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Framing Protesters: Description Bias in the Coverage of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and Charlotte Protests

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Introduction

The right to collectively organize and advocate for systemic change is foundational to democracy in the United States, and protest retains its significance in our cultural and political landscape to this day. In 2016, a surge of activism covered issues from environmental injustice at Standing Rock to political dissatisfaction following the presidential election. The media's role in framing such protests, or emphasizing certain aspects while ignoring others, is essential to developing the public understanding of protesters' goals and determining the salience of their message (Iyengar 254). Consequently, journalists play a role in determining the efficacy of protest. The frame through which a protest is portrayed can even serve to counter the goals of protesters, especially when implicit biases are present. With over 80% of individuals in the newsroom identifying as white, racial bias may frequently influence the way stories are framed (Savali). For example, in the coverage of many Black Lives Matter protests against police shootings of unarmed black men, racial bias is apparent through negative imagery that paints black protesters as "barbaric" (Savali). This bias creates a double standard whereby white protesters are often forgiven for utilizing violence while black protesters are held to a higher, almost unreachable, standard.

To understand how framing bias occurs, it is important to consider two types of framing: episodic and thematic. In *Media Politics*, political scientist Shanto Iyengar defined episodic framing as "[depicting] issues in terms of individual instances or specific events . . . typically [featuring] dramatic visual footage and pictures" (255). A thematic frame, on the other hand, addresses "a public issue in a general context and usually takes the form of an in-depth background report" (Iyengar 255). Both thematic and episodic framing can contain description bias, which is defined by sociologist Jennifer Earl as bias related to the "omission of information, misrepresentation of information, and framing of [an] event by the media" (Earl et al. 72). For this study, I concentrated on the latter part of the definition that focuses on framing.

This study examines the media coverage of two protests that took place in 2016—the anti-government protests at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon, and the Black Lives Matter protests in Charlotte, North Carolina—with the intention of discovering whether the media evidenced description bias in the framing of the two demonstrations. The concerns of each protest were different, but both movements sought to create change by drawing public attention to their respective issues. However, to bring their agendas before a national audience, protesters rely on media coverage of their demonstrations, and the frame through which events are portrayed can influence public opinion of the issues at stake. During the coverage of the Malheur and Charlotte demonstrations, the US mainstream media exhibited description bias by disproportionately using a thematic frame for the anti-government protest and an episodic frame for the Black Lives Matter protest, resulting in

opportunities for the public to understand the Malheur movement in ways that the Charlotte movement was not afforded.

Background

On January 2, 2016, a dozen anti-government protesters travelled to Harney County, Oregon, and took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. While the protesters were confronting the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) over government encroachment on their land, the leaders of the occupation, Ammon and Ryan Bundy, were simultaneously protesting the imprisonment of two ranchers charged with arson (Gallaher 295). Despite being heavily armed with explosives and guns while unlawfully occupying a government building, the protesters did not attract much attention from law enforcement or national media. During much of the protest, the atmosphere at Malheur was cordial; law enforcement personnel at the scene allowed the occupiers to come and go without interference, and journalists interviewed members of the Bundys' group, providing them with a platform to explain the land-use issue to a national audience (Gallaher 294).

Over six months after the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge protest, another demonstration on the other side of the country also made headlines; this time protesters were responding to the law-enforcement shooting of an unarmed black man. On September 20, 2016, officers from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department arrived at an apartment complex in the city to serve an arrest warrant. Instead, the officers noticed Keith Lamont Scott, a man who, according to the officers, possessed marijuana and a handgun (Fausset and Blinder). After the officers approached Scott, they perceived him as a threat to their safety and fatally shot him. While the officers claim that their actions were justified as Scott was holding a gun, there has been no evidence provided to validate the claim (Fausset and Blinder). Scott's family members argue that he was reading in his car at the time. The shooting of Keith Scott led to numerous protests throughout the city of Charlotte. The demonstrators acted to express their outrage with Scott's death and with previous police shootings of unarmed black men. The combination of increased law enforcement presence and property damage resulted in clashes between protesters and police officers, who fired tear gas to quell the demonstrators (Fausset and Blinder).

Literature Review

Previous research has shown that the framing of demonstrations similar to those in Harney County and Charlotte typically does not align with the agendas of protesters and can negatively impact public opinion. The article "From Protest to Agenda Building: Description Bias in Media Coverage of Protest Events in Washington, DC" argues that while protest movements seek to attract attention to a larger issue, their goals can be lost if the media

frames the coverage in ways that undercut the intention of the protest. When describing the implications that media framing has on a social movement, the authors state that the media

will marginalize social movement agendas by, for instance, framing stories in a way that personalizes, de-contextualizes, or dramatizes them . . . by emphasizing the drama of a protest event rather than the substance of protester critiques, the mass media encourage shallow understandings of these issues and discourage the critical engagement of audience. (Smith, McCarthy, et al. 1403-1404)

The episodic framing of demonstrations as described in the study can cloud the central issues of a protest. When the media concentrates on a singular event instead of the central social problem protesters are attempting to address, description bias occurs. This description bias affects the type of narrative surrounding a protest and has the ability to influence public opinion on that protest.

When analyzing the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 in his article "Protest News Framing Cycle: How *The New York Times* Covered Occupy Wall Street," political scientist Julian Gottlieb describes the protesters' fight to attract coverage and the way media frames this fight. Gottlieb's research "indicates that protesters can make their issues more salient in the news by escalating conflict and getting arrested, but that journalists tend to focus on the conflict instead of the protest issues" (18). Gottlieb concludes that the more conflict there is in a demonstration, the less likely journalists are to focus on the substance of the protest, resulting in description bias (18). Coverage that focuses on arrests during a demonstration is an example of episodic framing, which can counteract protesters' initial goals of attracting media attention to the issues they are protesting.

Methodology

To research description bias in media framing, I examined news articles from the *Wall Street Journal*, a right-leaning news source, and *The New York Times*, which is left-leaning. I chose these two newspapers because they attract a significant national audience and represent opposite sides of the political spectrum. To find articles from these news sources, I queried the *ProQuest U.S. Newsstream* database. I used the keywords "wildlife refuge" and "protest OR occupation" to conduct my search for articles covering the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge protest. I examined articles from January 2, 2016, the start date of the protest, until January 21, 2016. I used the keywords "Charlotte," "protest OR riot," and "Scott" to search for articles on the Charlotte protests. I searched for articles within the date range of September 20, 2016, the date of Scott's death, through September 24, 2016, the day after the second night of protesting.

While analyzing each news article, I used Iyengar's definitions to establish whether an article contained a thematic or episodic frame. To determine if an article contained a certain

frame, I examined each passage to see if a majority of them possessed an episodic or thematic frame. If most passages discussed the protest itself or the direct cause of the protest, the article was labeled “episodic.” If most passages referred to the historical context or underlying societal issues of each protest, the article was categorized as “thematic.” While media coverage can exhibit a balance between the two frames, most articles in the study did not achieve this balance. Journalists may mention the history of a movement in episodic articles, but if the focus of the article is primarily on the unfolding events of a protest, it does not serve the same purpose as a thematically framed article.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 *Mainstream media framing of the Malheur protest*

| Newspaper | Total Number of Articles | Articles with Episodic Frame | Articles with Thematic Frame | Articles Excluded |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| New York Times | 17 | 3 | 10 | 4 |
| Wall Street Journal | 4 | 0 | 3 | 1 |

My search for articles on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge protest generated 21 results, including 17 articles from the *New York Times* and four from the *Wall Street Journal*. Of those articles, three were presented in an episodic frame and 13 contained a thematic frame. I excluded five articles from my results as they did not provide sufficient coverage of the protest itself or the context of the protest, so they had neither an episodic nor a thematic frame of the event. Of the remaining articles published in the *New York Times*, less than one-fourth were presented with an episodic frame and the rest were presented with a thematic frame. By contrast, the *Wall Street Journal* provided no articles with an episodic frame, covering the protest in an entirely thematic frame.

Table 2 *Mainstream media framing of the Charlotte protest*

| Newspaper | Total Number of Articles | Articles with Episodic Frame | Articles with Thematic Frame | Articles Excluded |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| New York Times | 14 | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| Wall Street Journal | 6 | 2 | 2 | 2 |

My search for the Charlotte protest news articles produced 20 results, with 14 from the *New York Times* and six from the *Wall Street Journal*. Of the articles, nine contained an episodic frame and four had a thematic frame. Again, I excluded seven articles from my results as they did not focus on either the protests, context, or underlying issues of the event. Of the articles published by the *New York Times*, over three-fourths contained an episodic frame and the rest exhibited a thematic frame. The *Wall Street Journal* covered the protests evenly, with two articles presenting a thematic frame and two articles containing an episodic frame.

There were several differences in how each of the publications covered the two protests. Firstly, the *New York Times* provided more coverage of each event. The *New York Times* also provided a greater proportion of episodic coverage to the wildlife refuge protests than the *Wall Street Journal*, which reported on the occupation in a solely thematic frame. Yet both newspapers reported on the issue with mostly thematic framing. The *New York Times* chose to report on the Charlotte protests with a primarily episodic frame, while the *Wall Street Journal* provided more equal framing. However, in one of the two articles containing a thematic frame, the journalist sympathized with police officers in portraying the issue of police brutality, and thus undermining the goals of the protesters.

The results of the study show that the media exhibited description bias in the coverage of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and Charlotte protests. The publications favored the wildlife refuge protesters by drawing more attention to the issue they were protesting than the protest itself. In contrast, the Charlotte protests were presented in an episodic frame, and coverage often unfairly ignored the issue the protesters were attempting to bring to the public’s attention.

A large portion of articles that covered the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge protests tended to provide sympathetic and holistic coverage of the event, a result of favorable description bias. In the article “Protest Rooted in Land-Use Dispute,” *Wall Street Journal* writers Jim Carlton and Dan Frosch report in depth on the protesters’ dispute with the federal

government that led to their takeover of the wildlife refuge. The authors choose to cover the history of land-use disputes that resulted in the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, giving the coverage of the event a thematic frame. Carlton and Frosh begin their article by stating:

Behind the armed protest at a national wildlife preserve in Oregon lies a decades-long struggle between agencies that manage vast tracts of federal land in the West and the ranchers, loggers, and miners who depend on access to them for their livelihoods.

By diverting from an explanation of the protest itself and instead describing the historical context leading up to the confrontation, the authors give a more thematic overview of the land-use issue than that which an episodic frame would cover. Iyengar explains that when events are described using a thematic frame, “attributions of responsibility . . . were societal in focus” (256). This is evident in the article’s focus on government encroachment on land in the West and its impact on ranchers rather than describing the demonstration. Attributing responsibility for the protests to the government tacitly absolves protesters of the crime of their armed occupation and makes the public more likely to sympathize with their cause, contributing to the effectiveness of the movement.

The *New York Times* article “Why the Government Owns So Much Land in the West,” by Quoc Trung Bui and Margot Sanger-Katz, is another example of thematic framing as it provides a comprehensive description of federal land ownership and the issues that antigovernment protesters at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge were fighting. The depth of the explanation given by Bui and Sanger-Katz provides the demonstrators with the attention they are seeking through their protest. The authors recognize that the “remaining ownership and management of large tracts of forest and grazing lands is the core problem for antigovernment protesters in Oregon” (Bui and Sanger-Katz). By answering anticipated questions of the readers on the context and root causes of the protest, Bui and Sanger-Katz approach the issue with a thematic frame. The thematic frame, as Iyengar points out, “directs the viewers’ attention to alternative and more contextual accounts” (257). The frame presented by the authors allows readers to understand the reasons why the protest is occurring, making them more likely to blame the federal management of land rather than the protesters themselves.

Most articles covering the Charlotte protests contained an episodic frame, a direct result of description bias. In Valerie Bauerlein’s article, “Man Shot, State of Emergency Declared as Charlotte Protests Continue,” the *Wall Street Journal* reporter summarizes the events of the second night of protests in Charlotte after the death of Keith Scott. By focusing on the specifics of the demonstrations, Bauerlein frames the conflict episodically. She details the protests by stating, “Violent protests continued toward midnight Wednesday in the central business

district. Windows at restaurants and major hotels were smashed, and police in riot gear sought to regain control of the streets” (Bauerlein). The dramatic description and lack of context for the demonstrators’ motives results in an episodic frame, which Iyengar described as “typically . . . dramatic” (255). He also notes that, in this type of framing, “viewers [attribute] responsibility not to societal or political forces but to the actions of particular individuals or groups” (Iyengar 256). Through this episodic frame, the public is more likely to focus on the activity of the demonstrators rather than focusing on the systemic racism responsible for the protests. Since movements are often reliant on support of the general public to achieve their goals, conflict framing can pose a significant barrier to the movement. If Black Lives Matter protests continue to be depicted using language that emphasizes conflict, for instance, the narrative of the movement will be shrouded by negative public perception.

The *New York Times* article “More Violence Hits Charlotte After Shooting,” by Richard Fausset and Alan Blinder, is another example of description bias through the creation of an episodic frame. The article describes the aftermath of the shooting of Keith Scott and the resulting protests in Charlotte. The frame is evident throughout the article, including the opening line:

A second night of protests set off by the police killing of a black man spiraled into chaos and violence after nightfall here Wednesday when a demonstration was interrupted by gunfire that gravely wounded a man in the crowd. Law enforcement authorities fired tear gas in a desperate bid to restore order.
(Fausset and Blinder)

Emphasis on the chaotic details of the protest is often found in episodic frames and distracts readers from focusing on the larger issue of police brutality. As Iyengar notes, when episodic frames are evident, “viewers [focus] on individual and group characteristics rather than on historical, social, political, or other general forces” (256). In this case, the article diverts the attention of the readers to the Charlotte protesters rather than the issue of police brutality. Not only are the protesters portrayed negatively in this situation, but the law enforcement officials at the scene are viewed through a sympathetic lens with language that paints their efforts to deescalate the situation as “desperate.” The combination of contrasting depictions of activists and officers with an episodic frame serves to limit the effectiveness of the protest. The frame detracts from the overall message of the Charlotte protest, creating unfavorable description bias.

Conclusion

The results of my study demonstrate that the US mainstream media exhibited description bias in their framing of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and Charlotte protests. It might be prejudicial for media outlets to cover protests with a completely thematic frame that always aligns with the goals of the protesters. And yet the media did exhibit prejudice by framing a majority of the Malheur protest articles thematically while giving little attention to the issues that resulted in the Charlotte protests. There are several possible reasons why there was a disparity in the coverage of these protests. One of the most glaring differences is the level of conflict in both events. As Gottlieb noted in his research, protests that attract police presence or escalate to conflict often lead the media to focus on the conflict itself, resulting in an episodic frame (4). The racial disparity between the two groups of demonstrators is one possible explanation for the policing differences in the Malheur and Charlotte protests. Black protesters are more likely to receive law enforcement presence at their demonstrations, which increases the rate at which their protests are reported in an episodic frame (Davenport et al. 168). Davenport's argument may explain why articles covering the Charlotte protests were more likely to contain an episodic frame. The Malheur protesters, who were mostly white, attracted very little police presence, which may have favorably contributed to the primarily thematic frame of the demonstration. There are, of course, other factors that could have contributed to the disproportionate framing between the two protests. Since the Malheur protest lasted over six weeks, there were times during which nothing eventful happened. Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement had frequently been in the news due to the volume of law-enforcement-related shootings so the unfolding protest events were new to the public consciousness while the underlying issues were not, which could provide motivation for framing the demonstrations episodically. The urban setting of the Charlotte protests in comparison to the secluded wildlife refuge in Harney County also meant the Black Lives Matter protests more directly affected the general public. Yet none of these factors justify the fact that the Malheur protesters, who staged a heavily armed takeover of a government-owned building, did not receive coverage consistent with the severity of their actions.

While the coverage of the Malheur protests brought the issue of federal land-use laws to the general public's attention, the narrative of the Charlotte protesters was lost in the absence of substantive content covering the systemic injustice of policing that is biased against people of color. The racial disparity of the issues is hard to ignore, as the Malheur protesters were acquitted of all charges brought against them, despite the armed occupation (Bernstein). The whiteness of the protesters, in combination with the lack of strong media criticism, may have influenced how the protesters were treated in the legal system. Meanwhile, police brutality remains unresolved, especially considering that the police officer who killed Keith Scott was recently cleared of all charges (Swaine). If the public perception of the Black Lives

Matter movement had been more positive, there may have been harsher consequences for the officer involved and for all instances of excessive use of police force. Although equitable media coverage of protest events will not entirely solve systemic issues, an attempt from the US mainstream media to eliminate description bias from their framing of protests will be necessary to enact lasting change.

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