

Framing Effects of Television News Coverage of Social Protest

by Douglas M. McLeod and Benjamin H. Detenber

We investigated framing effects of television news coverage of an anarchist protest. Three treatment stories differed in their level of status quo support. Status quo support had significant effects on viewers, leading them to be more critical of, and less likely to identify with, the protesters; less critical of the police; and less likely to support the protesters' expressive rights. Status quo support also produced lower estimates of the protest's effectiveness, public support, and perceptions of newsworthiness. The results substantiate concerns about status quo support by showing that it can influence audience perceptions.

The mass communication literature provides many studies that lead to the conclusion that the mass media can “delegitimize” or “marginalize” protest groups that challenge the status quo (e.g., Cohen, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Shoemaker, 1984). Examinations of news content show that news stories about protests tend to focus on the protesters' appearances rather than their issues, emphasize their violent actions rather than their social criticism, pit them against the police rather than their chosen targets, and downplay their effectiveness. This kind of coverage constitutes what has been called the “protest paradigm” (Chan & Lee, 1984), which leads to news coverage that supports the status quo. Although there have been many studies that have examined the characteristics of protest story *content*, few studies have examined the *effects* of protest paradigm news coverage on the audience.

The framing literature provides a point of departure for studying how these effects might occur. Compared with traditional media effects approaches, framing is a relatively new approach “in which the audience is seen as constructing meaning from a rich media environment” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 7). The news frame is one of the most important characteristics of a news story, both in terms of providing a template that guides journalists in assembling facts, quota-

Douglas M. McLeod (PhD, University of Minnesota, 1989) is associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Delaware. His research interests include media coverage of social conflicts and media influences on public opinion. Benjamin H. Detenber (PhD, Stanford University, 1995) is assistant professor in the School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include media effects and media influence on public opinion.

tions, and other story elements into a news story and for orienting interpretations by the audience (Gamson, 1992; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). As defined by Entman (1993),

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52; italics in the original)

Many studies have looked at various framing effects of news coverage, but few have considered the framing effects of the support for the status quo produced through the protest paradigm.

We did not adopt a narrow, mechanistic, or deterministic view of media effects to investigate framing effects of television news. Rather, we regarded the audience as actively creating meaning from many sources including media messages. Our approach was similar to what Neuman et al. (1992) called the "political cognition perspective." Rather than conceptualizing audience effects as attitude change, we conceptualized the impact of a news story as shaping the way audience members think about the events, issues, and groups addressed in the story. Although we do not deny that political cognitions have affective dimensions, as pointed out by Just, Crigler, and Neuman (1996), we conceptualized the framing effects investigated in this study as cognitive responses to media content rendering certain thoughts more salient or readily accessible to the viewer.

This study extends McLeod's (1995) previous research by reorienting the original four dependent measures from attitude scales to political cognition scales and adding seven new dependent measures. Specifically, we tested seven hypotheses about the framing impact of three protest news stories with varying levels of status quo support on perceptions of the protesters, police, the protest, the protesters' expressive rights, perceived social support for the protesters, and the newsworthiness of the story. By using three stories, we could examine whether the framing effect was linear or curvilinear. In addition, we posed a research question about the relationship between status quo support and general perceptions of protest as a form of democratic participation.

News Media and Status Quo Support

Theorists have proposed that the U.S. media reflect the interests of the existing power structure (e.g., Altschull, 1984; Breed, 1958; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Molotch & Lester, 1975; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1973; Westergard, 1977). Support for the status quo is the product of influences that have been classified into several categories, including the biases of individual journalists; professional conventions, practices, and ideologies; organizational imperatives; economic ties; sociocultural worldviews; and hegemonic ideology (Berger & Chaffee, 1987; Dimmick & Coit, 1983; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Hertog & Mcleod, 1995; Hirsch, 1977; Shoemaker & Mayfield, 1987; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tichenor et al., 1973). Media support for the status quo is embedded in the processes of news production and often occurs without the conscious awareness of the individuals who produce the messages (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Although media sociologists contend that the media generally support the status quo and marginalize groups that challenge official institutions, they also recognize that under certain conditions the media will criticize groups in power. For instance, Bennett's (1990) concept of "indexing" identified an important factor that regulates the degree to which media support the status quo. The media are more likely to be critical when there is elite conflict within the power structure. For example, as Congress debated whether to impeach or censure President Clinton, media criticism of the president was prompted by criticism from both Republican and Democratic legislators. Alternatively, when elite conflict is limited, as in the case of international conflicts and domestic challenges from outside the power structure (Coser, 1956), media support for the status quo tends to be strong.

Given that the media often produce messages that support the status quo, Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995) recast the traditional "watchdog" analogy for the media. They argued that in supporting the status quo, the media stray from this normative ideal and act more like a "guard dog," maintaining order and protecting the system against potential internal and external threats. In contrast to a passive and obedient "lapdog," the guard dog media will occasionally attack an individual power holder. However, in doing so, they focus blame on the individual rather than on the system, thereby protecting the legitimacy of the status quo. Social protest, particularly that which advocates radical change, may present a threat to the social system. The normative theory that underpins the watchdog media holds that the media should objectively explore the protesters' social critique by launching a serious investigation of its merits with respects to all available facts. The guard dog media, on the other hand, take a hostile stance toward the threat posed by social protest. Because of their ties to the power structure, the guard dog media often cover protests from the perspective of those in power. Guard dog media coverage highlights the deviance of the protesters, diminishing their contributions and effectiveness, insulating the power structure, and defusing the threat.

Protest Paradigm and Framing Effects Theory

Status quo support in news coverage of social protest has been well documented (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Shoemaker, 1984). The set of common characteristics that articulate this support have been codified into the concept of the "protest paradigm" (Chan & Lee, 1984), which provides a template for the construction of a protest story. McLeod and Hertog (1998) classified characteristics of the protest paradigm into the following categories: narrative structures; reliance on official sources and official definitions; the invocation of public opinion; and other techniques of delegitimization, marginalization, and demonization.

The narrative structure serves as a kind of script for the news story. McLeod and Hertog (1998) noted that it is common for journalists to use a violent crime story narrative that casts the event as a battle between the protesters and police, rather than as an intellectual debate between the protesters and their chosen target (McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Using this narrative structure, media coverage emphasizes any violence associated with the protest (Cohen, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Murdock, 1981). To get media attention, protesters often

engage in a barter arrangement (Gamson, 1989). If the protesters provide action that makes for good video and still pictures, the media will cover the protest. The incidence of violence at a protest attracts media coverage, but often results in news stories that focus on conflicts with the police, obfuscating the issues raised by the protesters (Gitlin, 1977) and characterizing the protesters as “deviants” and “criminals” (Hall, Clarke, Critcher, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1978).

Journalists rely heavily on official sources and official definitions of situations (Fishman, 1980; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Sigal, 1973; Soley, 1992). They use official sources to add prestige to a story, to increase the efficiency of news production, and to maintain the illusion of objectivity (McLeod & Hertog, 1998). This practice is especially common for protest stories, which are often told from the perspective of the power holders and thus reinforce the status quo.

The invocation of public opinion is a third protest paradigm characteristic. McLeod and Hertog (1992) described the various ways in which news stories convey cues to public opinion (i.e., opinion polls, overt characterizations, invocations of social norms, violations of laws, and the symbolic use of bystanders). Cues to public opinion found in mainstream media coverage of social protest often communicate the deviance of protesters by depicting them as an isolated minority.

Several protest paradigm characteristics delegitimize, marginalize, and demonize protesters. Gitlin (1980) found that media coverage of the anti-Vietnam war movement made the group’s appearance, language, beliefs, and goals appear more radical than they really were. Several literary techniques contribute to the delegitimization of challenging groups. Tuchman (1978) identified the use of quotation marks as one way journalists interject commentary without overtly compromising objectivity. Gitlin (1980) provided an example from the Vietnam war protest coverage that used quotation marks around the term “peace march.” Lipari (1996) described a similar technique: journalists’ use of stance adverbs (e.g., obviously, supposedly, allegedly) to connote the legitimacy of information and foster preferred interpretations.

Ultimately, the common characteristics of media coverage form the protest paradigm, which is an implicit model that journalists apply to the coverage of protests. McLeod and Hertog (1998) argued that the more a protest group challenges the status quo, the more closely the media will adhere to the characteristics of the protest paradigm. In short, news coverage will marginalize challenging groups, especially those that are viewed as radical in their beliefs and strategies (Carragee, 1991; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Murdock, 1981; Shoemaker, 1984).

Framing effects theory takes framing beyond the construction of news stories to examine what happens when audience members encounter these messages. It constitutes a departure from the media effects tradition by focusing on how people construct meaning from the experiences of daily life, including exposure to media messages (Gamson, 1988; Neumann, Crigler, & Just, 1992). In this study we adopted this theoretical perspective to provide a framework for understanding potential effects that might result from exposure to a protest story.

As a particular way of packaging events and issues into a story, the protest paradigm constitutes a news frame. As a product of journalistic practices and values, news frames influence public opinion by making certain aspects of a story

more salient, thereby activating specific thoughts and ideas for audience members (Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). These thoughts and ideas are likely to be applied when audience members evaluate the groups, issues, and other story elements (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). This process, labeled the “availability heuristic” (Shrum & O’Guinn, 1993; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) or the “accessibility bias” (Iyengar, 1990a), occurs automatically and simplifies the cognitive tasks of making judgments and interpretations. This facilitates the impact of media messages on individual perceptions and opinions.

Recent research provides evidence of different types of framing effects in several contexts. Iyengar (1991) described a series of experiments demonstrating that certain news frames (episodic vs. thematic) can influence attributions of the causes of social problems and the responsibility for solving them. When news stories presented the issue of poverty in a personalized manner (i.e., framed episodically or at the individual level), viewers assigned responsibility for the problem to the individual. When stories presented poverty as the result of economic conditions and social policies (i.e., used a thematic frame), responsibility was assigned to society at large (Iyengar, 1990b). Rhee (1997) found that two distinct news frames (strategic vs. issue) used in campaign coverage influenced participants’ characterizations of a mayoral election campaign. Research by Shah, Domke, and Wackman (1996) revealed that whether newspaper stories framed the positions of three congressional candidates in either “ethical” or “material” terms had different effects on audience interpretations and decision-making strategies. Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) found that three alternative frames for newspaper stories about university funding reductions (human interest vs. conflict vs. personal consequences) affected the topical focus and valence of readers’ thoughts on the issue.

Framing studies often examine the influence of news stories on audience members’ perceptions of groups and interpretations of issues covered in the news stories. For protest news stories, framing may influence judgments about the protesters. However, by focusing on the clash with police and ignoring the actual target of the protest (McLeod & Hertog, 1992), protest news stories may have a limited framing impact on perceptions of the protest target. Another relevant framing effect may be altered perceptions of the success or efficacy of the protest itself. In addition, there are several important concepts from the mass communication literature that, until this study, have not been examined as outcomes of framing effects: support for expressive rights (Andsager & Miller, 1994); perceptions of public opinion (Mutz, 1994); and the newsworthiness of a news story (Galtung & Ruge, 1981).

Two studies have looked at the effects of protest news coverage. Shoemaker (1982) demonstrated that newspaper stories affected readers’ perceptions of the protest group’s legitimacy. McLeod (1995) found that participants exposed to a news story that was slanted against the protesters were more critical of the protest group and its issues than participants who saw a more balanced story. The experiment by McLeod (1995) also found that the effects did not extend to participants’ perceptions of the utility of protest as a form of democratic expression. Exposure to a single news story affected perceptions of the groups featured in the story, but not perceptions of protest in general.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Framing effects studies typically examine the outcomes of exposure to news stories with different news frames. In this study we examined the impact of television news stories with different levels of status quo support within a specific news frame (i.e., the protest paradigm). We felt that messages conveying higher levels of status quo support would provide stronger evocative cues to guide the construction of meaning. We expected that variation in the level of status quo support would have linear effects on audience perceptions of the protesters who challenged the status quo and the police who responded. We also predicted that greater status quo support would reduce perceived effectiveness of the protest, diminish support for the protesters' expressive rights, attenuate perceived social support for the protesters and their issues, and lower estimations of the newsworthiness of the protest event. Thus, we proposed seven hypotheses:

H1: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the more critical participants will be of the protesters.

H2: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the less participants will identify with the protesters.

H3: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the less critical participants will be of the police.

H4: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the less effective the protest will seem to the audience.

H5: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the less participants will support protesters' expressive rights.

H6: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the lower the estimates of social support for the protest group will be.

H7: The higher the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story, the less newsworthy the protest will seem to the audience.

Although these hypotheses predicted linear relationships, the use of news stories with three levels of status quo support further extended past research by permitting the examination of nonlinear relationships. For instance, it is conceivable that if a protest story's status quo support was so strong that it was perceived by audience members as being unfair to the protesters, it might generate sympathy or counterarguing that might cause disruptions to linear patterns.

RQ1: Will the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story produce any nonlinear relationships with assessments of audience perceptions?

In addition, we investigated the impact of new stories with varying levels of status quo support on more general protest perceptions. We also examined three new general protest scales: hostility toward protest, support for the protesters' expressive rights, and the perceived newsworthiness of protest. Because McLeod (1995) found that differences between news stories did not affect perceptions of

protest utility, we posed a research question rather than hypotheses:

RQ2: Will the level of status quo support in the stimulus news story affect general perceptions of protest including the utility of protest, hostility toward protests, the expressive rights of protest groups, and the newsworthiness of protests?

Method

Participants

Two hundred twelve undergraduate students (M age = 19.3 years) at a mid-sized mid-Atlantic university participated in this study. They received partial credit toward the research participation component of their introductory communication research methods course or extra credit in another introductory communication class. Consistent with the student demographics of the department, 75% of the participants were women ($n = 159$). We balanced the number and gender of participants across conditions.

Stimuli

The stimuli consisted of three television news stories on anarchist protests in downtown Minneapolis, MN, during 1986 and 1987. The protests were part of the War Chest Tour, a self-described series of anarchist demonstrations against government power and corporate capitalism. Both demonstrations included confrontations with the Minneapolis police, some property damage, and some arrests. The news stories of these protests were carried on two different local affiliate stations in Minneapolis: KSTP and WCCO. The stories ranged in length from 1 minute 25 seconds to 2 minutes 15 seconds, and all featured a reporter's voice-over, assorted protest footage, interviews with key figures in the story (e.g., the deputy police chief), and a closing stand-up by the reporter. Although all stories adhered to the protest paradigm and presented the events in a similar way, they varied in their degree of status quo support. That is, there were some distinct differences in both the tone and substance of the reporting. Specifically, the three stories differed in terms of (a) their portrayal of the protester-police interaction, (b) their representations of public opinion, (c) the nature of reporter commentary, and (d) whether protesters were shown speaking on camera. Our analysis of the stories along these dimensions suggested that the stories represented three levels of status quo support: low, medium, and high.

The "protester versus police" theme was evident in all three news stories. However, the nature of interaction differed across the three stories. For example, the low and medium support stories showed protesters clashing with Minneapolis police in front of the Federal Reserve Building. They used very similar footage, but the verbal descriptions of the event were quite different.¹ The first version

¹ The voice-over in the low support story said, "Angry marchers threw rocks as police charged them with mace," whereas the reporter in the medium support story said, "A few (demonstrators) also hurled rocks and other debris at Minneapolis Police who were standing by."

suggested that the police shared responsibility for initiating conflict. The second portrayed the police as simply reacting to the protesters' violent actions and makes no mention of the use of mace by police. The high support story also focused on the confrontation between protesters and police. It cast the protesters as a threat to civil society and the police as protectors of the peace.

Public opinion representations, communicated through statements made by the reporters and the depictions of bystanders, also differed across the three stories. The different types of public opinion represented in the three stories illustrate their varying degrees of status quo support. The low support story showed bystanders taking an interest in the protest. The medium support story stated that bystanders were "not impressed with the protesters' tactics or their message" and then showed a woman on screen saying, "I just don't appreciate it as a citizen of such a wonderful free country." The high support story presented the most negative portrayal of public opinion by declaring in the voice-over that most people were "revolted" by the protesters and their actions. Facial expressions of the bystanders ranged from stunned gazes to furrowed brows and scowls. Each story also invoked public opinion by focusing on the violation of social norms by the protesters (McLeod & Hertog, 1992). The norm violations ranged from mild (the unusual dress and hairstyles of some of the protesters, public spitting, and the like) to more serious acts like smashing a television set, burning currency, and burning a U.S. flag. To underscore the egregiousness of the flag burning, the reporter for the high support story asked one bystander if she was upset by the incident. Sobbing, she responded, "Yes! Yes! People died for the freedom they have. They don't seem to understand that!"

As some of the examples described above illustrate, the kind and degree of commentary made by the reporters varied across the three stories. The greatest amount of editorializing and negative commentary appeared in the high support story. The reporter's selection of bystander quotes and his use of stance adverbs, irony, and a derisive tone conveyed a strong sense of disapproval of the protesters. For example, in a mocking tone the reporter referred to the march as the "so-called War Chest Tour." From this and other statements, the reporter's antipathy toward the protesters was quite palpable. Rather than presenting substantive information on the groups participating in the protest and the issues they were raising, the reporter emphasized the protesters' transgressions and the negative responses of onlookers.²

In contrast, the reporter in the medium support story did not characterize the protesters as immature delinquents. Instead, he acknowledged that many different types of people participated in the march, and that only a few of the protesters were responsible for the vandalism and involved in the confrontation with police. The reporter did engage in some mild editorializing, however, by using phrases

²The reporter finished the story by denigrating the protesters: "We didn't see anyone along this demonstration through the city who actually showed this group support. In fact, most of the people were actually disgusted with it. One woman said, 'It's easy for these kids to be against everything because they themselves are not involved in anything.'"

that called into question the legitimacy of the group and the purpose of the march (e.g., “they call themselves anarchists,” “they claim that they are opposed to government”). The low support story had the least amount of commentary and none of the hostility toward the protesters or their cause that was evident in the high support story. In fact, at one point, the reporter seemed almost sympathetic toward the protesters by including them in a list of people injured by the mace police sprayed into the crowd.

Another important aspect of news coverage is how viewpoints are communicated. According to Fink (1998), having the concerned parties express their views in their own words is preferable to paraphrasing. The presentation of protesters’ views varied in the three stimulus stories. The low support story featured two interviews with protesters balanced by two different segments of an interview with the deputy chief of police. The medium support story did not have the protesters speak on camera, but did briefly relate the purpose of the march in a voice-over. The high support story had a brief segment with a protester speaking on camera, which was done partly as a voice-over for scenes of flag burning.

Based on these characteristics, we believed that these three stories represented an ordinal operationalization of status quo support. Although the high support story allowed a protester to speak on camera, this scene was more than offset by the use of inflammatory footage, the derisive and moralistic tone of the story, and the highly emotional segment of the sobbing bystander.

As a manipulation check, we asked four media professionals currently working in broadcast journalism to evaluate the three stories. We counterbalanced the presentation order of the stories, and the reviewers did not know the purpose of the evaluation. The ordinal rankings by all four journalists concurred perfectly with our rankings.

We embedded each protest news story in a constructed newscast that featured five other news stories, a commercial break, and an introduction and closing to the newscast by a team of professional newscasters. This fixed portion of the newscast ran 8 minutes 45 seconds, so the complete newscasts with the embedded target stories ranged in length from 10 minutes 10 seconds to 11 minutes. In all three versions the target story was slotted as the fourth story.

Procedure

This experiment used a single factor, posttest only, between-subjects design with random assignment to condition. Upon arriving at the research facility, participants were provided with a brief description of the stimuli and questionnaire and then signed an informed consent form. In a modified classroom, the participants sat in a semicircle of chairs positioned approximately 2.5 meters in front of a Sony 27-inch color monitor. They watched one of the three versions of the constructed newscast played back on a VHS videocassette recorder. Tape viewings were done in groups of two to eight people. At the end of the newscast, we asked the study participants to fill out a questionnaire on what they had seen. After completing the questionnaire, the students were verbally debriefed and thanked for their participation. The entire experiment lasted 45 minutes.

Measurement

To measure protest-specific political cognitions, we used 15 items from McLeod (1995). To improve the measurement and increase the number of perceptual dependent measures, we added 21 new items.³ Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation eliminated three cross-loaded items and suggested seven protest-specific scales. The eight items of the criticism of the protesters scale ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.63$) had a Cronbach's alpha of .82.⁴ The identification with the protesters scale ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.77$) consisted of four items (alpha = .79).⁵ The criticism of the police scale ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.71$) was constructed from five items (alpha = .81).⁶ Perceptions of protest effectiveness ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.77$) were measured using five items (alpha = .79).⁷ Support for the protesters' expressive rights ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.58$) consisted of three items (alpha = .79).⁸ Perceived public support for the protesters ($M = 14.97$, $SD = 13.40$) was measured by one item that asked participants to estimate the percentage of the population that agree with most of the protesters' viewpoints. Finally, perceptions of the newsworthiness of the protest ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.58$) were assessed using seven items (alpha = .76).⁹

We developed 18 new items to assess participants' perceptions of protest in general to add to the five items used by McLeod (1995). Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation suggested four protest-general scales. All items were measured on 5-point Likert scales. The six items that measured perceptions of general protest utility ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.54$) had a Cronbach's alpha of

³ Unless otherwise noted, all items were measured on 5-point Likert-type scales. The higher the number, the stronger the agreement with the statement.

⁴ The items were "The protesters were out of line," "The protesters were violent," "The protesters were troublemakers," "These protesters were disrespectful," "These protesters were out to cause trouble," "These protesters were annoying," "It is important to listen to these protesters" (reversed), and "I've heard all I want to about these protesters."

⁵ The items were "I share some of the protesters' viewpoints," "The protesters' actions were justified," "I would consider getting involved with a group who supported causes similar to those of the protesters," and "On the following scale, how close are your beliefs to those of the protesters" (9-point scale).

⁶ The items were "The police actions toward the protesters were justified" (reversed), "In the protest, the police were out of line," "In the protest, the police used excessive force," "In the protest, the police had a role in initiating the conflict," and "In the protest, the police were violent."

⁷ The items were "The protest was a waste of time" (reversed), "The protesters provided a useful service to democracy," "This protest was an effective way to influence public opinion," "These protesters offer new insights on social issues," and "These protesters brought issues to my attention."

⁸ The items were "These protesters have a right to protest," "These protesters should not be allowed to protest in public places" (reversed), and "These protesters have the right to be heard."

⁹ The items were "The media should provide these protesters with the means to be heard," "It is the media's obligation to cover this type of protest," "The media should not encourage these protesters by giving them attention" (reversed), "News stories about this protest aren't of interest to the public" (reversed), "The news story about this protest was relatively important compared to other stories on local television news," "The media should have found other stories to cover" (reversed), and "The public can learn a lot from stories about this protest."

.80.¹⁰ Five items comprised the general hostility toward protest scale ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.61$, $\alpha = .76$).¹¹ General support for protest expressive rights ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.58$) had three scale components ($\alpha = .79$).¹² Finally, general newsworthiness of protest ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.47$) consisted of nine items ($\alpha = .76$).¹³

Eight covariates were included in the analysis (gender, conservatism, political interest, and participation, and four different media use measures). Females made up 75.8% of our sample. Conservatism was a two-item measure that asked participants to rate themselves on two 7-point scales ranging from *very liberal* (1) to *very conservative* (7) on social and economic issues ($\alpha = .76$). Participants responded to two items, one asking about their interest in politics and the other asking about interest in the outcome of the next presidential election, using 9-point scales ranging from *not at all interested* (1) to *very interested* (9). Responses were averaged to create a measure of political interest ($\alpha = .79$). The covariates also included the use of local television news, national television news, newspapers, and radio news. Media use variables were constructed by multiplying the number of days per week that participants said they used the medium by the average number of minutes per day they spent with that medium on days that they use it.

Results

To examine the relationships between the level of status quo support in the news story stimulus and the dependent variables, we ran 11 separate ANCOVAs, using the eight variables as covariates. Confidence in the ordinal nature of our independent variable led us to use planned contrasts in the analyses. Though we expected linear trends in our dependent measures, we examined quadratic trends as well.

H1, which proposed that higher levels of status quo support will elicit higher levels of criticism of the protesters, was strongly supported, $F(2, 196) = 18.66$,

¹⁰ The items were “Protesters provide a useful service to our democracy,” “Protests are a waste of time” (reversed), “Protests are an effective way to influence politicians,” “Protests are an effective way to influence public opinion,” “Protesters can offer new insights on certain issues,” and “Protesters often bring new issues to my attention.”

¹¹ The items were “Protesters are often disrespectful,” “Protesters tend to be annoying,” “It is important to listen to protesters” (reversed), “Protesters are out to cause trouble,” and “I’ve heard all that I want to about protests.”

¹² The items were “Protesters have a right to protest,” “People should not be allowed to protest in public places” (reversed), and “Protesters have a right to be heard.”

¹³ The items were “The media should provide protesters with the means to be heard,” “It is the media’s obligation to cover protests,” “The media should not encourage protesters by giving them attention” (reversed), “News stories about protests aren’t of interest to the public.” (reversed), “News stories about protests are relatively important compared to other stories on the television news,” “The news media should cover other stories rather than protests” (reversed), “The public can learn a lot from news stories about protests,” “Protests make for exciting television news stories,” and “A lot can be learned from a television news story about protest.”

Table 1. ANCOVA Tests, Estimated Marginal Means and Linear and Quadratic Contrasts for the Protest-Specific Dependent Measures by Exposure Groups Controlling for Eight Covariates

Dependent Variables	F	df	eta ²	Low Support	Medium Support	High Support
Criticism of the protesters	18.66***	2, 196	.16	3.40	3.54	3.96
Linear	34.36***	1, 196		(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Quadratic	2.77	1, 196				
ID with protesters	11.78***	2, 196	.11	2.26	1.93	1.62
Linear	23.49***	1, 196		(.09)	(.09)	(.09)
Quadratic	0.10	1, 196				
Criticism of police	43.35***	2, 196	.31	2.76	2.11	1.88
Linear	81.16***	1, 196		(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Quadratic	5.96*	1, 196				
Protest effectiveness	12.58***	2, 196	.11	2.76	2.60	2.17
Linear	23.38***	1, 196		(.08)	(.09)	(.09)
Quadratic	1.66	1, 196				
Support expressive rights	3.37*	2, 196	.03	4.23	4.16	3.96
Linear	6.22*	1, 196		(.07)	(.08)	(.08)
Quadratic	0.48	1, 196				
Estimated public support	9.45***	2, 196	.09	19.92	13.94	10.55
Linear	18.52***	1, 196		(1.51)	(1.62)	(1.57)
Quadratic	0.43	1, 196				
Newsworthiness of protest	8.49***	2, 196	.08	3.50	3.23	3.13
Linear	16.00***	1, 196		(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Quadratic	1.06	1, 196				

Note. *N* = 212 (low support group = 76; medium support group = 68; high support group = 68). Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

p < .001 (see Table 1). The contrast procedure revealed a significant linear relationship, but no significant quadratic relationship. The estimated marginal means for the criticism of the protesters scale, after controlling for the eight covariates, were 3.40 for the low support group, 3.54 for the medium support group, and 3.96 for the high support group.

H2, which stipulated that the level of status quo support would be negatively related to participants' identification with the protesters, was strongly supported, $F(2, 196) = 11.78, p < .001$. Again, the linear contrast was significant, but the quadratic contrast was not. The estimated marginal mean for the low support group was 2.26, the mean for the medium support group was 1.93, and the mean for the high support group was 1.66.

As H3 predicted, exposure groups significantly differed in their criticism of the police, $F(2, 196) = 43.35, p < .001$. Both the linear and quadratic contrasts were significant. The low support group was the most critical of the police, with an estimated marginal mean of 2.76. The medium support group was less critical

($M = 2.11$). The high support group was even less critical ($M = 1.88$). The significant quadratic contrast indicates that the size of the difference between the low support and medium support groups was larger than the difference between the medium support and high support groups.

H4, predicting a negative relationship between the status quo support level and perceptions of the effectiveness of the protest, was also strongly supported, $F(2, 196) = 12.58, p < .001$. Only the linear contrast was significant. The low support group ($M = 2.76$) saw the protest as more effective than did the medium support group ($M = 2.60$) and the high support group ($M = 2.17$).

A similar pattern was found in the test of H5, which predicted a negative relationship between status quo support and support for the protesters' expressive rights. However, the strength of the relationship was considerably less than that of the other six protest-specific scales. The hypothesis was supported, $F(2, 196) = 3.37, p < .04$, but again, only the linear contrast was significant. The least amount of support came from the high support group ($M = 3.96$), followed by the medium support group ($M = 4.16$) and the low support group ($M = 4.23$).

H6, which proposed that participants who saw stories with higher levels of status quo support would estimate social support for the protesters to be lower, was also supported, $F(2, 196) = 9.45, p < .001$. The linear contrast was significant, but the quadratic was not. Participants who saw the low support story perceived the highest percentage of public support for the protesters' viewpoints ($M = 19.92$), followed by the medium support group ($M = 13.94$) and the high support group ($M = 10.55$).

The results also supported H7 regarding the relationship between status quo support and perceptions of the story's newsworthiness, $F(2, 196) = 8.49, p < .001$. The polynomial contrasts revealed a similar pattern to five of the previous six protest-specific measures, namely a significant linear contrast and a nonsignificant quadratic contrast. The participants in the low support group showed the highest newsworthiness evaluations of the anarchist protest ($M = 3.50$) followed by the medium support group ($M = 3.23$) and the high support group ($M = 3.13$).

The first research question asked whether there would be any nonlinear effects. We found none. There was only one significant quadratic contrast (i.e., criticism of the police). However, the exposure group means for this scale, as they were for all the other protest-specific dependent measures, were in a linear order consistent with the stimulus story's level of status quo support.

The second research question asked whether the exposure groups differed on scales measuring perceptions of protest in general. Similar to past research (McLeod, 1995), the exposure group differences observed for scales measuring perceptions related to the particular protest did not extend to differences in perceptions of protest in general. Exposure groups did not differ significantly on the general protest utility scale, the general hostility toward protest scale, and general support for protest expressive rights scale (see Table 2). None of the linear and quadratic contrasts were significant for the three exposure groups on these three scales. There was a significant relationship between the exposure group and the general newsworthiness of protest scale, $F(2, 196) = 3.89, p < .03$. The linear contrast was also significant, but the quadratic was not. The low support group rated the

Table 2. ANCOVA Tests, Estimated Marginal Means and Linear and Quadratic Contrasts for the General Protest Dependent Measures by Exposure Groups Controlling for Eight Covariates

Dependent Variables	F	df	eta ²	Low Support	Medium Support	High Support
General Protest Utility	1.30	2, 196	.01	3.58	3.46	3.45
Linear	2.18	1, 196		(.06)	(.07)	(.06)
Quadratic	0.45	1, 196				
General Protest Hostility	0.26	2, 196	.00	2.86	2.82	2.80
Linear	0.49	1, 196		(.06)	(.07)	(.07)
Quadratic	0.03	1, 196				
General Expressive Rights Support	0.73	2, 196	.01	4.18	4.08	4.19
Linear	0.01	1, 196		(.07)	(.07)	(.07)
Quadratic	1.44	1, 196				
General Protest Newsworthiness	3.89*	2, 196	.04	3.46	3.26	3.30
Linear	4.69*	1, 196		(.05)	(.06)	(.05)
Quadratic	3.16	1, 196				

Note. *N* = 212 (low support group = 76; medium support group = 68; high support group = 68). Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

newsworthiness the highest (*M* = 3.46). The medium support group (*M* = 3.26) and the high support group (*M* = 3.30) rated protest as less newsworthy.

Discussion

The protest paradigm provides a news frame through which the audience develops impressions of the groups and issues involved in the protest. News stories operating within the protest paradigm may vary in terms of their level of status quo support. Our results show that the degree of status quo support in news stories produces framing effects on protest-specific perceptions: criticism of and identification with the protesters, support for their expressive rights, criticism of the police, perceived effectiveness of and public support for the protest, and the newsworthiness of the protest. Although the media professionals who watched the stories consecutively as part of the manipulation check were able to detect differences in the level of status quo support (validating the manipulation), the participants did not rate the stories significantly different on measures of accuracy, believability, clarity, comprehensiveness, and objectivity. Although each story was critical of the protesters, subtle differences in the level of status quo support in the news stories had a substantial linear impact on the exposure groups. The linear patterns suggest that the stories were activating cognitions consistent with the level of status quo support in the story rather than stimulating counterarguing.

The strongest effects were on the three protest-specific dependent measures that dealt with the two elements of the central conflict of the story: the protesters and the police. Characterizations of the protesters and police were some of the most salient differences among the stories. The items asking about the effectiveness of the protest, public support for the protest, and the newsworthiness of the protest required the participants to make inferences beyond the manifest content of the story. This may have contributed to the slightly smaller effect sizes for these items. Nevertheless, the fact that these items were significant suggests that participants were using cues provided by the news stories to make such inferences.

Among the important cues embedded within the protest paradigm is the representation of public opinion (McLeod & Hertog, 1992), a key factor differentiating the level of status quo support in our stimulus stories. This study provides evidence that respondents' judgments were being affected by the level of status quo support in the stimulus story. On average, participants in the high status quo support group estimated public support for the protesters to be about half the estimate by those in the low status quo support group. Spiral of silence theory raises the concern that higher levels of status quo support that lead to smaller estimates of public support for protesters might in turn reduce viewers' willingness to speak out or take actions on behalf of protesters and their issues (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

The weakest relationship among the protest-specific items was the impact on participants' support for the expressive rights of the anarchist protesters. This may be because support for expressive rights scale tapped both protest-specific perceptions and an underlying general principle. Scale items asked about the anarchist protesters, specifically. Thus, participants' responses were subject to the influence of the way that the anarchists were treated in the news story. At the same time, these items asked participants whether the anarchists had the right to protest publicly, which also involves beliefs about expressive rights generally. With a scale that taps both case-specific and general perceptions, the influence of the news story's level of status quo support was weaker than the strong effects found for the other six case-specific dependent variables, but stronger than the lack of effects found for the general protest dependent measures.

Perceptions of Protest as a Form of Democratic Expression

Of the four scales measuring perceptions of protest in general, there was only one significant effect of status quo support. Participants who saw the news story with the lowest level of status quo support exhibited the highest newsworthiness ratings. Perhaps when journalists treat a given protest group more positively, it provides a cue to audience members that protests in general merit news coverage. Conversely, when a specific protest group is denigrated, it may activate thoughts about the legitimacy of protest as a news story. Because this finding does not fit the pattern of the other general protest measures in this study, or those of past research (McLeod, 1995), and the mean differences and the effects size were modest, this result should be viewed as tentative until it is replicated in future research. The fact that the level of status quo support had a strong impact on the protest-specific scales, but not much of an impact on perceptions of protest in

general, raises an interesting possibility about the nature of the effects. Although perceptions of a specific protest group can be influenced by a single news story, it seems that cognitions about protest in general, may be more deeply rooted. The results do not preclude the possibility that protest paradigm stories have a cumulative effect over a long period of time. Given that the media sociology literature consistently has demonstrated status quo support in several protest contexts (Carragee, 1991; Chan & Lee, 1984; Cohen, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Murdock, 1981; Shoemaker, 1984), it is possible that public perceptions of protest as a form of democratic expression may become more hostile over a long period of time. That is, if people are exposed repeatedly to messages with a specific news frame (e.g., the protest paradigm), certain cognitions may be made chronically accessible (Shrum, 1995).

Demonstrating long-term effects is complicated. First, it requires a longitudinal design, which could invite a host of confounding influences. Moreover, it would be difficult to track exposure to news stories about social protest. Although they are only indirect measures of exposure to protest stories, the media use measures used as covariates in this study showed virtually no effect on the dependent variables. Even if the amount of exposure to protest stories could be measured accurately, the research would still suffer from the problem that haunts macrosocial media effects and perhaps hinders our ability to see the full extent of media power: the lack of an unexposed control group. Just as it is conceivable that everyone is affected by television violence (regardless of the actual amount of exposure), long-term exposure to news coverage of protest may make the general public more skeptical toward protest as a viable form of political participation. On one hand, the difficulty of demonstrating this effect empirically should not deter research interest or lead to the conclusion that it does not occur. On the other hand, we should be cautious about inferring such an effect on the basis of protest-specific effects from exposure to a single news story. At the very least, though, the strong protest-specific findings of this study should motivate future research on the effects of long-term exposure.

Future researchers should also attempt a more systematic study of protest in a variety of contexts to document whether the media's status quo is consistent. For example, Shoemaker (1984) has found that journalists' perceptions of the degree of deviance of a protest group are related to how the media treat them. If media coverage of mainstream, reform-oriented protest groups contains positive statements about the contributions and the utility of protest, long-term effects on audience perceptions of protest as a form of democratic expression might be negligible.

Individual Differences and Framing Effects

This study controlled for eight covariates (i.e., gender, conservatism, political interest and participation, and four different media use measures). In general, the impact of these factors on the dependent measures was minimal. We find this somewhat surprising given the evidence suggesting that individual differences influence interpretations of news stories and framing effects (Neuman et al., 1992; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). There are some other potentially important mediating fac-

tors that were not incorporated into the design of this study (other than being controlled through random assignment of groups). For instance, preexisting cognitive orientations toward protest groups are likely to minimize the effects of news stories. In this case, there is a pervasive social bias against anarchists. Anarchist movements are perceived, and in most cases misperceived, as groups that are against any and all laws. There is also a social stereotype of the anarchist as the violent bomb-thrower and a threat to the established order (Chan, 1995). Although these stereotypes might create negative predispositions toward the protesters depicted in the stimulus news stories, the impact of these preexisting orientations would also constrain exposure group differences. However, our stimulus stories were able to move participants despite the potential anchor provided by preexisting stereotypes about anarchists.

Preexisting knowledge about the protesters and their issues is another important mediating factor. The impact of this factor in news story processing is complicated. On one hand, the knowledge gap literature (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1995) shows that preexisting knowledge leads to greater news attention and more sophisticated information-processing. Deeper processing might produce more potential for effects. On the other hand, people with more preexisting knowledge are likely to have more entrenched orientations toward the groups and issues involved in the story. As a result, news story effects are likely to be greater when people know little about the subject of the story.

Past experience with the groups and issues in the new story may also mediate the story's impact. For example, in their dependency theory of media effects, Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) noted that the media's influence is greater for issues with which people have no direct contact or personal history. Similarly, Lang and Lang (1981) argued that issues fall on a threshold continuum. Low-threshold issues are those that individuals can observe first hand in their daily lives, whereas high-threshold issues are those that are learned indirectly, as in exposure to media messages. Lang and Lang suggested that the impact of the media will be highest on high-threshold issues, for which individuals do not have the opportunity for independent validation of information contained in the media message.

Limitations of the Study

A significant shortcoming of this study is that it used a set of messages on a single topic for the manipulation. Although attempts were made to control possible confounds, the possibility exists that some idiosyncratic aspect of one or more of the news stories (e.g., the reporter's appearance) was actually producing the results. We feel fairly confident, however, that it was the clear manifestation of status quo support that influenced viewers' responses, rather than some extraneous attribute. We base this assertion on our analysis of the news stories and the validation of our assessments by media professionals. Rather than speculate that some obscure or latent characteristic of the news stories was driving the effects found in this study, we feel it is prudent and parsimonious to believe that the level of status quo support was the cause.

Another concern is that the effects revealed in this study are idiosyncratic to this particular protest. Future research should investigate stories from different

protest contexts to examine whether these findings can be replicated. In the process, such research should take into account mediating factors such as preexisting cognitive orientations toward the protesters, knowledge about the issues in question, and past experiences relevant to the protest.

Another question can be raised about whether the framing effects of exposure to a single news story on protest-specific measures are short-lived. Research on cognitive priming suggests that media influence is often temporary (Berkowitz & Rogers, 1986). Future research should examine the persistence of these framing effects.

Though the theoretical underpinnings of this study lie in framing effects, the methods used are more akin to the experimental approach of the media effects tradition than to the methods prescribed by Gamson (1988). To get at the interpretive processes that are the core of his constructionist model, more open-ended response items could be used for dependent measures. Future studies could also use other methodologies such as in-depth interviews and focus groups (Gamson, 1988). These kinds of approaches would help to capture alternative meanings constructed by the audience.

In summary, this study contributes to our knowledge of the framing effects of status quo support embedded in television news stories about social protest. It shows that the effects on perceptions of the protesters and police demonstrated by McLeod (1995) can be extended to perceptions about the effectiveness of the protest, support for the protesters' expressive rights, estimates of public support for the protest, and judgments about the protest's newsworthiness. Moreover, we used three news stories with different levels of status quo support (low vs. medium vs. high) to show that the effects were consistently linear rather than curvilinear. The framing effects revealed in this study substantiate the concerns about the status quo support that have been raised by media critics. They also underscore the importance of journalists' framing decisions and their choice of sources, words, and pictures used to construct a news story.

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