the issue. But his decision was also based on his judgment about what’s newsworthy. “You’re talking about one group of activists. How big is their movement?”

Several newsmen also blamed the harsh reality of newsroom cutbacks. But the HCAN organizers think that the news media are blacking them out. A TV assignment editor for a local station told Marc Stier, HCAN’s Pennsylvania director, that Hanway’s home in suburban Media was “a bit out of the way,” and noted that TV cameras would be busy that evening to cover fan reaction to the Phillies’ clinching the National League Eastern Division championship. The ritual mattered more than the news of a movement.

As for the question of whether the protests matter, Stier claims that HCAN represents “the biggest issue movement in the state” and that it has influenced Sen. Arlen Specter’s position, adding: “We do two or three events in one day some days, and there’s barely any coverage. There’s no sense of how big this movement is.”

The town-meeting shouters of August, by contrast, were contentious. Some screamed and hectorred, some got embroiled in fist fights, some carried guns. Some carried signs calling

Obama a “Nazi” and his plan “socialism”; some warned that “Obamacare” would “pull the plug on grandma.” They understood that the standard template for protest stories is the crime story. They cracked the reportorial code: By behaving extravagantly and precipitating clashes, they made news.

It’s an old story, immortalized in the slogan, “If it bleeds, it leads.” This idea of newsworthiness has the unintended effect of coaxing protest movements toward raising the action ante.

HCAN and other pro-reform groups plan more demonstrations this month. On Oct. 5 and 6, HCAN activists will protest at insurance company offices in at least sixty cities. In mid-October, MoveOn.Org, an HCAN partner, is planning to demonstrate at Senators’ offices to coincide with the latest campaign contribution filings. HCAN also intends to confront CIGNA’s Hanley, UnitedHealth’s Hemsley, WellPoint’s Braly and their counterparts at other major insurers at the annual meeting later this month of America’s Health Insurance Plans, the industry’s lobby group. On October 29, HCAN and its local affiliates will be trick-or-treating in the neighborhoods of industry CEOs and board members.

As in previous protests, HCAN plans to bring clergy, doctors, nurses, victims of insurance industry neglect and their families, as well as members from unions, religious congregations, community and consumer groups, MoveOn, and other groups.

Some demonstrators may engage in civil disobedience. HCAN forswears anything raucous, disruptive, or violent. But they worry that editors and reporters won’t deem their peaceful protests newsworthy.

Meanwhile, during the first half of this year, the insurance and HMO industry increased its lobbying expenditures and campaign contributions to some \$700,000 a day. You won’t find their CEOs manufacturing news by taking to the streets.

Correction: This article originally stated that The Philadelphia Inquirer *did not cover the CIGNA/HCAN rally on September 22. In fact, a brief on the rally ran in the Inquirer’s business section the next day.*