Protest Language in the News
Final Project for Data in Linguistics course
Authors: Susie Webb and Claire Bradley

Research Question:
How do newspapers in cities with differing political leanings use language associated with violence and non-violence when reporting on Black Lives Matter protests in the immediate wake of the murder of George Floyd?

Introduction:
        We are in an era where police brutality and systematic racism are ever prevalent. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 set off a series of national and international protests calling for justice and reform, but even today these problems still persist.
        Newspapers across the country were responsible for covering the widespread protests in that summer of 2020 — forcing many newsrooms to make decisions about how to justly report on the demonstrations taking place. Not all made the right calls. So many headlines were published in newspapers ranging from national to local, liberal to conservative that perpetuated the use of violence-associated words like "rioter" and "mob" in reference to Black Lives Matter protests.
        In this report, we seek to understand the prevalence of violence-associated words in reference to Black Lives Matter protests in the two-week period following the murder of George Floyd. While there have been some news reports and editorials on the usage of "protestor" versus "rioter" by mainstream news outlets, there has yet to be comprehensive research on the prevalence of violence-associated words and their impact on readers. This report seeks to address that fissure in the research.

Background:
        Language is powerful, and the words used by news outlets to describe Black Lives Matter protests are important. George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020 which sparked outrage across the country and fueled global protests. Across different news outlets in different regions, many words were used to describe these Black Lives Matter protests. These words include protestor, rioter, mob, rally, vigil, demonstrator, etc. There is a great difference in the reader's interpretation of the word "protestor" versus "rioter." Protestor is a more neutral term, while rioter is associated with violence. Scrolling through a series of news articles about dangerous mobs taking over the town conveys a very different message than scrolling through a series of news articles about peaceful protests and vigils. In their distinction among these different words, news organizations are able to influence how the reader interprets different demonstrations. This power can be dangerous.
        In June, 2020 the AP Stylebook — which outlines style rules for newspapers across the country — updated its guidance to include the capitalization of the word "Black." It also includes guidance on the usage of different demonstration-related words. "Use care in deciding which term best applies," the book outlines.
        Across the course of history, Black people have been disproportionately associated with violence in the news media landscape. One of the main reasons there was such strong demand for Black newspapers during the turn of the twentieth century is because the only time Black

people would be covered in the white newspapers of the time would be among the connotations of violence. The Black press emerges to fill this niche and tell stories of Black achievements, pride, and joy. Those problems of Blackness being associated with violence, though, are still prevalent in the language choices that modern newspapers make.

We wanted to compare two similar cities with pretty extreme opposite political leanings (within the top 15 most polarized in ideology compared to other US cities). Through our research we found that Portland, Oregon ranks as the 12th most liberal city in the US and has a population around 600,000 people (World Population Review). Oklahoma City, OK ranks as the 2nd most conservative city and also has a population of about 600,000 people (Politico). The two main newspapers in each city — *The Oregonian* and *The Oklahoman* — are also both similar sizes; however, *The Oregonian* is perceived as a very liberal newspaper while *The Oklahoman* is perceived as more conservative.

The protests in Portland gained national attention for their size and intensity. Thousands of participants flooded the streets for weeks on end fighting against police brutality. These protests gained a reputation across the country and in national news outlets of being some of the most violent protests in the nation. In Oklahoma City, the Black Lives Matter protests were not nearly at the same scope, but were still highly prevalent in the city. Several different demonstrations took place across Oklahoma City that garnered national news media coverage.

This research paper analyzes the prevalence of violence-associated words versus non-violence associated words between these two papers.

Methods:

To gain better insight into the differences in language used to describe protest we formed a Google Search query to narrow down the articles we planned to use in our analysis. We searched the term "George Floyd" from both newspaper websites across the dates May 25th-June 7th 2020. These dates were selected to include the day George Floyd was murdered through the first week of June when there were the most protests. We excluded galleries to focus on pieces with more text and opinion pieces to narrow focus to the more typical voice of the newspaper. This querying left us with 57 articles from *The Oregonian* and 52 from *The Oklahoman* from which we created a loop in R programming language to run through each URL and scrape the body text of the article. The text was combined from all the articles of each newspaper leaving us with two separate vectors of text so we were able to run the analysis.

The terms we used were based on the researcher's prior knowledge from reading and listening to reporting on protests. In addition, we skimmed some articles from both newspapers to expand and finalize the list. We grouped our terms into two categories, non-violent and associated with violence. Non-violent terms consisted of "protest(or)(s)," "demonstrat(or)(ion)(s)," "march(er)(s)," "vigil(s)," and "peaceful." Protest terminology with violent connotations consisted of "angry", "violent," "instigator(s)," "loot(er)(s)," 'riot(er)(s)," "mob(ster)(s)," "radical," "extremist(s)," "far-right," and "far-left."

Once the regular expressions were formed to include all the variations of these words, we used R to run a directional proportions test to understand the significance of the difference in proportions of violent versus nonviolent protest words used in both newspapers. The directional proportions test used the input alternative = "greater" meaning we were testing whether the proportions of the violent words out of total protest words were significantly greater in The Oklahoman than The Oregonian.

Results:

   Our findings were that the percentage of violent/total protest words in *The Oklahoman* *were* 12.9% while the percentage in *The Oregonian* was 10.7%. The two-sample aspect of the test, comparing these percentages together, was not significant (p >.05 on one degree of freedom), therefore we cannot reject the null hypothesis. The chi-square value was .806 with a 95 percent confidence interval of -.0175-1.0.

```
X-squared = 0.80616, df = 1, p-value = 0.1846
alternative hypothesis: greater
95 percent confidence interval:
 -0.01750553  1.00000000
sample estimates:
    prop 1     prop 2
0.1291391 0.1070912
```

Figure 1. Proportions Test Results

   Our study faced some limitations making an opportunity for future research to build out the understanding of protest language used in newspapers should they address these. Some of the articles in *The Oregonian* may have been subscriber exclusive, meaning that when the loop in R attempted to scrape the text, only part of the article could be captured. In addition, due to the timeframe and scale of the project, we did not include article headlines, gallery articles featuring photos and captions and opinion pieces. With these limitations in mind, these pieces still include protest language that is reaching an audience and having an impact, therefore in future work, collecting more total articles and including these aspects could lead to a more robust analysis. While our findings were not significant in this study, likely as a result of a sample size of articles that was too small for one or both of the newspapers, the percentages show that there was still a fair amount of use of violent terminology when talking about protest.

Conclusion:

   Though there were more non-violence associated words used than violence-associated words, the impact of those violence-associated words is significant. It was not surprising that *The Oklahoman*, which is a more conservative newspaper, did use some violence-associated words in its news coverage. This aligns with trends among more national news organizations, like Fox News, that tend to use more conservative language when referring to Black Lives Matter protests (Hoffman). Interestingly, though, there were still violence-associated words present in *The Oregonian*, even if it is perceived as a fairly liberal news source. Even in cities considered liberal, there is still racialized language used. More progressive states should not be spared from having to consciously address their racial prejudices.

   Bias in the news media landscape has become a very strong point of debate recently. While some forms of bias are easier to recognize than others, even minor word choices have a strong impact. There is a lot of widespread mistrust in the journalism industry, and the only way that the news industry can build back that trust with the community it serves is by ensuring it is being just and fair in its coverage. Newspapers play an important role in building an informed community, but if they are spreading racialized terms and overly associating Blackness with violence, they are only contributing to creating an ignorant, hate-filled base. Journalists and editors must push back against this to ensure justice in news coverage.

Works Cited

Associated Press Stylebook. (2020). Retrieved from https://www.apstylebook.com/

Hoffman, Halie. *Biased Narratives in the Media: Coverage of Fatal Shootings During Black Lives Matter Demonstrations*. Inquiries Journal, vol. 14, no. 4, 2022.

Lerner, A. B. (2014, September 17). *A tour of America's most conservative cities*. POLITICO Magazine. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/09/americas-most-conservative-cities-111082/

Most Liberal Cities 2022. World Population Review. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-city-rankings/most-liberal-cities

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, news, politics and sports. The Oklahoman. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.oklahoman.com/

Oregon local news, breaking news, Sports & Weather. The Oregonian. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.oregonlive.com/