

Partisan News Realities:
Partisan Media Bias Through the Portland Protests Following the Murder of George Floyd

ISF 190 Thesis
Fall 2020

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Abstract

Particularly in the United States, partisan media bias (PMB) is more prevalent than ever before. In this study, I build upon previous frameworks describing partisan media bias to illustrate the severity of the partisan news media environment in the United States. I conducted my study using Media Cloud, an open-source platform for studying media ecosystems, to study the coverage of the Portland Protests following the murder of George Floyd. I found that reporting was significantly slanted to match outlet ideology when covering the Portland Protests. Analysis of top words also revealed significant differences in framing that also matched outlet ideology. I conclude my paper with implications for future research on partisan media bias and discuss other partisan divisions besides protest coverage.

Keywords

Partisan Media Bias, Framing Theory, Protest Paradigm, Episodic Framing, Thematic Framing, Media Cloud

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The statement that Americans are politically divided seems almost a statement of fact at the end of 2020. Partisanship in the United States is traditionally thought of as the ideological division between the Democratic Left and Republican Right. Though they did not start this way, the two parties have been sorted by a partisan ideology with the Democrats more liberal and the Republicans more conservative than they were 50 years ago (Mason 2014). This partisanship is both best represented by and exacerbated by the current media landscape. Ongoing studies by Pew Research have shown that Americans have divided opinions along partisan lines on a variety of topics, including the news media they consume, the news media they trust and distrust, and in their opinions on public protest, the media coverage of covid, and other various topics (Gottfried et al., 2020; Jurkowitz et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2020a, 2020b; NW et al., n.d., 2015, 2019).

Literature Review

Episodic vs Thematic Framing

Iyengar (1991) outlines episodic and thematic frames in *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* to illustrate what he saw as the problems with how political issues were framed. Episodic framing focuses on individual discrete events while thematic framing chooses to instead focus on the issue over time, situating it within its context and environment. This episodic framing is apparent when considering news media coverage of

protests under the protest paradigm (Chan and Lee 1984; McLeod and Hertog 1999). The protest paradigm attempts to explain the interactions between news media and protestors as “a set of news coverage patterns that typifies mainstream media coverage. This coverage generally disparages protestors and hinders their role as vital actors on the political stage” (McLeod, 2007, p. 185). McLeod and Hertog identified news frames, reliance on official sources, the invocation of public opinion, delegitimization, and demonization as the identifying characteristics of the protest paradigm.

Research into the varying levels of trust that different groups have towards news sources shows us not only that polarization has increased in the past 5 years, but also that no single news source is trusted by more than 50% of Americans (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Also of note, is the overwhelming concentration of viewership and trust towards Fox News for those who consider themselves Republicans with no other source coming close, while Democrats have a high level of trust in sources other than their top trusted source of CNN. This polarization along party lines is most distinct among those who consider themselves either Liberal Democrats or Conservative Republicans with high levels of trust in their respective media sources, and high levels of distrust in the media favored by their opposition. And while those who identified as moderates on either side tended to have a willingness to consume media from both sides, this did not indicate that there was a corresponding trust in the consumed media.

After analyzing 30 waves of the General Social Survey, O’Brian and Noy (2020) found that while Republicans began the study with higher confidence in science and lower confidence in religion than Democrats, they ended the period in opposite positions. They attribute this change to the dual politicization of science and religion that occurred through the unification of economic and religious conservatives. This is in line with research that shows that conservative

media use resulted in greater distrust in scientists, which then resulted in a greater distrust in climate science. The opposite also held where greater non-conservative media consumption resulted in greater trust in scientists and therefore climate change (Hmielowski et al., 2014).

Framing Theory

Media framing theory is an extension of agenda-setting theory, the idea of prioritizing an idea or topic; in framing theory, the presentation of an event or issue within a particular field of meaning is what can change how it is perceived. First outlined by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (1974), frames help the audience “locate, perceive, identify, and label” the information around them. Early research into framing theory in the United States performed by Shanto Iyengar “found that daily news coverage was strongly biased towards an episodic interpretation in which news depicts social issues as limited to events only and not placed in a broader interpretation or context (the thematic frame)”(De Vreese, 2005).

In response, Semetko and Valkenburg conducted similar research in Holland and found that although the “study showed that television news can be episodic and at the same time frame the government (rather than the individual) as responsible for social problems. This suggests that Iyengar’s (1991) argument about the consequences of the episodic nature of TV news is culture-bound and not generalizable beyond television news in the U.S. Our findings suggest that, although television news in many countries may be episodic, how responsibility is framed in the news is influenced by the political culture and social context in which the news is produced.” This observation is particularly interesting due to research regarding attitudes towards GMOs and climate change concerning individuals’ perceptions of governments and corporations in Germany and the United States. Though prior research in the US tended to focus on the political background of individuals, this study found that positive attitudes towards

government resulted in positive attitudes towards climate science in both countries while positive attitudes towards corporations resulted in negative attitudes towards climate science in the US. In Germany however, trust in corporations still resulted in positive attitudes towards climate science (Pechar, 2018). This makes sense in the context of the US; network analysis reveals that conservative donor groups and foundations provide the vast majority of funding for climate change counter-movement organizations. It was found that twenty-two foundations provided 77.4 percent of the total funding. Unfortunately, due to shifts in funding patterns, the vast majority of donations to CCCM organizations are now untraceable and have also increased in amount as a result (Brulle, 2014).

Content analysis of news articles showed that there was less ideological bias than previously thought when considering the relative coverage of different events. It is important to note that how news organizations take a side is not by advocating for a position, but rather by criticizing one side more than the other (Budak et al., 2016). A content analysis of Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC from 2007-2008 showed that Fox was more dismissive of climate change overall. This is of particular importance as Republicans tended to base their views more on the news outlet they watched than the stance of their affiliated party. This indicates a higher association between skepticism and media consumption than skepticism and personally held beliefs (Feldman et al., 2012).

This sort of oppositional messaging has negative implications for trust in science overall. A study on dissonant science messages and their effects on liberals and conservatives showed that dissonant messaging resulted in lower trust in science for both groups (Garrett, 2015). However, the divide between Republicans and Democrats regarding their relative trust in science is still heavily skewed towards Democrats as they are “three times more likely to follow

science-related Twitter handles than Republicans”(Helmuth et al., 2016). The study also found that Republicans who voted with Democrats on the Keystone Pipeline bill were more similar to Democrats in their science account follows. The results of this study support the conclusion that Republicans “are less skeptical when exposed to information on the reality and urgency of climate change” (Feldman et al., 2012). However, due to the high rate of trust and viewership rates for Fox news for Conservatives, it is unlikely that this information would reach them in the current state of American news media. This is especially concerning when considering that political orientation is a stronger predictor for attitudes concerning climate change than actual measurable climatic change (Marquart-Pyatt et al., 2014).

Protest Paradigm

The protest paradigm attempts to explain the interactions between news media and protests as a “set of news coverage patterns that typifies mainstream media coverage. This coverage generally disparages protestors and hinders their role as vital actors on the political stage” (McLeod, 2007, p. 185). McLeod and Hertog identified news frames, reliance on official sources, the invocation of public opinion, delegitimization, and demonization as the identifying characteristics of the protest paradigm. Early studies on the protest paradigm found “that moderate reform and radical reform protests were more likely to be treated critically in both the headline and main body of the article as well as have greater emphasis placed on specific events rather than themes and goals (Boyle et al., 2004)”. Later studies found that the intensity of the protest paradigm affected estimated public support for a cause and that a group’s tactics would determine whether media coverage was positive or negative (Boyle et al., 2012; Detenber et al., 2007).

Later research on the protest paradigm focuses on specific events and how different outlets would cover protest events. A study of the Occupy Wall Street protest found that the New York Times and USA Today used public disapproval as their most frequent explanatory device (Xu, 2013). The latest research on the protest paradigm focuses on partisan media bias and how it interacts with the protest paradigm. Past scholarship has shown that outlet ideology is a factor for determining the extent to which the protest paradigm is employed with evidence for the Tea Party in the US, protests in Hong Kong, protests in India, Brazil, and Hong Kong, and for the “Yellow Vest Movement” and the “United We Roll Convoy” in Canada (Cillia & McCurdy, 2020; Lee, 2014; Shahin et al., 2016; Weaver & Scacco, 2013).

Partisan Media Bias

The study of partisan media bias has been one of increasing interest since the 1990s (Groeling and Kernell, 1998). Various forms of bias have been identified throughout the years, with many studies focusing on partisan media bias in politics. Barret and Barrington (2005) found that newspapers exhibited bias in candidate photo selection. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) reported that all news outlets outside of *Fox News’ Special Report* and *The Washington Times* received scores left of the average member of congress. Groeling (2008) found that while ABC, CBS, and NBC had supported Clinton, FOX news supported Bush. Larcinese et al. (2011) found bias in reporting on the topics of the trade deficit and unemployment. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) showed that the bias of local newspapers match the partisan lean of the readers where the paper was sold. While Lott and Hassett (2014) found bias in favor of Democrats over Republicans on news related to unemployment or the economy. Peng (2018) found that there was a difference in the photographic coverage of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

Some theories, like the Propaganda Model, argue that the media is largely guided by corporate interests and the political elite through various forms of advertising and information access and even suggest a conservative bias (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Alterman, 2002). Others like Groseclose (2011) point to studies on the relatively liberal views of journalists vs the general public and their left-of-center self-identification as evidence that the media holds a liberal bias instead (Lott & Hassett, 2014; Patterson & Donsbagh, 1996). Criticisms from both sides make similar mistakes in treating the media as if it is a single entity, and in acting as if bias can be eliminated through equal coverage. A study on US newspapers found that they were usually “ideologically balanced around the median voter in each state” and exhibited bias in certain issues, some to the left and some to the right of the median voter (Puglisi & Snyder, 2015).

Shultziner and Stukalin noted that Partisan Media Bias “is expressed in the way different news outlets cover the same political story within the same time frame relative to one another (description bias). This approach rests on the assumption that there are professional routines and objective media considerations that guide the work of journalists who come from different ideological backgrounds. Given that these considerations are largely similar for equivalent market competitors, the differences in coverage between such outlets are attributed to pressures and interests on the organizational level (production mechanisms)” (Shultziner & Stukalin, 2019). While Shultziner and Stukalin were able to illustrate the presence of PMB in ideologically different newspapers through a combination of description bias and production mechanisms, their methodology is better suited for print media, specifically newspapers (Shultziner & Stukalin, 2020).

Considering the partisan divisions of news media and trust in news media in the US, I wanted to adapt their approach to the US news media. While I hold their core assumptions regarding description bias and production mechanisms, I have adapted them to an increasingly online, instant, and 24-hour news cycle. However, instead of production mechanisms like front-page, size, visual, or page-number bias, I instead focus on the relative output of a news outlet and the general language being used. Barring large changes in production capacity, most news organizations maintain relatively stable output over time. Considering this, the decision to put out a news story is not only based on its newsworthiness, but also on how much production capacity is even available. There are only so many employees, editors, and hours in the day and these limitations require value judgments to decide what stories to focus on over others.

Assuming that the news production cycle is fairly standardized and that similar editorial standards are enforced throughout the industry, we would expect fairly similar coverage of the same topic. However, when there is a significant and consistent difference across outlets based on their ideological position, we can assume that partisan media bias is occurring. Therefore, when considering partisan media bias, it is important to recognize that bias is relative to who is reporting the news, what is being reported on, and when the reporting is taking place as new information can come to light over time.

H1: If Partisan Media Bias exists, description bias will match outlet ideology.

H2: If Partisan Media Bias exists, word choice will match outlet ideology.

Methodology

The data in this research was scraped from six news media websites. I used Media Cloud, “an open-source platform for studying media ecosystems”¹, to study the coverage of the Portland Protests following the murder of George Floyd. Using the Media Cloud Explorer, I was able to

¹ <https://mediacloud.org/about>

analyze a total of 227,057 media articles to generate data regarding the relative attention paid to the protests over time and the various frames used by different networks. I specifically focused on patterns of news coverage as well as understanding the framing employed through the use of “Top Words” generated by Media Cloud.

News Source Selection

In order to illustrate the partisan divides across news media, I selected three news media outlets from newspapers and television news to provide a total of six outlets. The New York Times and MSNBC were selected to represent “left” media, USA Today and CBS News were selected to represent the “neutral” media, and the New York Post and Fox News were selected to represent the “right” media. The “left”, “neutral”, and “right” media designations were determined based off of the “Interactive Media Bias Chart®” by Ad Fontes Media² and the levels of trust and distrust in each media source based on research by Pew Research Center³. The “Mainstream Media” source on Media Cloud was also used as a frame of reference for the general media as it comprised the top 22 sources based on “Google Ad Planner's measure of unique monthly users”⁴. All six of the selected sources were contained within the “Mainstream Media” source.

Study Period

The articles came from two specific time periods, the first was from May 25th, 2020 to June 27th, 2020 and the second from June 28th, 2020 to August 2nd, 2020. The first period starts on the day George Floyd was murdered, and ends the Sunday after Trump signed the “Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence”. This first period marked the timeframe when federal troops were deployed

² <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart-2/>

³ <https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/>

⁴ <https://sources.mediacloud.org/#/collections/8875027>

to Portland. The second period covers the month-long presence of federal troops in Portland, beginning on the 28th, the Sunday following the executive order, and ending on the Sunday after federal troops were withdrawn to standby locations.

Bias/Framing Determination

In line with Shultzinger and Stukalin (2020), I will be “comparing the ways different news outlets cover the same event at the same time” to determine Partisan Media Bias. Assuming that journalistic standards are consistent, deviations must then be due to partisan considerations. Due to Media Cloud utilizing boolean search operators for its explorer tool, I was able to search with a relatively high level of granularity. The relative slant of an article was determined through the use of the AND and NOT functions. The entire group of articles related to the portland protests was found through the “catch-all” search:

{portland **AND** (protest* **OR** riot*) **NOT** "st louis" **NOT** "Maine"}

This returned all results that mentioned portland as well as either protest* or riot*. The * meant that protest* would return results for “protested”, “protestors”, “protests”, etc. The NOT “st louis” and “Maine” were included due to cities of the same name returning results due to protest related events.

Like Gottlieb (2015), I will also be using a coding unit smaller than the entire story or article as previous studies have done. The “Positive” and “Neutral” frames encompass the Protest Paradigm as it has been understood, with the “Neutral” category encompassing articles that mention riot* as the distinction between a protest and a riot is usually one of lawlessness and/or violence. The “Neutral” categorization is still a form of bias -the protest paradigm- but one that is within the bounds of editorial norms. The “Negative” frame references the mention of antifa*, understood to be the most negative portrayal of protestors and an association with protests

supported with little evidence⁵. This claim originates from an antisemitic Q-anon conspiracy theory that Antifa and BLM are domestic terrorist organisations funded by George Soros, a billionaire philanthropist who is a common target of conspiracy theorists. The “violent far-left” narrative has been one that the far-right has been pushing since at least 2016, but with little mainstream success until now⁶. This type of narrative has been shown in the past to influence how “police perceive a social movement, what to expect on the ground, the tactics they deem necessary and, ultimately, how to police the event” (McCurdy 2012, p. 246). As all positive articles are included within the neutral category, the neutral count is actually the number of neutral returns minus the positive results.

Table 1

Framing Categories and Definitions and Their Respective Framing Operationalization

Framing Category and Definition	Framing Operationalization
<p>“Positive”</p> <p>“Positive” portrayal under the protest paradigm</p>	<p>{portland AND protest* NOT riot* NOT antifa* NOT "st louis" NOT “Maine”}</p>
<p>“Negative”</p> <p>Follows protest paradigm, portrayal of violence</p>	<p>{portland AND (protest* OR riot*) NOT antifa* NOT "st louis" NOT "Maine"}</p>

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/20b9b86dba5c480bad759a3bd34cd875>

⁶

<https://medium.com/dfrlab/the-disinformation-campaign-to-define-u-s-protesters-as-terrorists-3ea8db0a4881>

<p style="text-align: center;">“Neutral”</p> <p>Deviates from journalistic standards, partisan protest paradigm</p>	<p>{portland AND (protest* OR riot*) AND antifa* NOT "st louis" NOT "Maine"}</p>
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Qualitative Coding Determination

Using Media Cloud, a list of top words were generated from a sampling of 10,000 stories. Media Cloud has validated that the default sample size of 1,000 was representative of the entire set of results, but I chose to work with the larger sample size. Working off of the protest paradigm characteristics, I grouped the words into “positive”, “neutral”, and “negative”. Words that were used to characterize the protests as extremist, irrational, or otherwise lawless were coded as “negative”, while words that explained the greater context of the protests, or characterized them in a non-negative manner, were coded as positive. All other words were included in the “neutral” category. It is important to note that this coding is dependent on the issue being discussed and in order to deal with subjectivity any words that could be used in both a negative and positive manner were assumed to be neutral.

Findings

The results of this research will be presented in two steps: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative findings will give a general overview of the attention paid over time by each news outlet. The qualitative findings will be a breakdown of ordered word clouds and the frames employed by different news outlets.

Quantitative Findings

In order to analyze description bias, I first looked at Mainstream Media as a whole. I classified description bias as either “Positive”, “Neutral”, or “Negative” based on the parameters outlined in the methodology above. Table 2.1 shows the variation in description bias.

Table 2.1

Bivariate Analysis of News Ideology on Overall Description Bias Period 1

Variables % (N)	Positive Bias 52.5% (84)	Neutral Bias 30.0% (48)	Negative Bias 17.5 % (28)	Test	df	P. Value
<i>Outlet Period 1</i>				$\chi^2=23.28$	10	0.0098
Fox	33.33 (28)	58.33 (28)	64.29 (18)			
NYP	11.9 (10)	10.42 (5)	10.71 (3)			
CBS	5.95 (5)	4.17 (2)	7.14 (2)			
USA Today	25.00 (21)	4.17 (2)	0.00 (0)			
MSNBC	3.57 (3)	8.33 (4)	3.57 (1)			
NYT	20.24 (17)	14.58 (7)	14.29 (4)			
Ideological Slant 3 way				$\chi^2=15.70$	4	0.0035
Right	45.24 (38)	68.75 (33)	75.00 (21)			
Neutral	30.95 (26)	8.33 (4)	7.14 (2)			
Left	23.81 (20)	22.92 (11)	17.86 (5)			
Ideological Slant 2 way				$\chi^2=11.16$	2	0.0038
Right	45.24 (38)	68.75 (33)	75.00 (21)			
Left	54.76 (46)	31.25 (15)	25.00 (7)			

Most interesting is that Fox news alone is responsible for 64% of negative articles in the first period and for 58% of all “neutral” articles. The relationship between outlet and description bias is statistically significant ($p=.0097$). I also created an ideological slant variable based on the ideological leaning of each outlet as “Right”, “Neutral”, and “Left”. Furthermore, I also tested the relationship when compressing the outlets further as a dichotomy of “Right” and “Left”

where neutral outlets were grouped with the “Left”. I performed a Chi-square test on both the 3 way and 2 way slant in relation to description bias to find that both are statistically significant with p. values of .0035 and .0038 respectively. When compressed, Right wing outlets are responsible for 68.75% of neutral articles and for 75% of negative articles. The split between positive articles was less pronounced with left wing outlets providing 54.76% of articles while right wing outlets provided 45.24%.

The bias trends seen in period 1 only get more pronounced in period 2. Table 2.2 shows the variation in description bias.

Table 2.2

Bivariate Analysis of News Ideology on Overall Description Bias Period 2

Variables % (N)	Positive Bias 56.3% (409)	Neutral Bias 33.7% (245)	Negative Bias 9.91% (72)	Test	df	P. Value
<i>Outlet Period 2</i>				$\chi^2=116.5$	10	<0.0001
Fox	27.38 (112)	58.78 (144)	56.94 (41)			
NYP	10.76 (44)	16.73 (41)	20.83 (15)			
CBS	11.98 (49)	4.08 (10)	0.00 (0)			
USA Today	16.87 (69)	8.98 (22)	4.17 (3)			
MSNBC	11.25 (46)	0.82 (2)	2.78 (2)			
NYT	21.76 (89)	10.61 (26)	15.28 (11)			
Ideological Slant 3 way				$\chi^2=106.6$	4	<0.0001
Right	38.14 (156)	75.51 (185)	77.78 (56)			
Neutral	28.85 (118)	13.06 (32)	4.17 (3)			
Left	33.01 (135)	11.43 (28)	18.06 (13)			
Ideological Slant 2 way				$\chi^2=103.5$	2	<0.0001
Right	38.14 (156)	75.51 (185)	77.78 (56)			
Left	61.86 (253)	24.49 (60)	22.22 (16)			

The results of Chi-squared analysis results in p. values $<.0001$ for all three relationships. The divide between right and left wing outlets is even more pronounced with right wing outlets making up 75.51% of neutral articles and 77.78% of negative articles. In a departure from period 1, the coverage of positive articles is heavily skewed with left wing outlets putting out 61.86% of positive stories opposed to the right wing's 38.14% of positive stories.

The Mainstream Media source on Media Cloud consists of 22 news media sources. Following the assumptions laid out by Shultziner and Stukalin (2020), I would also “expect unbiased coverage to yield roughly similar coverage among market competitors” (Shultziner & Stukalin p.8). However, the relative attention paid to the protests varies greatly among news outlets. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate the relative attention paid to the Portland Protests over the first and second period respectively. The number of peaks and plateaus can help identify periods of steady or increased interest in a topic. In both months, Fox News has the highest peak as well as the largest number of articles most days. The largest peak in June follows closely after the killing of Rayshard Brooks on June 12th. The largest peak in July occurs on the same day that camera footage of unmarked vans picking up protestors first begins circulating on Twitter. There is also a period of zero stories published over four days from July 25th to July 28th that coincide with Federal Troop withdrawal from the area.

Figure 1.1

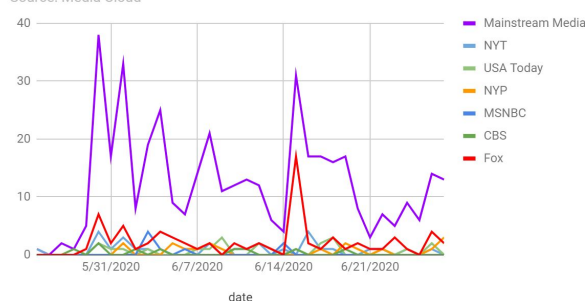
Daily Story Count Period 1

Figure 1.2

Daily Story Count Period 2

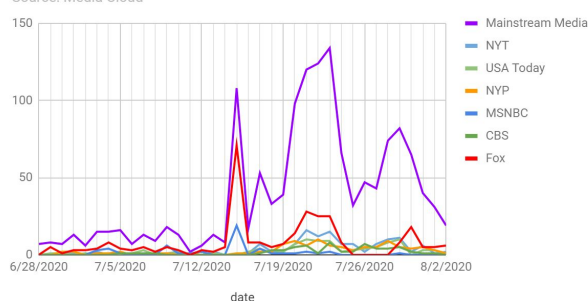
Portland Story Count 5/25-6/27

Source: Media Cloud



Portland Story Count 6/28-8/2

Source: Media Cloud



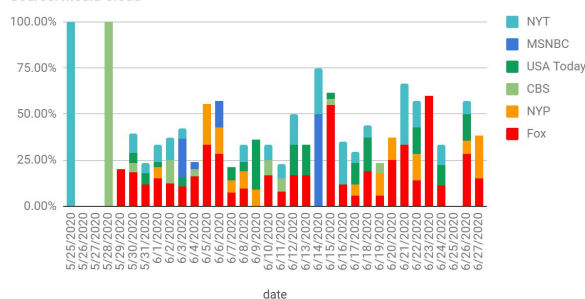
Using the “Mainstream Media” as the total, each of the news outlets was plotted as a percentage of the total articles published each day. In the first and second period, Fox News made up the greatest percentage of the entire mainstream media. In the first period, Fox News was responsible for 50% or more of the stories for two of the days, and 25% or more of them for four days. In the second, Fox News was responsible for 50% or more of the stories five of the days, and 25% or more for seven of the days.

Figure 1.3

*Count as a Percentage of the Mainstream
Media Period 1*

Mainstream Media Coverage Breakdown 5/25-6/27

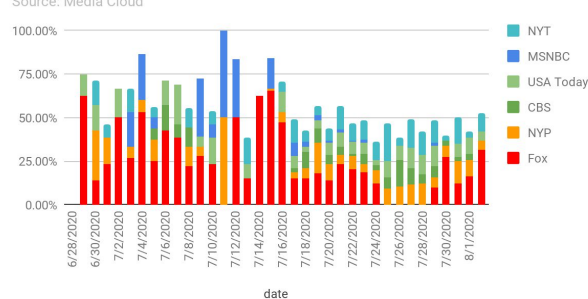
Source: Media Cloud

**Figure 1.4**

*Count as a Percentage of the Mainstream
Media Period 2*

Mainstream Media Coverage Breakdown 6/28-8/2

Source: Media Cloud



When looking at the Mainstream Media by frame category, the protest paradigm can be observed in action. Following the initial surge of protests following the murder of George Floyd, news coverage initially spiked on the 30th in Figure 2.1. Following a few days of “neutral” dominant reporting, “positive” reporting became the most used frame for the rest of the first period. In the second period, figure 2.2, save for a spike on the 26th when “neutral” stories outnumbered “positive” stories, “positive” stories were the most common.

Figure 2.1

*Mainstream Media Story Count by Frame
Period 1*

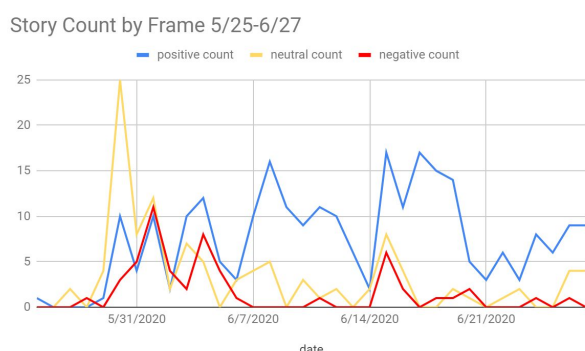
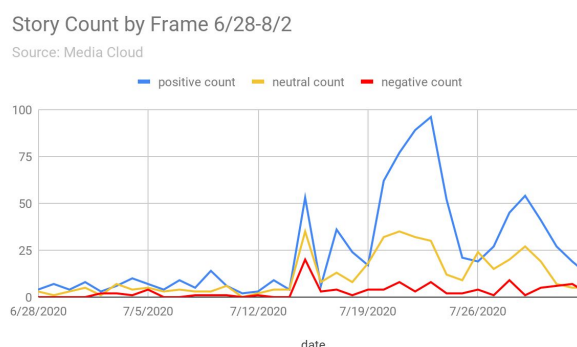


Figure 2.2

*Mainstream Media Story Count by Frame
Period 2*

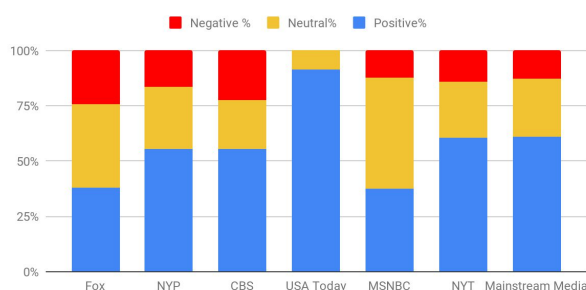


Looking at the framing breakdown over each time period, partisan media bias becomes apparent. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 show that although MSNBC and Fox News have similar proportions of “positive stories” in the first period, they become polar opposites in the second, with MSNBC leading with 92% positive stories in the second period, as opposed to only 37.71% for Fox. It is interesting to note that while partisan differences were less pronounced in the first period, they became worse as time went on. In general, “right” media was more critical in the second period vs the first, while “left” and “center” media were generally more positive in their framing in the second period as opposed to the first.

Figure 2.3*Outlet Framing Breakdown Period 1*

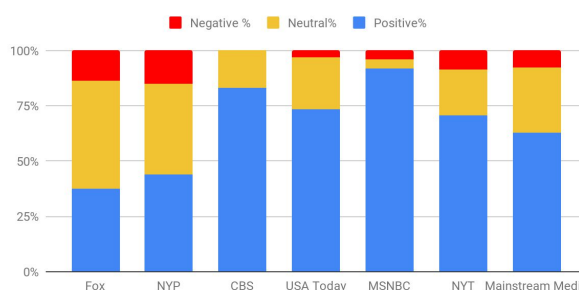
Framing Breakdown 5/25-6/27

Source: Media Cloud

**Figure 2.4***Outlet Framing Breakdown Period 2*

Framing Breakdown 6/28-8/2

Source: Media Cloud



Considering that news outlets are limited in their output, the percentage of stories relative to their total published are an illuminating statistic as well. Though the bias considerations outlined by Shultziner and Stukalin (2020) work well for newspapers, a different set of standards must be considered for online news media sites. In figures 3.1 and 3.2 , mainstream media averaged 0.38% of its attention over the first period while averaging 1.62% over the second period. Fox News averaged 0.96% over the first and 3.68% over the second period. Fox news also peaked at 5.98% in the first period, and 15.38% in the second period. Fox News also had a period of 4 days where no stories were published regarding Portland. This coincides with the

withdrawal of federal troops from Portland. While there was a relative decrease in output for all sources around this period, Fox’s sudden drop to zero attention for several days is noteworthy.

Figure 3.1

Percentage of Daily Output that Covered the Portland Protests Period 1

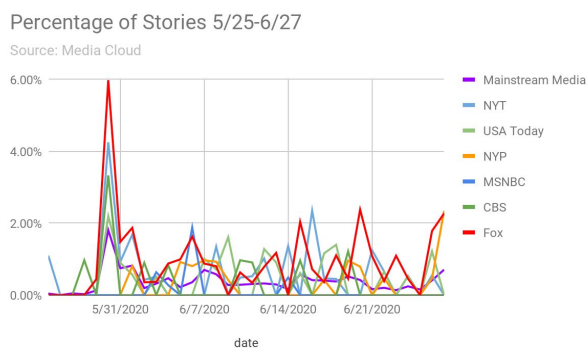
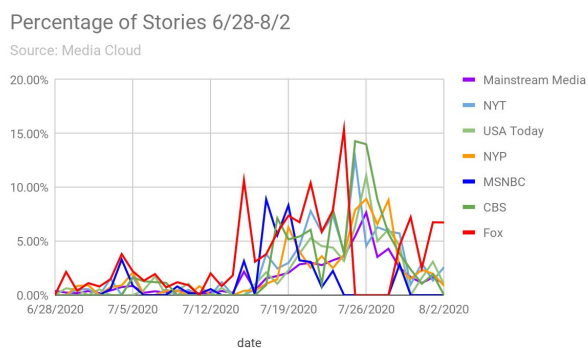


Figure 3.2

Percentage of Daily Output that Covered the Portland Protests Period 2

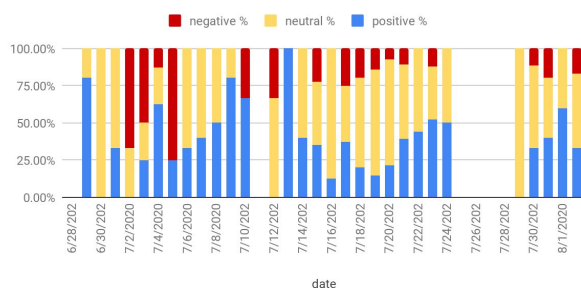


Looking at the 2nd period by day, differences in coverage are more pronounced. While Fox only has six days with no coverage in Figure 4.1, CBS has 16 days with no coverage Figure 4.2, and MSNBC has 20 in the same period, Figure 4.3. As far as the employment of the “negative” frame, Fox employs it on 16 of the days, while MSNBC uses it twice. Use of the “neutral” frame is also markedly different, with 27 days for Fox, seven days for CBS, and two for MSNBC. Figure 4.4 shows the framing breakdown for the “Mainstream Media” source to illustrate the overall framing trends that are occurring.

Figure 4.1*Fox Frame Breakdown Period 2*

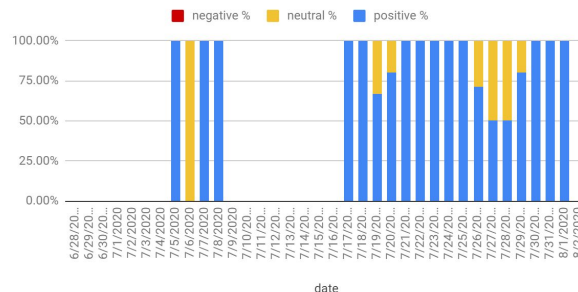
Fox Framing Breakdown

Source: Media Cloud

**Figure 4.2***CBS Frame Breakdown Period 2*

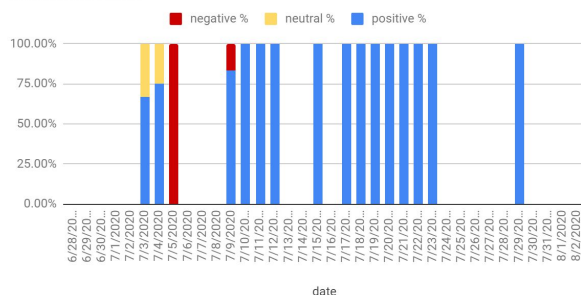
CBS Framing Breakdown

Source: Media Cloud

**Figure 4.3***MSNBC Frame Breakdown**Period 2***Figure 4.4***Mainstream Media Frame Breakdown**Period 2*

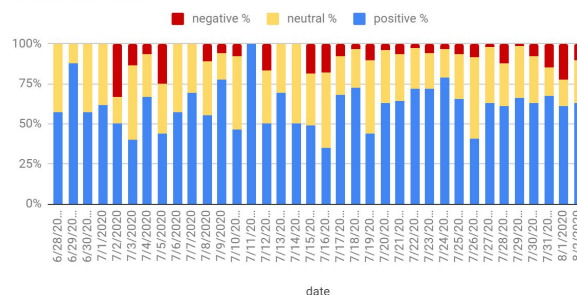
MSNBC Framing Breakdown

Source: Media Cloud



Mainstream Media Framing Breakdown

Source: Media Cloud



Qualitative Findings

Media Cloud also has a Top Words tool that enables the creation of ordered word clouds based on a sample of the stories. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the top words used based on a sample of 10,000 stories generated from the “catch-all” search. Notable differences include the Right having Portland as their top word, followed by protest, while the Left has the opposite. The third word for the Right is “riot” with both the roots “violent” and “violenc” making appearances as well in the seventh and ninth spots. The other words include “courthous”, “trump”, “demonstr”, “mayor”, “ore”, and “oregon”. The third word for the Left however, is “trump”, and the words “riot”, “violent”, and “violenc” do not make the top ten at all. Instead, we see the words “floyd”, “tear”, and “deploy” come up instead. The word “homeland” is also included in the left instead of ore.

Figure 5.1

Top Words Right Period 2

Figure 5.2

Top Words Left Period 2

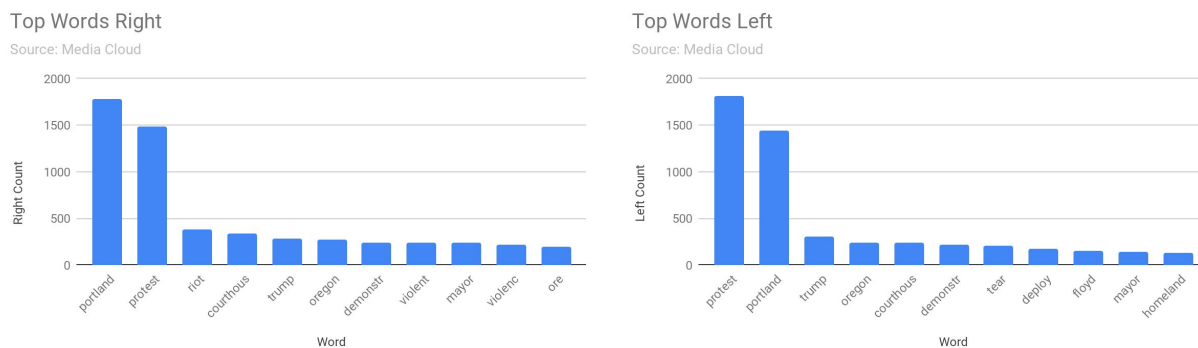
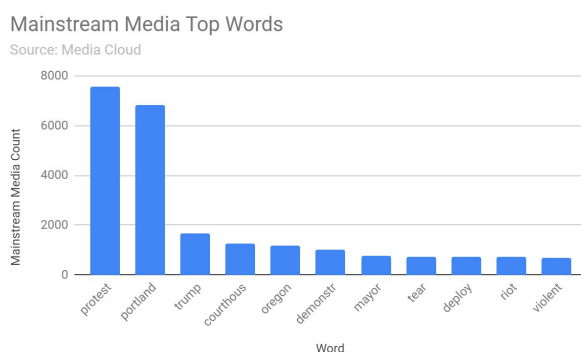


Figure 5.3

Top Words Mainstream Media Period 2



While it is not surprising that “portland” and “protest” make up the first two words for the left and right, it is interesting to note that they are reversed. The prevalence of words like “riot”, “violent”, and “violenc” all indicate the protest paradigm at work, but their notable absence in the Left indicates that this protest paradigm is partisan in nature. This is further bolstered by the fact that “floyd” is noticeably absent from the Right’s top ten, indicating that the focus is on the representation of protestors as violent over the greater context of the protests. The presence of “tear”, “floyd”, and “homeland”, indicates that there is a greater attempt at a thematic portrayal of the protests by the “Left wing” media. Tear can refer to tear gas and tear down, but the majority of use was around variants of tear gas. Thanks to the word in context tool

on Media Cloud, I was able to look at these words based on a random sample of 1000 sentence fragments. By seeing the words before and after each of these top words, I was able to determine the general context of how they were being used.

Figure 5.3 shows that the “mainstream media” top words are more or less a reflection of the “left” top words, with “riot” and “violent” taking the ninth and tenth spots. Table 2.1 shows the coded results for the top 100 words, split by quartile, for the “Left” “Right” and “Mainstream Media”. The second quartile has the largest difference with no positive words for the right, and three for the left. While this approach does give some insight into the relative bias present, the relative positioning and frequency of words must be considered independently.

Table 2.1

Top Words Coded Quartiles Left, Right, and Mainstream Media

1st Quartile	Positive	Negative	Neutral	2nd Quartile	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Left	4	5	16	Left	3	6	17
Right	4	5	16	Right	0	7	19
Mainstream Media	4	4	17	Mainstream Media	2	6	18
3rd Quartile	Positive	Negative	Neutral	4th Quartile	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Left	2	4	20	Left	0	5	21
Right	3	6	17	Right	1	3	22
Mainstream Media	3	5	18	Mainstream Media	1	3	22

In Table 2.2, the Positive and Negative coded words have been listed out along with the reason why they were positive/negative as opposed to neutral. Instead of indicating whether each passage or article was positive or negative, I instead looked at the general word use and frequency according to ideological slant. While the relative positioning of words can be quite similar for some words, like “protesters” (1,2) and still differ greatly in their frequency (1817

counts vs 1490counts), a more extreme case can be made for other words. For example, the words “racism” and “injustice” both show up in the 3rd quartile for the left, but rank below 170 for the right. Frequent use over time implies the dominance of that narrative frame, and the differences between the left and right are obvious.

Table 2.2

Top Words Coding Breakdown, Ranking, and Count: Left and Right

Word (Rank L/R)	Count (L/R)	Coding Reason		Count (L/R)	Coding Reason
Positive			Negative		
protesters (1/2)	(1817/1444)	contextualizes protestors	riots (21/3)	(87/378)	negatively represents protestors
moms (35/64)	(50/40)		rioters (78/15)	(28/149)	
activists (37/72)	(45/37)		antifa (190/39)	(19/59)	
protestors (169/78)	(14/34)		anarchists (30/37)	(59/60)	
democratic (26/20)	(68/126)	right to protest	unrest (25/18)	(69/128)	lawless/destructive /distructive
floyd (9/12)	(154/180)	contextualizes protests	fires (67/47)	(31/54)	
george (12/13)	(128/172)		clashes (17/28)	(102/81)	
racism (62/171)	(32/16)		arrests (47/34)	(39/63)	
injustice (59/177)	(33/16)		vandalism (92/53)	(25/48)	
brutality (23/61)	(76/42)		looting (170, 62)	(14/41)	
			chaos (174, 71)	(14/37)	
			lawlessness (143/80)	(16/33)	
			crime (56/35)	(34/62)	
			custody (91/48)	(26/53)	
			disperse (38/51)	(44/50)	
			criminal (55/67)	(36/40)	
			mob (125/94)	(18/28)	violence
			weapons (119/97)	(18/27)	

			violent (15/10)	(127/243)	
			violence (10/14)	(116/218)	

It is important to note that differences are more pronounced for words higher up in the list. While “riots” ranks 21st in the left wing media, it is third in the right wing media. This 18 rank difference translates into a count of 87 for the left and 378 for the right. The word “moms” on the other hand, has a similar rank difference of 19, but has a count of 50 and 40 respectively. Words like “anarchists” however, have nearly no difference in count, despite a ranking difference of seven. Distinct differences in ranking and/or count can indicate partisan media bias and should be analyzed accordingly. The determination of whether a word qualifies as “positive” or “negative” requires an intimate understanding of how the word is used both historically and in the context of the media piece. For example, I coded the words “violent” and “violence” as negative in this study as they have been used in the past to delegitimize protests through the protest paradigm. However, this is not to say that the use of the word “violent” should always be considered a negative. Use of the word in the context of “systemic violence against protestors” means something very different from “antifa violence continues.” The nuances of language make it difficult to determine clear cut lines for coding different words as always positive or negative, but their usage in the journalistic context is driven by clear patterns and standards. While it may be difficult to determine a metric for measuring the degree to which a network exhibits bias as a whole, ideological network bias in a partisan protest paradigm can be seen through a comparison of the language used within the context of the topic.

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 help illustrate some interesting observations regarding the output of each source. For each graph, the “Positive”, “Neutral”, and “Negative” counts are on the left axis and the “Total”, “Stories per day*”, “Stories per day**”, and “Peak Total” are on the right axis.

Note that “Stories per day*” refers to the average output for the source over time and “Stories per day**” is the average output for the source during the period. Several observations stand out regarding Fox News. One is the total output on the topic relative to the average daily output for the period. Fox is the only network to have its total output on the topic surpass its “Stories per day**”. While all sources had an increase in total output on the topic, with Fox having the lowest relative increase at 4x with CBS leading at 6.5x, these do not tell the whole story. Important to note is that the starting point for these values is vastly different. While Fox news, USA Today, and the New York Times have a relatively similar “Stories per day*”, in the first period, Fox news was already outputting more than double the number of stories. Fox’s peak attention is 33.9% of their average daily output for period 2, vs period 1 where it was only 6.8%. It is also interesting to note that this massive increase in interest regarding this topic was not followed by a likewise increase in total output for the period, even though the second period was two days longer than the first, Fox averaged around 42 fewer stories a day, which comes out to a difference of over 1400 stories over the period. These observations are significant considering that the relative output capacity of a source should not change too drastically over time, and large mobilization of resources implies either an important topic or bias depending on the degree and consistency of resource use. Seeing an increase in attention across the board implies that the topic is an important one, and does not necessarily mean that there is partisan media bias. However, a significant difference in resource mobilization can indicate PMB.

Figure 6.1

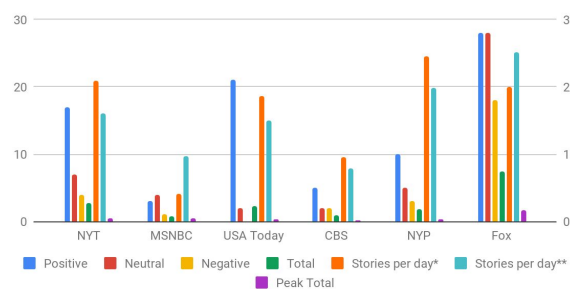
Output and Attention by Outlet Period 1

Figure 6.2

Output and Attention by Outlet Period 2

Output and Attention Period 1

Source: Media Cloud



Note: * Average of daily output for the source

** Average of daily output over the period

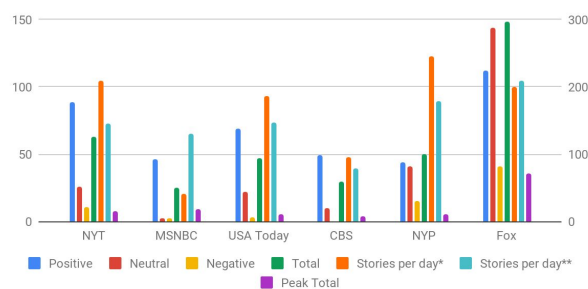
Positive, Neutral, and Negative are on the Left Axis

Total, Stories per day*, Stories per day**, and Peak

Total are on the Right Axis.

Output and Attention Period 2

Source: Media Cloud



Note: * Average of daily output for the source

** Average of daily output over the period

Positive, Neutral, and Negative are on the Left Axis

Total, Stories per day*, Stories per day**, and Peak

Total are on the Right Axis.

Figures 6.3 and 6.4 look at the average daily output of each source for periods 1 and 2. The “Positive Average”, “Neutral Average”, and “Negative Average” are graphed on the left axis, while the “Total Average”, “Peak Positive”, “Peak Neutral”, and “Peak Negative” are on the right axis. It is interesting to note that all firms had their highest peak in period 2 for the “positive” frame, while the two “right wing” sources were the only ones to deviate from this trend. The NYP had equal peaks for the “Positive” and “Neutral” frames while Fox news had a higher “Neutral” framing peak. Considering that the “Neutral” frame is still a negative characterization of protestors under the protest paradigm, this indicates a negative framing overall for the “right wing” sources.

Figure 6.3

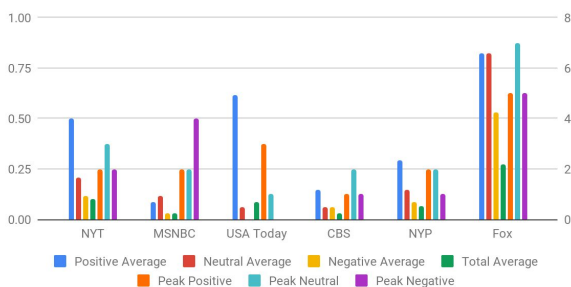
*Average Daily Output and Peak Count by
Outlet Period 1*

Figure 6.4

*Average Daily Output and Peak Count by
Outlet Period*

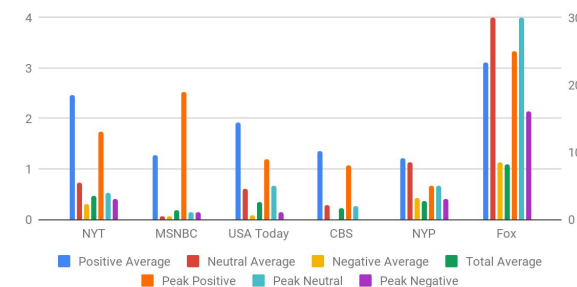
Daily Output and Peak Count by Frame: Period 1

Source: Media Cloud



Daily Output and Peak Count by Frame: Period 2

Source: Media Cloud



Conclusion

The results of this study provide interesting insights on the topic of Partisan Media Bias as well as the Protest Paradigm. Notably, it confirms Hypothesis 1 in confirming that PMB is employed when a news outlet departs from its market competitors based on ideology. It also confirms Hypothesis 2 by showing that a news outlets ideological slant will also determine the language used to describe an event. Contrary to previous theories that implied an overall bias that applied to the media as a whole, this study instead treats each individual news outlet as its own independent entity. This is significant because while early research into the protest paradigm suggested that protest tactics change the way that the media interacts with protests, more recent studies, and this one, indicate that an outlet’s ideology is likely a larger factor in determining how a protest will be covered (Cillia & McCurdy, 2020; Lee, 2014; Shahin et al., 2016; Shultziner & Stukalin, 2020; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). The results of this study also indirectly show that the protest paradigm is largely still in effect in the “Mainstream Media” due to the “positive” frame being a general cutoff for positive protest coverage. It is important to note that this study only works with words and articles published online. Future studies on Partisan Media Bias can look at so many other production mechanisms and description biases. For example, an online article can have pictures and videos to accompany it, television news is accompanied by a

screen full of other headlines and pieces of information, and like a newspaper, the front page of a news website is valuable space while a television segment only has so many minutes to spare.

In order to determine whether or not the protest paradigm is in effect, the overall article must be analyzed in detail in order to determine how the protest was covered. While an article may not use the words “riot” or “rioters” to describe protestors, the article still may be employing an “episodic framing” where the greater contexts of police brutality, racism, and the right to peaceably assemble are not being discussed. This is supported by the relatively low ranking of words like “brutality”, “racism”, and “injustice” for the left. Had the protest paradigm not been in effect in the “Left-wing” media, we should see a much higher mention of these keywords that would be covering the greater thematic significance of these events. However, this study was not designed to test whether or not the protest paradigm was being employed across the entire mainstream media landscape, but rather to see if the protest paradigm was in effect according to the ideological slants of the media outlets themselves.

While partisan media bias is concerning in itself, there are other worrying signifiers that partisanship even affects how an individual reacts to information. Prior studies have shown that an individual’s political affiliation supersedes objective climatic conditions in shaping their opinions on climate change (Marquart-Pyatt et al., 2014). A study by Peterson and Iyengar (2020) found that “partisans seek out information with congenial slant and sincerely adopt inaccurate beliefs that cast their party in a favorable light”, which supports the findings by Pew that show partisan polarization in the media that they trust and distrust (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Partisans even differ in their perceptions of violent and nonviolent protest, with self-identified Republicans perceiving higher levels of violence when a disliked group is protesting. While self-identified Democrats did not show this type of polarization, Republicans had the strongest

perceptions of violence for the least disruptive tactics (Hsiao & Radnitz, 2020). A survey by Pew Research Center showed that among white Republicans and Democrats, there was a significant difference in how they perceived the News Media and Trump's perspectives on demonstrations to protest the death of George Floyd. While 76% of white Republicans thought Trump's message was mostly or completely right, 94% of white Democrats believed that the messaging was mostly or completely wrong (Mitchell et al., 2020).

The solution to Partisan Media Bias is not as simple as representing "both sides" of an issue, as this is not only a false representation of most issues but also a continuation of the episodic framing that plagued news media even before Partisan Media Bias became so prevalent. A 2004 study found that adherence to "balanced reporting" actually led to biased coverage of climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Boykoff and Boykoff also found that "adherence to first-order journalistic norms – personalization, dramatization, and novelty – significantly influence the employment of second-order norms – authority-order and balance – and that this has led to informationally deficient mass-media coverage of" climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

There are also very real consequences to partisan protest coverage, a study found that the "media's exaggerated and sensational construction of anti-capitalist protesters as 'folk devils' has enabled the police to preemptively justify the use of strict and often questionable policing tactics" (McCurdy 2012 p.245). The overwhelmingly negative coverage of protesters by right wing media has dual effects of both mischaracterizing them, which delegitimizes their movement, but also works to justify the actions taken by the government against protesters. While it is unlikely that people would support the mobilization of federal troops to control

relatively peaceful protests, justifying their use becomes easier when protests are not only seen as violent but organized terrorism.

In light of this information, I hope that future studies and theories regarding bias will be more cognizant of the inherent complexities of issues and the world. Complex identities and issues are compressed as false binaries and dichotomies to where even non-political topics are now partisan issues. While it is easy to condemn right-wing media as the source of all negative bias, solving partisan media bias is only part of the solution. While it is important to deal with partisan media bias, solving media bias is not what should be strived for at all, as bias cannot be completely eliminated, nor should elimination of bias be the goal. Instead, episodic framing should be dealt with instead to better situate topics within the complex world and systems they exist in. For example, while coverage of the BLM protests following the death of Michael Brown was found to follow the protest paradigm, local coverage of Ferguson and Charlottesville found that social media discourse tempered the effects of the protest paradigm (Ismail et al., 2019; Leopold & Bell, 2017). Another study found that social media users might prefer more legitimizing coverage of protesters than traditionally offered by mainstream media (Harlow et al., 2017). While the initial mainstream media response to the Portland protests resembled the generalized protest paradigm (Figure 2.1), over time the general narrative adjusted to a less negative framing.

In order to restore faith in news media, journalists, editors, and owners must take it upon themselves to improve. Instead of offering oppositional messaging, outlets should work to offer complete thematic coverage of issues. While this is a higher standard than the current norm of episodic reporting, it is what has to be done. Take for example protest coverage. While it may be easy to disparage the tea party as a “left-wing” news outlet, it does little to provide greater

context nor does it do anything to inspire trust in reporting for conservative viewers. The answer to Fox News and its partisan media bias is not more biased reporting from the opposite side, but rather adherence to higher standards of reporting. The effects of partisan media bias are apparent, as Republicans and Democrats have fundamentally different perspectives on nearly every topic.

While a difference of opinion is healthy and vital for a Democracy, not all topics or issues need to be situated along a “Right-Left” binary. The right to protest is an American one, the fight for universal healthcare is also non-partisan, and the environment is lived in by everyone, not just those in your political party. Stopping a global pandemic is a matter of public health, not patriotism. Thematic framing must be done sooner rather than later, as current developments in politics indicate that not only is partisan media consumption is on the rise but so is the continued breakdown of trust in institutions like the media and science on the right. In 2020, everything from the existence of the pandemic, to the details of the pandemic bills, to wearing a mask, and even the supposed legality of public health mandates has become political. Conspiracy theories like Qanon continue to rise in popularity on Twitter and Facebook with a Qanon Republican candidate even winning a House seat in Georgia this past election (King, 2020). As more Americans lose trust in the media and turn to alternative sources of news or just stop paying attention to the news altogether, these partisan divisions can only grow wider.

One final thing to consider is the monetary barrier to news. While many news sites are supported by ads, many others are supported through subscriptions. Of the 6 news media sites I looked at for this study, only the New York Times had a subscription block to their content. All other sites had either free access supported by ads, or an ad free subscription available for purchase. This is an important distinction as one of the important features of television news was its accessibility. With the proliferation of online news and alternative media like blogs and social

networking sites, the lines between types of media are becoming less important and many only turn to sources of information that reinforce what they believe in. Access to quality news reporting needs to be provided for free as well, the BBC is a great example of this.

Partisan media bias is a serious concern, but other framing issues will continue to persist under the current norms of episodic framing. Universal healthcare is still generally lampooned by the mainstream media and the political elite as costly and choice removing, despite popular approval among the general population and research showing its cost saving benefits (Galvani & Fitzpatrick, 2020; NW et al., n.d.). Note that approval for single payer varied among partisans, with only 34% of Republicans supporting either a single payer or mixed program as opposed to 88% of Democrats. Despite this partisan gap, popular approval still saw an increase from 59% to 63% overall from 2019 to 2020. Even among republicans, there was a 4% increase in approval for either a single payer or mixed program.

In an ideal and healthy news media environment, issues need to be framed thematically. Instead of presenting universal healthcare as a loss of choice in healthcare options, or a loss to insurance companies, it should be instead situated within the complex sociopolitical climate that it resides in. Instead of framing protesters in a negative fashion depending on whether or not they are on “our side”, all protests should be framed within the context of what they are protesting against. No issue should be simplified to a false left-right dichotomy, and nothing should be beyond scrutiny.

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