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News Coverage and Social Protest: How the Media's Protest Paradigm Exacerbates Social Conflict

Douglas M. McLeod*

I. INTRODUCTION

Past research on media coverage of social protests has yielded evidence of a protest paradigm: a set of news coverage patterns that typifies mainstream media coverage. This coverage generally disparages protesters and hinders their role as vital actors on the political stage. The lack of respect for the value of social protest inherent in such coverage has created frustration among the protesters, which has in turn contributed to dysfunctional confrontations. However, under certain conditions, journalists will deviate from the protest paradigm. Such aberrations were found in the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of the May 1, 2006, "Day without Immigrants" demonstrations. An analysis of this coverage reveals that the reporters relaxed the conventions of the protest paradigm in favor of more constructive forms of news coverage, permitting a more functional discourse to emerge from the conflict. Based on insights gleaned from this analysis, this paper argues that society would reap enormous benefits if journalists would abandon the traditional protest paradigm in favor of multi-perspective approaches. Following a summary of this analysis, specific suggestions for improving protest coverage are made, which will ultimately enhance the dynamics and outcomes of social conflicts.

Most protest groups operate with limited resources and have a difficult time securing public visibility, disseminating information, and exerting influence. Though the Internet has certainly compensated somewhat for the lack of resources in achieving such goals, most protest groups still attempt to engage mass media. However, getting media attention puts many protest groups in a precarious situation. A peaceful protest that focuses on articulating issue positions is not likely to fit established news conventions for what makes a good news story. As such, protest groups often engage in activities that provide the kind of drama that garners media attention. For example, the media largely ignored the Minneapolis anti-pornography movement until demonstrators ransacked an adult bookstore.¹ Anarchist protests in Minneapolis got the attention of local media when they impaled a Pillsbury doughboy, demolished a TV set, and smashed the windows of a Marine recruiting station.² Protests against the World Trade Organization got

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1. See Douglas M. McLeod & James K. Hertog, *Social Control and the Mass Media's Role in the Regulation of Protest Groups: The Communicative Acts Perspective*, in *MASS MEDIA, SOCIAL CONTROL AND SOCIAL CHANGE* 305, 314-15 (David Demers & Viswanath Kasisomayajula eds., 1999).

2. Douglas M. McLeod & James K. Hertog, *The Manufacture of Public Opinion by Reporters: Informal Cues for Public Perceptions of Protest Groups*, in *DISCOURSE AND SOCIETY* 3, 259, 263, 269 (Teun A. van Dijk ed., 1992).

national coverage when protesters engaged with riot gear-clad police in street violence.³ In each of these cases, protests attracted considerable media attention largely because the aforementioned actions made for good television and served as focal points for news coverage. In each case, though, the protest actions drew harsh criticism from the media.

Thus, protest groups often find themselves in a double-bind: be ignored by the media, or resort to drama and risk that these events might be used to delegitimize the group. In essence, the protest paradigm contributes to an escalation in tensions when activist groups feel that their voices are not being heard, leading conflicts away from healthy discourse toward more dysfunctional outcomes.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROTEST PARADIGM

The protest paradigm is a routinized template for creating protest stories that has been naturalized through the process of journalistic socialization; that is, journalists learn how to apply the protest paradigm as they learn their craft through training in journalism schools and then later as they learn how things are done in media organizations. The origins of the protest paradigm are the product of the forces that shape news production including the bias of the individual reporter, the impact of the news organization, the canons of the journalistic profession, the cultural and ideological blinders of the social system, and the constraints of the medium.⁴ Based on their review of past research, McLeod and Hertog identify the following protest paradigm characteristics: news frames, reliance on official sources, the invocation of public opinion, “delegitimization,” and “demonization.”⁵

1. *News frames.* News framing is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”⁶ Several different frames have been associated with the protest paradigm. Among the frames that are commonly used in the coverage of radical social protests are the “crime story,” the “riot,” and the “carnival;” the “debate” frame is less common.⁷

2. *Reliance on official sources and official definitions.* Evidence of the heavy reliance on official sources by mainstream news media has been long-established.⁸ The use of official sources gives news stories prestige, increases

3. Kevin M. DeLuca & Jennifer Peebles, *From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the “Violence” of Seattle*, in CRITICAL STUDIES IN MASS COMMUNICATION 19, 125 (2002).

4. PAMELA J. SHOEMAKER & STEPHEN D. REESE, *MEDIATING THE MESSAGE: THEORIES OF INFLUENCES ON MASS MEDIA CONTENT* 261-71 (2d ed. 1996).

5. McLeod & Hertog, *supra* note 1, at 311-22.

6. Robert M. Entman, *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, 43 J. OF COMM. 51, 52 (1993).

7. McLeod & Hertog, *supra* note 1, at 301, 312-14; James K. Hertog & Douglas M. McLeod, *Anarchists Wreak Havoc in Downtown Minneapolis: A Multi-level Study of Media Coverage of Radical Protest*, in JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION MONOGRAPHS 151, 155-59 (1995).

8. See MARK FISHMAN, *MANUFACTURING THE NEWS* (1980); DAVID L. PALETZ & ROBERT M. ENTMAN, *MEDIA POWER AND POLITICS* (1981); LEON V. SIGAL, *REPORTERS AND OFFICIALS: THE ORGANIZATION AND POLITICS OF NEWSMAKING* (1973); LAWRENCE C. SOLEY, *THE NEWS SHAPERS: THE SOURCES WHO EXPLAIN THE NEWS* (1992).

news production efficiency, and adheres to the rituals of objectivity.⁹ When public officials are the predominant source of information for news stories, stories tend to be told from the perspectives of the powerful, downplaying perspectives that challenge that power.

3. *Invocation of public opinion.* Cues to public opinion typically point out differences between protesters and mainstream society. They include reports of opinion polls, sweeping generalizations about public opinion, bystander portrayals, norm invocation, and legal transgressions.¹⁰ Most protest stories do not contain reports of actual public opinion polls, with the occasional exception for issues like abortion and anti-war protests. It is actually more common for reporters or the sources they quote to make generalizations about public opinion on protest issues or about public reactions to the protesters. For radical protests, these assertions typically are used in a way that frames protesters as an isolated minority. Mainstream public opinion is also demarcated by the invocation of social norms, violations of which are an indicator of deviance. According to the protest paradigm, news stories often pay considerable attention to the appearance and behaviors of protesters in a way that draws attention to their deviance from social norms. Similarly, news stories about radical protest pay particular attention to violations of law in a way that point out that the protesters oppose mainstream values. Bystanders (who by definition do not join the protest), like letters-to-the-editor, are used symbolically to represent the responses of the citizenry.

4. *Delegitimization.* The media often fail to adequately explain the meaning and context of protest actions, leading the audience to perceive them as futile, pointless, and even irrational.¹¹ Journalists may further delegitimize protests by judging them as futile or as failures, ignoring many of the latent functions of protest groups (e.g., spreading information, generating resources, building solidarity among individuals and coalitions among like-minded groups, etc).

5. *Demonization.* Media coverage includes content that identifies potential threats and negative consequences of protests. For many radical protest groups, the media may create “moral panics” by exaggerating threats.¹² For example, Gitlin asserts that the media over-hyped the communist elements of the anti-Vietnam War movement.¹³ Similarly, McLeod and Hertog found that media coverage emphasized the violence, flag-burning, and counter-cultural elements of minority anarchist and anti-war protesters in Minneapolis. A prominent feature of protest coverage is a focus on the negative consequences of the protest, such as the violence, property damage, traffic congestion, and expenditure of community resources (i.e., the cost of law enforcement), that result from the protest.¹⁴

9. McLeod & Hertog, *supra* note 1, at 314-15.

10. *Id.* at 315-18.

11. *Id.* at 319.

12. STANLEY COHEN, *FOLK DEVILS AND MORAL PANICS: THE CREATION OF THE MODS AND ROCKERS* 9-19 (1980).

13. See TODD GITLIN, *THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING: MEDIA IN THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE NEW LEFT* 28 (1980).

14. McLeod & Hertog, *supra* note 1, at 320.

III. THE PROTEST PARADIGM AND PROPOSITIONS FOR RESEARCH

Shoemaker concluded that the more radical a protest group is, the more negatively the mainstream media will treat it.¹⁵ Following this logic, McLeod and Hertog proposed that the more radical a group is, the more closely news coverage will follow the characteristics of the protest paradigm. They suggest that assessing how radical a group is should be done on the basis of two dimensions: the extremity of its objectives (i.e., the extent of change to the system that it seeks) and the militancy of its tactics (i.e., the extent to which tactics violate social norms).¹⁶ Most studies of the protest paradigm have analyzed news coverage of radical groups such as the SDS, anti-war protesters, and anarchists. This study examines coverage of the pro-immigration movement, whose goals are not extreme and whose tactics have been distinctly non-militant, in order to test the proposition that predicts a lesser degree of adherence to the protest paradigm than has been found in past research. Moreover, to the extent that such coverage deviates from the protest paradigm, one may observe models for how coverage could be different and possibly foster constructive, rather than destructive, social conflicts.

IV. A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE DAY WITHOUT IMMIGRANTS DEMONSTRATIONS OF 2006

On May 1, 2006, people gathered in cities around the United States to conduct protest marches as part of the Day without Immigrants. These protests were part of a larger movement that has gained momentum in 2006 in response to congressional debates over various proposed revisions to immigration policy, some of which may restrict the flow of immigration to the United States and others that may impinge upon those who are already in the U.S. without authorization. This movement seeks to: (1) fend off proposed restrictions; (2) make it easier for illegal immigrants to attain legal status; and (3) secure social services for non-resident workers. To support these objectives, movement groups have engaged in a series of strategic protests to publicize their causes through the news media.

By examining the news coverage that this movement received, one can observe the limits of the protest paradigm. This raises a number of questions. To what extent will the protest paradigm apply to coverage of this large, mainstream movement? Which characteristics of the protest paradigm are most robust in the case of this protest group? To what extent was the pro-immigration movement successful in generating widespread publicity without succumbing to the delegitimizing forces of the protest paradigm? These questions will be answered using the findings of a discourse analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the May 1, 2006, Day without Immigrants demonstrations.

The *Los Angeles Times* was chosen because the immigration movement raises issues that are particularly salient in Southern California, and the newspaper produced quite a volume of coverage in a very short period of time. All news stories,

15. Pamela J. Shoemaker, *Media Treatment of Deviant Political Groups*, 61 JOURNALISM Q. 66, 67 (1984).

16. McLeod & Hertog, *supra* note 1, at 310.

columns, and editorials (n = 33), as well as letters to the editor (n = 9), that appeared one day before the protest on April 30 through two days after the protest (May 3) were analyzed. The analysis was structured by the characteristics of the protest paradigm: story frames, the use of official sources, the invocation of public opinion (public opinion polls, sweeping generalizations, norm violations, legal violations, bystander portrayals, and letters to the editor), delegitimization, and demonization.

V. LOS ANGELES TIMES COVERAGE OF THE DAY WITHOUT IMMIGRANTS DEMONSTRATIONS

A. *Story Frames*

Derogatory news frames (e.g., police versus protesters, riot, circus, freak show frames), so common in past coverage of radical social protests,¹⁷ were notably absent from the *Los Angeles Times* coverage. Instead, much of the coverage was framed as a national celebration of positive energy, devoid of violence, civil disobedience, and visible conflict. Another common frame was rooted in the sheer size of the protest. Perhaps journalists were disappointed at not finding the usual fodder for the protest paradigm such as violence, property damage, and conflict. Short of such material, which typically makes for great visuals to anchor protest stories, the visual anchor became the sheer size of the protests.

B. *Reliance on Official Sources*

Compared to coverage of other social protests, coverage of the Day without Immigrants marches was not dominated by official sources. Perhaps because there were fewer direct confrontations with authority, and perhaps because the issues of the protest were so abstract, the media did not rely on official sources. Instead, an unusual amount of attention was given to the voices of the protesters.

C. *The Invocation of Public Opinion*

The public opinion cues found in the coverage did not clearly indicate the deviance of the demonstrators to the same extent found in past research. Public opinion polls showed that a significant portion of the population supported the position of the protesters, as well as their demonstrations. Sweeping generalizations about public opinion generally depicted the community as supporting the demonstrations, though as in the case of coverage of many other protests, counter-demonstrators were featured in many stories about the protest. Norm and legal violations were far less common than for other, more radical protests, which is not surprising given that there were relatively few legal violations by the marchers. Bystander portrayals were either critical or mixed in their orientations toward the protests. Finally, a majority of the letters to the editor were critical of the protests, and some were extremely hostile. On the whole, the public opinion cues found in

17. *Id.* at 312-13.

the newspaper coverage indicate that there was a fairly large segment of the community that was receptive to the protesters and their messages.

D. Delegitimization

No article provided a detailed explanation of the issues behind the protest, but several stories identified basic issues and mentioned the House and Senate immigration bills that fueled the wave of immigration protests around the country during 2006. Still, readers would not learn much about the immigration issues and policies that led to the protest. In general, newspaper stories from the *Los Angeles Times* credited the May 1 protests as being successful, though a few columnists and news sources were skeptical of the protests' effectiveness.

E. Demonization

Not only were the Day without Immigrants protesters rarely portrayed as a threat to the community, coverage largely depicted them as a spirited, peaceful group with only a smattering of a radical element. As commonly happens with social protest, traffic congestion caused by the protest was an issue in the Day without Immigrants coverage. However, when journalists come to a story with an expectation and find the opposite, the violated expectation becomes a story. In some cases, *Los Angeles Times* reporters were so surprised by the lack of traffic problems on the day of the protest, they wrote stories that noted that traffic was actually less problematic than on a normal commuting day. The newspaper also covered the impact on local businesses. Though there were many depictions of employers who were happy to cooperate by giving workers the day off, others complained about inconveniences caused by the protest. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the most significant negative impact of the protest was felt by the agriculture, construction, transportation, and textiles industries. Another major negative consequence that received considerable attention was the increase in absentee rates in public schools.

VI. WITHER THE PROTEST PARADIGM?

Why didn't the protest conform more closely to the protest paradigm? There are several explanations that may contribute to the answer to this question. First, the protest was large and diverse. Second, the protests represented not only interests that are shared by a large number of immigrants, but also the interests of the wealthy elite in terms of meeting their needs for a large labor force to staff businesses and provide residential services. In addition, illegal immigrants, Hispanics/Latinos, and foreign-born immigrants make up a large segment of a newspaper's community and potential readership base, especially for the *Los Angeles Times*. As such, it is not surprising that the coverage of the May 1 demonstrations was more sympathetic to the protesters and less adherent to the protest paradigm.

Moreover, there were characteristics of the demonstrations themselves that did not lend themselves to protest paradigm coverage. First, the sheer size and national scope of the protests meant that the journalists could not ignore them. They had to be covered even if they did not fit other newsworthiness criteria (e.g.,

conflict, property damage, clashes with police, etc.). At the same time, the lack of visible drama and conflict made it difficult for journalists to apply the standard protest paradigm format in covering the story. This led to a state of uncertainty about how to cover the story. Many *Los Angeles Times* reporters adopted a grassroots approach, covering the story from the perspective of demonstration participants and shopkeepers.

On the whole, the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the Day without Immigrants demonstrations was commendable on a number of accounts. Not only was substantial attention given to the various demonstrations, but the stories gave the protesters a voice in the coverage by interviewing plenty of demonstrators, immigrants, and non-resident workers. The coverage put a human face on the mass of marchers. Many of the articles brought up the larger policy issues that the protests were designed to address and often explained perspectives on both sides in the process. The tone of coverage was relatively neutral, if not slightly favorable toward the protesters. While stories did exhibit characteristics of the protest paradigm, they were not nearly as pronounced, nor as detrimental, as they were in stories about radical protest groups.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study found evidence that journalists have more latitude to deviate from the protest paradigm when they are covering a group that has goals and tactics that are more consistent with mainstream public opinion and more acceptable to political elites. It seems that the relatively positive coverage of the movement (relative to coverage of other protests) stems from several factors: (1) the size and scope of the demonstrations made them hard to ignore; (2) the goals of the protest were consistent with the interests of readers and the power structure; (3) the tactics of the protest were relatively peaceful making it difficult for the media to find fault; and (4) the large percentage of immigrants, Latinos, and non-resident workers in the Los Angeles community insulated the movement from severe criticism.

Despite the fact that the coverage managed to avoid many of the pitfalls of the protest paradigm, there were some distinct problems that could have been improved. First, while several stories touched on the underlying issues, and a few explained the basics of policies being debated in Congress, there was not a single article that provided the kind of detailed exploration and explanations that would allow the audience to not only understand the immigration controversy, but also to formulate intelligent policy positions. The audience was not provided with thorough renderings of the arguments and rationales of the various partisan groups involved. Second, not only were readers not given details on pending legislation, no information was provided as to the current status of the legislation, when future action on the legislation was expected to take place, or how citizens could weigh in on this issue should they have been mobilized in any particular direction by exposure to the coverage. In other words, the *Los Angeles Times* coverage failed to provide "mobilizing information"¹⁸ that would encourage citizens to get involved in the issue.

While the grassroots approach taken by the coverage gave readers insight into who the marchers were and what they wanted, most of the depictions were rather

18. James B. Lemert, *Journalists and Mobilizing Information*, 54 JOURNALISM Q. 721, 721-26 (1977).

cursory leading to a shallow understanding for the audience. Readers would have benefited from a more detailed rendering of life as an undocumented worker. It is hard to form a legitimate opinion on what to do about undocumented workers without understanding the situations that drove them to seek employment in the United States. Not only would the audience be able to make a more informed judgment if they knew more about these workers, but also if they knew more about the needs of the employers that hire them. Are these employers desperate for labor or turning their backs on American workers in search of cheaper labor? The coverage could have included information about the economic consequences of various policy options. Specifically, the coverage could have provided more detailed background information on the economic contributions of undocumented workers, as well as more evidence on potential problems they cause.

VII. NORMATIVE LESSONS LEARNED

In general, this analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage produced a number of general normative recommendations for news coverage of activist protests, social movements, and the political conflicts in which they are engaged. These principles are derived from observing both what the newspaper did well and from noting what needed improvement. Below are ten normative recommendations that serve as goals to improve the quality of protest coverage, and ultimately the dynamics of social conflicts.

1. *Identify key issues.* It has long been recognized that the media play an important agenda-setting role in American society by identifying key issues for public consideration.¹⁹ When covering events such as protests and demonstrations, it is important for the news media to go beyond the episodic recounting of events²⁰ to identify and explore the key policy issues that the audience would need to understand to help them realize their potential as informed citizens.

2. *Identify key stakeholders.* In the process of exploring the issues involved, the media should also identify the key stakeholders involved. It is a common occurrence that media fail to point out relevant players in social conflicts. In their fervor to describe the events of confrontations between the protesters and police, the media often fail to consider the chosen target of the protest as part of the story, and thereby delegitimize the protest.

3. *Explain the positions and rationales of key stakeholders.* A central responsibility of media in a democratic system, according to Gurevitch and Blumler,²¹ is to provide relevant partisan interests with a platform for advocacy; that is, it is important that the media provide diverse viewpoints on the important issues of the day, even when those voices are critical and conflicting, and especially when those voices are disenfranchised.

4. *Explain underlying policy implications and details.* One of the sad ironies in reading news stories is that the reader often does not learn very much about the

19. See BERNARD C. COHEN, *THE PRESS AND FOREIGN POLICY* 120 (1963); MAXWELL E. MCCOMBS, *SETTING THE AGENDA: THE MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION* (2004).

20. See SHANTO IYENGAR, *IS ANYONE RESPONSIBLE?: HOW TELEVISION FRAMES POLITICAL ISSUES* (1991).

21. Michael Gurevitch & Jay G. Blumler, *Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values, in DEMOCRACY AND THE MASS MEDIA* 269-89 (Judith Lichtenberg ed., 1990).

issues at the center for the protest. These issues must be explored thoroughly. Particularly when it comes to policy decisions, media must provide a public service by discussing the implications of policy for all stakeholders involved, as well as the general public.

5. *Consider using the debate frame.* Given that protesters often seek to draw attention to important social issues and to engage the larger public in deliberation and debate, it is ironic that very few stories about social protests adopt a debate frame, which would explore the pros and cons of arguments from various parties to the debate. Instead, protest coverage often adopts what Iyengar refers to as episodic framing.²² Stories recount protest events chronologically and give details on acts of social disobedience and arrests. In the process, an exploration of the underlying issue is lost. As such, it would be ideal for journalists to develop an appreciation for protest as a viable form of democratic expression and participation, and learn how to write stories using the debate frame as a template for covering social protests.

6. *Treat demonstrators as legitimate political actors and give voice to their concerns.* Media coverage of radical social protests often treats demonstrators as deviants, ultimately delegitimizing their efforts to play a role in democratic decision making. In some sense, the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage, by giving a human face and a voice to the demonstrators, was well above the norm for social protest coverage. Protest coverage would be greatly improved by considering protesters as legitimate political actors.

7. *Seek responses from the institutions being challenged.* In order to treat protesters as legitimate political actors, the media must take protesters seriously enough to investigate the charges they level against the status quo. Too often, stories focus on the clash between protesters and police, and fail to take the protesters seriously enough to turn the media spotlight on their chosen target. In many protest stories, the target of the protest is never sought out for comment, which only delegitimizes the protesters' viewpoints.

8. *Ignore bystanders.* Following the protest paradigm, journalists often try to add color to their story by approaching bystanders for comment on the events and actions of the protest. Most bystanders are not particularly well-informed on the issue and, because they are not participating in the protest, are likely to criticize the protesters as well as misunderstand what the protesters are trying to do. The space that is used to interview the largely nebulous protest bystanders would be better used to air the viewpoints of the protesters' chosen targets. While publishing letters to the editor may help give citizens a voice in the process, journalists should avoid those that are inflammatory, as they tend to overshadow those that express reasoned viewpoints.

9. *Invest the time in writing important stories.* Of course, journalists are always operating under the pressure of deadlines to file stories. Under these conditions, it is easiest to fall back on what is known to produce an acceptable story, in this case the protest paradigm. But rather than composing thin, episodic stories that do little to inform or enlighten the public, journalists should take the time to write meaningful stories based on thorough research. The "hoping and groping"

22. IYENGAR, *supra* note 20, at 13-16.

coverage that is so pervasive in local television news eats away at the credibility of the news.

10. *Avoid the pitfalls of the protest paradigm.* Finally, the media should be enlightened regarding the pitfalls of protest paradigm coverage so that they can strive to improve the nature of coverage. This means the media should avoid focusing on the appearance of the protesters, downplaying clashes with the police in favor of covering clashes with policymakers. It means taking the time to interview protesters and articulating their viewpoints accurately, then going to their chosen target for a response. It means taking the protesters and the issues they raise seriously enough to avoid disparaging them through the techniques of delegitimization and demonization.

VIII. HOW CAN ACTIVISTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS HELP?

Through all this criticism of the media, it is also important to note that the protesters must make improvements, too, if they want better coverage of their protests. They must articulate clear, concise, consistent, and reasonable goals to make sure that journalists and the public understand what they are all about. They must resist using violent tactics and making threats that endanger our society. They must seek allegiances with other like-minded groups. As we can observe from the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the Day without Immigrants demonstrations, size matters. Larger groups are more likely to be taken seriously. It is also important to seek allies within the power structure. A voice coming from within the system carries more weight with the media. Finally, make sure that all events and demonstrations connote meaning. The pro-immigration protests were able to do this by marching en masse, making the case that the U.S. economy is dependent on their labor. The work stoppage and boycotts may not have had long-term effects on the local and national economies, but they did convey symbolic meaning to a large audience. By resisting many of the temptations that often give media the fodder to disparage the protest, the Day without Immigrants demonstrations went a long way toward delivering an effective message.