



Distorting the News? The Mechanisms of Partisan Media Bias and Its Effects on News Production

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Abstract

Integrating scholarship from several fields of study, this paper proposes a new model for understanding how partisan bias operates and how to measure its effects. We chart the factors that influence partisan bias over news production within news organizations that are simultaneously constrained and conditioned by factors of market competition, context considerations and journalistic norms. We argue that partisan media bias of a news-story is expressed in the manner that different news outlets cover the same political story within the same timeframe relative to one another. We find that description bias is a key parameter that is intertwined with selection bias mechanisms that highlight and downplay news items according to their content. We illustrate how partisan media coverage occurs in the context of a major political protest in Israel. We employ a dataset consisting of 1556 news products from all major newspapers. We find that partisan bias finds its strongest expression in the types of news products that the news outlets emphasize on their front-page and in the sizing of articles. These mechanisms of partisan bias can be generalized in the study of partisan bias in other types of news outlets.

Keywords Partisan media bias · Partisan coverage · News imbalance · News production · Protest coverage · Social movements and media

Democracy requires a vibrant media environment that provides the public with reliable news, is committed to the truthful representation of reality based on checked facts, and delivers relevant and accurate stories about politics. These objectives are normally achieved by a diversified and decentralized news market, by competition

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among news outlets over newsworthy stories, and by a professional ethos of objectivity among journalists. In recent years, however, the general public, political leaders and scholars have increasingly charged that the media is politically and ideologically motivated.

Partisan media bias, henceforth PMB for short, is a political or ideological slanting of the news in a way that favors, criticizes, emphasizes or ignores certain political actors, policies, events or topics. PMB may be a systematic ideological bias according to left-right positions in a certain political system (Grosseclose and Milyo 2005a, p. 306). PMB can also be applied to a specific politician or event *despite* their ideological affiliation, e.g., when a right-wing outlet that supports a right-wing prime minister attacks a right-wing politician who poses a threat to the prime minister. Partisan bias may include emphasizing positive facts about a politician, party, events or topic, and may also include omitting damaging or critical facts about the same.

This paper proposes an approach to explain what PMB is, how it operates, and how to measure it. One key problem with the concept of bias is the question: “bias *relative* to what”? (Puglisi and Snyder 2015a, p. 648). Instead of searching for criteria of balanced news and objective baselines against which to measure PMB (Grosseclose 2011; Hopmann et al. 2012), we argue that PMB is expressed in the manner that market competitors cover the same political story within the same timeframe *relative* to one another (see also Puglisi and Snyder 2015a). Our assumption of bias is that professional considerations are generally similar among news market competitors and dictate the newsworthiness of events and the content of the story. That is why news market competitors often produce similar content when covering the same story at the same time (e.g., car accidents). The advantage of this approach is that it holds various factors and considerations of newsworthiness and media routines constant while teasing out the news outlet’s differing political orientation toward a specific story at a specific time, where such exists. In addition, this work contributes to the literature on media coverage of protest movements (Rohlinger et al. 2012). It does so by examining how the different political orientations of the major Israeli newspapers affected their reports on the 2011 Occupy movement, a social justice protest movement which challenged the government and the social and economic status quo.

We find that media outlets account for the variability in description bias (i.e., content). We also find that one newspaper, *Israel Hayom*, was an outlier relative to its three market competitors in every measure. Our findings suggest that media organizations apply PMB to news production in two ways: (1) by selecting articles according to their content type; (2) by applying editorial discretion to emphasize or downplay articles according to their content. The latter is carried out primarily through decisions about front-page placement and sizing of articles.

Studies of Partisan Media Bias

The literature on PMB had seen interesting developments over the last few decades (Lichter 2017). Increasingly from the 1980s, one line of research has argued that the media is conservative, preserves the status quo and focuses on superficial news and

infotainment. This literature argues that media products are the result of a concentrated media market that is guided by the interests of major corporations and political elites (Alterman 2002; Bagdikian 1985; Ehrlich 1995; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 2003; Smith et al. 2001, p. 1403).

Studies of PMB have gradually developed since the 1990 s (Groeling and Kernell 1998, p. 1063). Patterson and Donsbach (1996) found that journalists in the US, UK, Italy, Germany and Sweden self-identify as slightly left-of-center and more liberal than the news organizations in which they work. They found that the strength of partisanship identity “can and does intrude on news decisions” unconsciously (Ibid: 466). Studies of personal political attitudes among journalists illustrate that most hold views that are more liberal and progressive than the views of the general public (Lott and Hassett 2014, p. 66). Criticisms from the right have used such evidence to argue that the media must be slanted to the left (see in Dennis 1997; Domke et al. 1999; Groseclose 2011). Initial empirical studies in political science did not find evidence of partisan bias in the news (D’Alessio and Allen 2000; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). For example, Niven (2001) found no bias in the reporting of unemployment rates under the Bush and Clinton presidencies, or in coverage of party switching (Niven 2003). Other studies found that audiences’ prior beliefs and perceptions shape bias perceptions (Dalton et al. 1998) and that bias accusations involve strategic considerations of elites (Domke et al. 1999).

Since around 2005, research about PMB has shifted into higher gears (Hopmann et al. 2012; Lichter 2017). One major strand that reinvigorated research on the topic has come from political economics (Gentzkow et al. 2015; Puglisi and Snyder 2015a). This literature offered new approaches to study PMB and examined the causes of this phenomenon. Broadly speaking, this scholarship identified “supply and demand” factors that affect PMB. Supply-side factors involve newspapers’ attempt to match the political tastes or ideologies of their audiences. For example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) found that the partisan orientation of local newspapers is strongly correlated with the political leanings of the areas in which they are sold. Such leanings are determined by counting campaign donations given to Democratic and Republican candidates in given zip codes. Puglisi and Snyder (2011) and Larcinese et al. (2011) similarly found that local newspapers highlight and downplay political scandals and economic performance according to the ideological leanings of their readers. On the demand-side, political economists found that, under certain conditions, media outlets may be able to exert PMB without losing revenue: such a strategy can even be economically sustainable if journalists are willing to be paid less in exchange for permission to slant the news (Baron 2006; Gentzkow et al. 2015).

In addition, Barrett and Barrington (2005) found both right and left wing PMB in photo selection of presidential candidates. Groseclose and Milyo (2005a) reported a liberal bias in various news outlets after comparing the number of think tank and policy-group mentions found in the media to those found in the statements of Congress members (see also Groseclose 2011). Ansolabehere et al. (2006) found that endorsements in newspaper editorials have generally increased over the years, especially in races for Governor, Senate, and House. They also found that until the early 1990 s newspapers mostly endorsed Republican presidential candidates, that

from 1996 onwards newspaper endorsements were found to have been roughly equal between Democrats and Republicans, and also that editorial columns now generally favor incumbents over contenders regardless of party identification.

Groeling (2008) found evidence that the ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX news stations had shown partisan bias in covering public approval polls on Presidents Clinton and Bush. Fox had favored Bush while the three others had favored Clinton. Larcinese et al. (2011) found partisan bias in coverage of unemployment and trade deficit issues in editorial endorsements across several elections. Puglisi and Snyder (2011) also found a strong correlation between newspapers' endorsements of candidates and the amount of coverage they give to political scandals involving members of either party: Democratic-leaning newspapers cover more Republican than Democrat scandals and Republican-leaning newspapers do the opposite (see also about pro-Democratic bias in the *New York Times*, Puglisi 2011). Lott and Hassett (2014) found that newspapers' headlines tend to favor Democrats over Republicans in the reporting of economic news on unemployment and growth of GDP. However, Puglisi and Snyder recently found that US newspapers are not biased overall but are, rather, "ideologically balanced around the median voter in each state." They are less extreme than interest groups, showing a "significant amount of ideological heterogeneity across newspapers" and exhibiting bias only in *specific issues*, some to the left and some to the right of the median voter (2015b, p. 262).

One important development in this growing body of research has been a transition from analyses of political bias in the media as a whole to studies of individual media outlets (e.g., compare Groeling and Kernell 1998 to Groeling 2008). As Barrett and Barrington (2005) argue, macro-level studies of partisan media bias have been inconclusive because they have not allowed a more robust examination of individual media outlets; hence they "have likely under-estimated the extent and importance of biased coverage" (p. 610). Such generalizations cannot address important and interesting differences *within and between* a wide and diverse field of media outlets, each with its particular political atmosphere based on special interests in various issues at various points in time.

Why and How Does PMB Occur

As the foregoing literature already suggests, the causes of PMB can be varied. PMB may occur as a response to readers' political tastes and to maximize profit or (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Puglisi and Snyder 2011) because of owners' shifting or longstanding personal beliefs and interests (e.g., Larcinese et al. 2011) and editors' political preferences and personal values (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, Chap. 6). These drivers of PMB are not mutually exclusive and can be reinforcing in certain contexts. Although PMB influences can be analyzed on various levels, we posit that PMB occurs primarily at the *organization level*, i.e., the impact of the media organization on news content (Barrett and Barrington 2005, p. 610; Groseclose and Milyo 2005b, p. 307; Shoemaker et al. 2009, p. 81; Shoemaker and Reese 2014) while simultaneously being constrained and conditioned by journalistic norms on the one hand, and considerations of market competition on the other. Figure 1

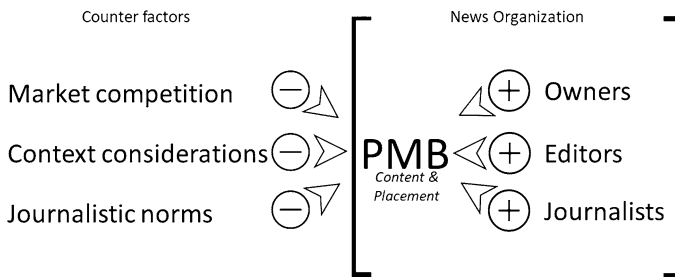


Fig. 1 Factors and counter-factors of PMB

illustrates the factor dynamics affecting PMB the media organization from within and those constraining it from without, as will be explained below.

Individual journalists write in favor or against an issue and they often employ various angles to tell a story. However, the final decision about what, how and where articles get published is ultimately in the hands of news editors and the owners of the outlet. As Shoemaker and Reese (2014, pp. 139–145) explain, news outlets are formal legal entities that are usually motivated by economic and political interests and vie for financial resources and prestige against other media institutions. These organizational interests sometimes lead news outlets to cover a similar story quite differently due to PMB influences over news content and news characteristics.

One type of influence is direct interference with, or control of, editorial decisions. In Israel, as elsewhere, newspaper owners may act as editor-in-chief and have the final say in editorial decisions. For instance, employees in *Yedioth Ahronoth* revealed that Nony Moses, the newspaper’s owner and editor-in-chief, maintained so-called “black and white lists” of which politicians would get positive reporting and which would get negative or no coverage (Tucker 2016). Moreover, the former owner of *Maariv*, Nochi Dankner, bought the newspaper to advance his businesses and to attack rivals (Persiko 2015). In other instances, media owners—and there may be several stockholders in a media outlet—contact the chief editors to prevent or otherwise influence the news, especially if the stakes are high or when lines have been crossed. Thus, media owners ultimately have the final say about news content: this is commonly exercised through veto power over “uncomfortable news” but also through active promotion of their economic and political interests (Shoemaker and Reese 2014, Chap. 6).

A second type of institutional partisan influence over news content revolves around the role of the chief editor and his deputies. These figures have tremendous power and can influence news products using a variety editorial tools: the choice of article headlines (i.e., framing), the promotion or demotion of articles according to their content in the news-order hierarchy, cuts and changes in articles, and assembly of news articles based on excerpts from several reporters. *Israel Hayom*, for example, is notorious for its chief editor’s tempering with article content and its pro-Netanyahu coverage (Persiko 2011). Former chief-editor Amos Regev is a friend of Netanyahu and they used to talk before the newspaper

went to print in order to convey Netanyahu's messages to the public through the framing of political issues (Ynet 2017). News editors also set the public agenda by deciding what plays prominently on front pages and headlines and what is omitted. Thus, editors can directly and indirectly exert PMB influences over news products.

A third type of institutional influence involves journalists' self-censorship, self-orientation and personal identification in reporting various issues. As Barrett and Barington argue, due to one or more of the reasons mentioned above, "media outlets develop an organizational political culture that influences the nature of their coverage" and their news products (Barrett and Barrington 2005, p. 610). The political orientation (or 'political atmosphere') of a news organization is mainly dictated through the hiring practices of the chief editor and other executives that think like the outlet's owners and advance their interests. This orientation is reinforced by the selection of content writers who either share the outlet's "core values and political leanings or act as if they do" (Ibid). Reporters and other content providers, such as opinion writers, learn about the news outlet's orientation on various issues through direct interaction with the editors and through sticks and carrots such as editorial changes and omissions, and the final placement and prominence of news products (Bagdikian 1985; Breed 1955; McChesney 2003, p. 319; Mortensen and Svendsen 1980; Shoemaker et al. 2009, pp. 76, 77; White 1950).

In addition, journalists may self-select to work at news outlets that best fit their ideologies and that allow them to express identification with certain issues in certain circumstances. For instance, *Haaretz* is known to its employees and the public as a left-wing newspaper. Stories and headlines will normally reflect this ideology and it will be very hard for a right-wing journalist to be appreciated in this outlet. Previous studies have shown that journalists of liberal outlets have expressed personal identification with, and even journalistic activism inside, the Israeli 2011 Occupy movement (Shultziner and Shoshan 2018). Media organizations may therefore influence journalists' writing orientation about political issues as they internalize the dominant norms, professional incentives, and political atmosphere of their workplace, which are necessary for having their work respected by their peers and superiors.

Nevertheless, the pressures and temptation to operate in PMB are *constrained and conditioned* by factors that are beyond the media organization. These factors include journalistic norms, dynamics between news-market competitors and context considerations. These factors generally counter partisan pressures, constrain the possibilities for partisan coverage (e.g., prevent it from being outright ideological) and condition the way in which PMB can take place.

First, PMB is constrained by *professional journalistic norms*. Journalists see themselves as professionals working according to certain ethical practices, regardless of their political attitudes. These practices require objectivity, fact-checking, treatment of both sides of the story (i.e., "balanced news"), neither ignoring nor exaggerating newsworthy facts (Tuchman 1972) and chasing newsworthy stories that will make the front-page (Niven 2012). PMB thus occurs between various forms of objectivity norms (Cottle 2007, pp. 10, 11) and media routines (Hopmann et al. 2012; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992). This means that news organizations cannot afford to ignore politically-sensitive newsworthy stories or to be completely

one-sided. To do so would result in the loss of credibility (and revenue), even with partisan supporters (Niven 2001, p. 35).

Second, the behavior of *news-market competitors* impacts the newsworthiness of a story and the possible extent of PMB (Hopmann et al. 2012; Kuklinski and Sigelman 1992; Wouters 2013; Westerstahl 1983). For instance, news outlet X may be able to downplay an emerging story due to partisan bias when most equivalent outlets do not pay enough attention to the story. But if its direct competitors begin intensely reporting and developing the story, news outlet X will be forced to cover the story for reasons of market competition and journalistic standards of newsworthiness (Ehrlich 1995; Shoemaker et al. 2009, p. 77).

Third, PMB is *context sensitive*; it depends on *time-specific, issue-specific and event-specific* considerations. PMB may ensue when a certain politician, topic or event is caught up with the interests of a news organization and bias may end when circumstances change. For instance, a news outlet may begin covering a civic protest neutrally or favorably but, if the owners or editors come to perceive it as threatening their interests, they may rapidly change the line of coverage and begin criticizing its objectives or methods of action (Lee 2014). Thus a news story may or may not elicit PMB from a media organization, depending on complex time-specific, issue-specific, and event-specific considerations. We can expect to see greater PMB in news coverage when the owners or chief editors of the news outlet perceive that a story jeopardizes their interests at a specific time (Mortensen and Svendsen 1980). As Gitlin put it, “The closer to home the affected interest the greater the strictures on news coverage” (Gitlin 1980, p. 268). This approach is suited to study the multi-dimensional nature of PMB rather than a broad one-dimensional, right-left, partition (Puglisi and Snyder 2015a, b, p. 658).

The Relative Nature of PMB

Our understanding of the factors and counterfactors of PMB leads us to the following conceptualization: PMB is expressed in the way different news outlets cover the same political story within the same timeframe *relative* to one another. 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. PMB is therefore *not* necessarily captured by measures of *absolute* balance within each outlet such as equal coverage time or favorability for each candidate or party (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Groeling 2013; Westerstahl 1983). For instance, a political candidate may draw far more media attention than his or her rival because the former is flamboyant and the other is running a poor campaign (Hopmann et al. 2012; Niven 2003, pp. 314, 315). Rather, PMB cannot be established when news outlets cover a news story similarly and PMB may be implicated when they cover the same story differently.

Figure 2 illustrates four different types of coverage by three anonymous news outlets. The first type, Negative Coverage (1.1), illustrates that, due to their news

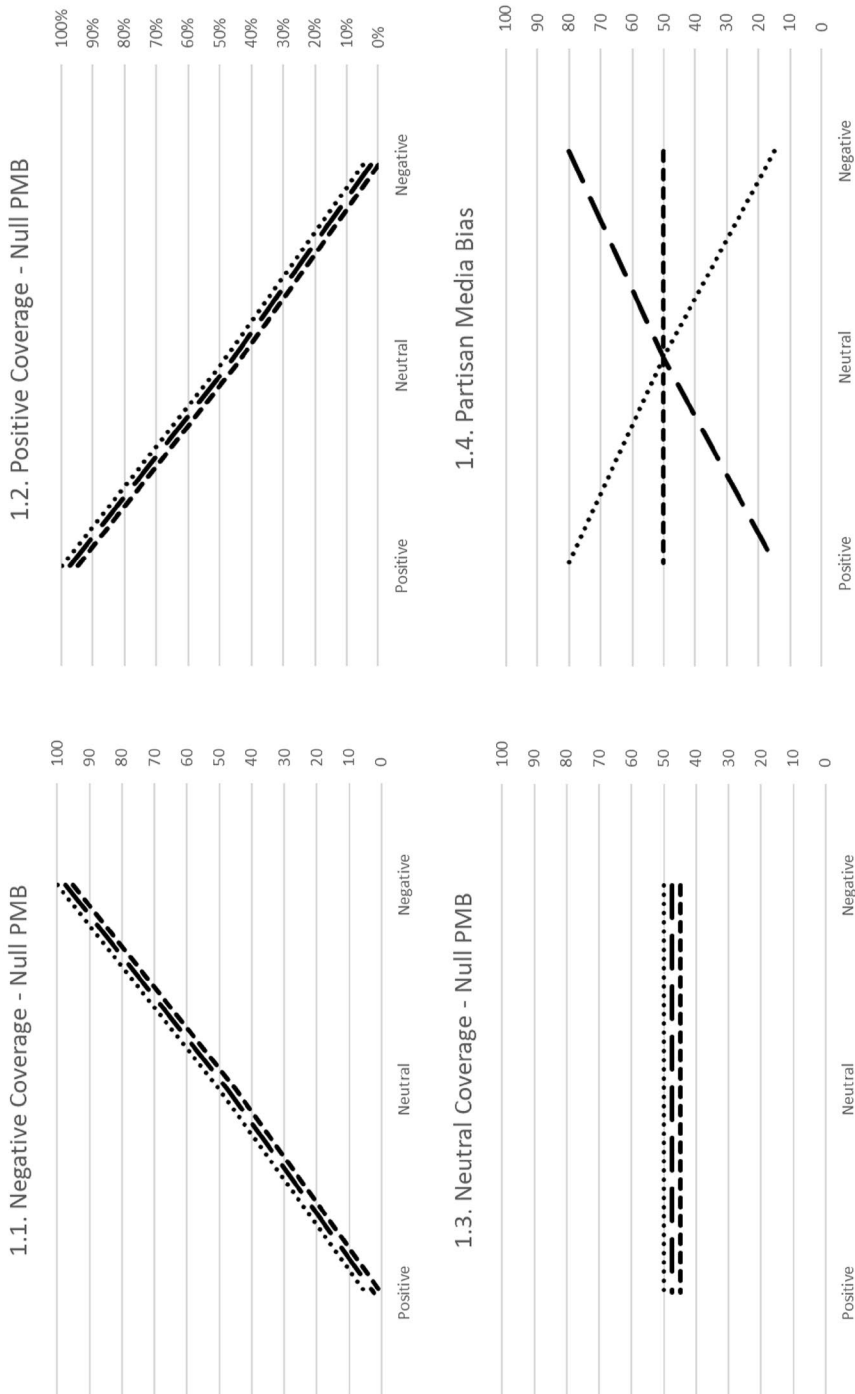


Fig. 2 The relative nature of partisan media bias

routines and newsworthiness considerations (e.g., scandal or violence), all news outlets give far more weight to negative news about a certain story than to positive news about it. When news outlets exhibit the same strategy toward the story, PMB is not established, but rather the null hypothesis is. The same holds for the second type, Positive Coverage (1.2) and the third type, Neutral Coverage (1.3). This is because all three outlets behave in roughly the same way. We should also stress that, in our conceptualization, ‘neutral’ coverage does not necessarily mean that PMB does not exist. Only the fourth type, Partisan Media Coverage (1.4), proves the hypothesis: the news outlets have different coverage strategies toward the story while facing the same news routines and newsworthiness considerations.

Measuring Partisan Media Bias

We present several possible operational measures of PMB. One measure of PMB is *volume bias* which is exhibited in the degree to which different news outlets cover the same political topic at the same time. This is essentially an agenda-setting function that involves selection bias (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Groeling 2013). It measures media *standing* (i.e., what deserves to be reported at all) and *newsworthiness* as understood by chief editors. A political topic may warrant little or significant attention in the media’s day-agenda depending on a host of factors (Weaver and Choi 2017). When a news outlet’s agenda-setting considerations are shaped by partisan bias the very selection of topics and its volume become a form of bias (D’Alessio and Allen 2000, pp. 135, 136). PMB of this sort has been measured, for example, by the number of mentions and omissions of the results of politicians’ approval polls by different news outlets (Puglisi and Snyder 2011, p. 932). In the context of social movements this bias “involves media gatekeeper’s (e.g., editors’) choices of a very small number of protest events to report from a much larger pool of events which could be reported” (Smith et al. 2001, p. 1400). In fact, most protests are selected out and have no standing in the media (Amenta et al. 2009; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2012; Wouters 2013). Volume bias is thus measured by the *total number of articles* devoted to the news story.

The second measure of PMB is *front-page bias*. As Wouters note, “When journalists assign headline status to an event, they clearly acknowledge its importance, a judgment that is not without its public consequence” and which is “especially likely to set the public agenda” (2013, p. 84). Front-page bias is measured as a dichotomous factor of articles with front-page headlines and articles without front-page headlines (e.g., Amenta et al. 2009).

The third measure of PMB is *page-number bias*. It refers to the placement of articles about a political story within the hierarchy of the newspaper’s pages (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Niven 2001, p. 36). A news item can appear in the first pages, or at the opening of a primetime show, or it may be placed in less eye-catching positions such as inner pages or lower-rating hours. Front pages have more exposure and chances of being read than inner pages have. As Schudson puts it: news about all sorts of events enter a newspaper, “[t]he question is where that information appears and how it is inflected” (2002, p. 258). Page-number bias is thus measured by the

average page-number of articles about the same news story within each outlet (e.g., Herman and Chomsky 1988; Niven 2001; Wouters 2013).

The fourth measure of PMB is *size bias* which involves the physical size of a news item (McCombs and Shaw 1972). An article that is bigger than the other news products on the same page draws more attention and is more likely to be read, and vice versa. Size bias is measured by the physical size of the article on the page (e.g., Niven 2001, p. 36; D'Alessio and Allen 2000, p. 136). News products that are very small and short are considered marginal while news products that occupy a central place on the page are considered central.

The fifth form of PMB is *visual bias*. Items accompanied by visuals such as pictures, statistics, and graphic designs are more eye-catching than text-only articles; hence visuals provide a form of news prominence as well. While it is possible to determine bias from the characteristics of pictures themselves (Barrett and Barrington 2005), the basic criterion we examine is whether news editors have chosen to emphasize an article with any picture or illustration at all. Thus, visual bias is here measured by a dichotomous factor of whether or not there is a picture or illustration alongside the news story.

The sixth form of PMB is *opinion spectrum bias*. Since all media outlets are expected to include some degree of both favorable and unfavorable treatment of various political stories, PMB is likely to find its expression in the spectrum of opinions expressed on a political story (Dalton et al. 1998, p. 117). A biased coverage would give considerable space to certain opinions only, while giving a marginal place to other points of view. A simple measure of opinion spectrum bias is the overall number of opinion columns that either favor or oppose a given political story.

A final and major form of PMB is *description bias*, also known as content bias or presentation bias (Groeling 2013). It involves the choice of facts, opinions, and frames that are used to describe a story and to convey a message to the public. Description bias consists of the tone of articles, choice of words (e.g., adjectives), a balance between positive and negative facts, choice of opinions, and the framing of the topic (e.g., D'Alessio and Allen 2000, pp. 136, 137; Gasper 2011; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Groseclose and Milyo 2005a). As Gitlin has put it, researchers must ask themselves: “What is the frame here? Why this frame and not another? What patterns are shared by the frames clamped over this event... by frames in different media in different places at different moments? And how does the news-reporting institution regulate these regularities?” (1980, p. 7). When framing is consistently one-sided it assists one player, or certain players, and undermines others. Entman thus defines content bias as “consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts over the use of government power” (Entman 2007, p. 166; e.g., Niven 2003).

In the context of social movements and protests, “[d]escription bias involves how a selected protest event is portrayed in a media story. Inherent in this term is the assumption that the media construct interpretations of protest events that differ from both the objectives of protesters and interpretations of other observers. That media portrayal helps shape agenda-building processes” (Smith et al. 2001, p. 1401). Moreover, a common feature of protest coverage has been to portray activists as violent, radical or illegitimate representatives of the issue they are raising, while holding the

responses of formal state and government representatives as a more reliable account of reality (Gitlin 1980). This is a phenomenon also known as the ‘protest paradigm’ (Boyle 2012; Lee 2014; Weaver and Scacco 2013). PMB thus occurs when a media outlet describes the goals, legitimacy or leadership of a social movement more positively or negatively relative to its market competitors within the same timeframe.

The Social Justice Protest Movement and Hypotheses of PMB

The Social Justice Protest Movement (henceforth the ‘movement’) started as an initiative of Daphni Leef, a 25-year-old video artist who was living in Tel Aviv. Leef had received an end-of-lease notice from her landlord and realized she could no longer afford to live in the city because of high housing costs. After talking to several friends, she used Facebook to organize a protest against these costs. Leef called on others to join her in protest by bringing tents for a sleepover near Habima Square (next to Rothschild Boulevard in central Tel Aviv) on July 14th, 2011. The protest drew thousands of online participants and much media attention, even before July 14th. In the weeks that followed the event, the Tel Aviv protest became an “Occupy” movement that grew in numbers and spread to dozens of tent cities all over Israel. Moreover, several protest rallies drew tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands, of participants.

PM Netanyahu then conceded and announced the formation of a special government committee to examine the problem of living costs and to propose solutions.

The movement stagnated from mid-August. The original organizers were in conflict with each other, the national student union and other activists. However, they came together for a final event on September 3rd, 2011. Approximately 400,000 protesters gathered, mostly in Tel Aviv, for the largest protest in Israel’s history (Berenson 2015, p. 375). The event organizers then announced that the Occupy movement had formally ended for that summer but would continue in other forms and through other channels (Schechter 2012). The municipalities then cleared the tent towns with little resistance.

While the initial protest focused on housing costs in Tel Aviv, the movement quickly broadened its aims to protest against living costs in general, corporate unfairness, privatizing the welfare system, social-economic gaps, and poverty. It also aimed to hold the government to account for its responsibilities toward its citizens and to find new forms of civic empowerment over politicians (Berenson 2015, p. 375; Schechter 2012, p. 64). Becoming known as the Social Justice Protest Movement its slogan was “The People Demand Social Justice.” With public approval rates running as high as 90% in July, and 80% in August–September (Haber and Heler 2011, p. 3), the movement was seen as a political threat to Netanyahu’s government.

While the movement was ongoing, there were competing frames offered by protest actors, movement rivals, politicians and journalists who participated in it (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014). The positive frame (or story) was one of a spontaneous movement established by Daphni Leef and a group of frustrated individuals who are true representatives of problems experienced by many Israelis concerning housing costs and living costs. Alternative frames included the portrayal of the protestors

negatively as spoiled young adults who want to live beyond their means, and are unwilling to move away from Tel Aviv to affordable places, have unrealistic goals, lack actual understanding of the economy, use radical, illegitimate and even violent means, and are led by left-wing strategists and activists who exploit the pretext of living costs to bring down Netanyahu's government. Most media outlets did not reproduce the negative frames. Instead, most journalists and media outlets portrayed the movement in positive frames.

This movement is a hard test-case for our proposed approach. Most studies of PMB focus on political candidates and parties. Those tend to *polarize voters*, sometimes over the issue of standing for or against “the media”. Such issues thus tend to accentuate partisan elements and make it easier for outlets to focus only on certain audiences and to justify their coverage. It would be arguably more difficult to find PMB among general-market newspapers concerning a story that enjoys high public approval from across the political spectrum. Given the movement's focus on the widely shared, and suddenly realized, problem of high living expenses, and because protestors distanced themselves from all parties and politicians, presumably all outlets would cater to public support and cover the protest similarly and favorably. If partisan considerations have entered the coverage of a consensus movement, it is likely that they are common in other social, economic and even mundane stories, and have a greater effect on political news.

Hypotheses

Overall, the movement enjoyed massive public support and became the central news story of 2011 in Israel (Berenson 2015). Nevertheless, each news outlet had different interests vis-à-vis the movement and had to decide *how* to cover this developing story, what prominence it should receive, and how to frame it. If PMB did occur in the coverage of the Social Justice Protest Movement of 2011, we would expect the newspapers to diverge in their coverage about the movement (Hypothesis 1). If we find that these market competitors score roughly similarly on the different PMB measures in their coverage of the movement, PMB would not be established (i.e., null hypothesis). We also briefly note the characterizing ideology of each newspaper and its owner in order to test the proposition that the media owners' political orientation and interests affect their newspapers' products (Lee 2014; Weaver and Scacco 2013).

Haaretz (The Country) is widely known, and its owners self-identify, as liberal and left-wing oriented (Schocken 2017). The newspaper is generally critical of PM Benjamin Netanyahu. We hypothesize that *Haaretz* holds the most favorable PMB for the movement, in all measures, compared to the other newspapers (Hypothesis 1.1). *Yedioth Ahronoth* (Latest News) is a centrist newspaper and was Israel's most widely sold newspaper in 2011. Its owner, Arnon (Nony) Moses, has a long history of animosity toward PM Netanyahu that involves both personal and economic interests (Tucker 2016), and the police and the Attorney General were recently led to recommend filing criminal charges against the two on accounts of bribery (Goldman and Siemaszko 2018). We hypothesize that Moses and the chief editors used the

protest as a means of challenging Netanyahu and provided positive coverage of the protests, though not to the extent *Haaretz* did (Hypothesis 1.2).

Maariv (Evening) was the second most sold, and third most read, newspaper daily in Israel in 2011. Nochi Dankner, then its chief manager and owner, purchased the newspaper to advance his economic interests and to attack rivals, although Netanyahu was not among them. We hypothesize that *Maariv* held the third most favorable position toward the movement since the protest was not seen as a direct threat to its owner (Hypothesis 1.3). *Israel Hayom* (Israel Today) has been Israel's most circulated newspaper since 2010. Established in 2007 by American business tycoon Sheldon Adelson, the newspaper is distributed for free to support Prime Minister Netanyahu. It generally conveys a conservative right-wing orientation. *Israel Hayom* is known for its ardent support of PM Netanyahu. We hypothesize that *Israel Hayom* held a negative PMB against the movement relative to the other national dailies because the movement was seen as a threat to Netanyahu and was denounced as being left-wing by several right-wing politicians. We hypothesize that PMB would transpire in all PMB measures (Hypothesis 1.4).

Hypothesis 2 concerns the mechanism of PMB. Given that this protest movement was the major news story of 2011, we expect that PMB will be manifested not so much in the total number of articles that each newspaper published but in how they emphasized and downplayed articles within the newspaper's pages. Based on prior studies we predict that frontpage articles are a central mechanism (e.g., Amenta et al. 2009; Wouters 2013). We are unable to a-priori predict which other PMB mechanisms will also be significant, but each mechanism is conceptualized as a subset of hypothesis 2 that will be put to the test.

Data Sources and Method

The data set for this study introduces the first complete coverage of the Social Justice Protest Movement in Israel from July 11th (3 days before the official launch-day) to September 9th, 2011, 6 days after the organizers formally called off the occupy movement.¹ The newspapers chosen for this study are the most widely circulated printed-newspaper dailies in Israel in 2011: *Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Israel Hayom*, *Maariv*, and *Haaretz*. They also have quite similar news holes, news supplements, and printing constraints. Three coders were trained and tested for uniformity (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.791$).² To avoid sampling and selection errors (Earl et al. 2004), the coders analyzed each daily edition and its supplements for the entire period. That is, the data set is *not a sample* of the movement's coverage but a complete set of every

¹ Data available at <https://doi.org/10.13140/rg.2.2.27066.24009>.

² See Appendix for coding details at <https://doi.org/10.13140/rg.2.2.33777.12646>.

single article written about this news story in each of the examined newspapers, from July 13th to September 9th, 2011, totalling 1556 news products.³

Each news product is classified according to its *article type*.⁴ Articles that focus on movement actions, movement participants and leaders, movement camps and camp culture and movement objectives are classified as *movement coverage*. Articles that focus on direct reactions to the movement by government and state officials—i.e., by PM Netanyahu, ministers, police, city Mayors, and other state officials—are classified as *government reaction*. Opinion columns, editorials and political caricatures about the movement's actions, leaders or demands are classified as *opinion columns*.

Volume bias is measured by the total number of articles about the movement in each news outlet. *Front-page bias* is determined simply by whether an article has a front-page headline in the main newspaper issue or its supplement (i.e., a stand-alone edition to the main issue) or not. *Page-number bias* is determined as an average of the first-page number of all news products about the movement in each newspaper.⁵ *Visual bias* is determined by whether articles are accompanied by visuals, such as pictures or illustrations, or not. *Size bias* is determined by the size of an article on the page. Articles that are less than a third of the page long are coded marginal and news products that take up a third of a page or more are coded central.

Each article is evaluated for its overall *description bias* by content analysis (e.g., Niven 2003).⁶ Articles are coded 'negative' if they are primarily characterized by one or more of the following: present movement actors' claims and goals as radical or unreasonable; rely on or support government and state statements about movement goals over and against movement actors' statements and opinions; use negative adjectives to describe protesters as unrepresentative of the social issue they stand for, unauthentic or as acting unlawfully; portray or criticize movement actors as irrational or as having illegitimate partisan motives; emphasize violence and divisions within the movement. Articles are coded 'positive' if they are primarily characterized by one or more of the following: present movement actors' claims and goals as reasonable; rely on movement actors' own words and statements; use positive adjectives such as successful, legitimate, peaceful, nonviolent, authentic to describe the protests; portray protesters and movement leaders as rational and authentic representatives of the movement; present outside support for the movement from political and non-political figures. Articles are coded neutral if they are primarily characterized by one or more of the following: maintain a balance between protesters'

³ The coders were trained and then tested for articles that were about the movement (i.e., coverage of, and opinions about, movement actions, movement participants and leaders, movement camps and camp culture, movement objectives, and direct responses of government and state officials to the movement) and those that were not directly about the movement (i.e., economic analyses of living costs and political matters which did not involve coverage of the movement). Inter-coder reliability of article inclusion is Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.775$.

⁴ Inter-coder reliability of *article type* is Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.807$.

⁵ If an article runs on several pages, only the first page is calculated.

⁶ Inter-coder reliability of *description bias* is Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.792$.

positions and their rivals' positions; do not use adjectives to describe the protestors; mainly employ quotes and facts to describe events; have little news analysis.

Since our model is about news outlets as units of analysis, we calculate the aggregate average scores of the different measures as the main variables of PMB. We then compare the measures across newspapers. Logistic regression analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 21).

Findings

In this section we review the results of PMB measures. We analyze the independent variables and then the relations between them, while finding strong connections between newspaper, description bias and other measures. This analysis paves the way to a statistical model showing that 'description bias' is related to three primary factors: newspaper, front-page headings, and article size.

A review of individual parameters yields interesting yet inconsistent results. For instance, the total number of articles about the movement is extensive among all market competitors (av. 389), with *Haaretz* (447) at 15% above average. The percentage of front-page articles about this news story is close among three outlets (35.3%), with *Maariv* at 11% above the overall average. The use of visuals is also comparable among three outlets (av. 58.8%), with *Israel Hayom* at 9.5% below the overall average. In terms of size bias, *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Maariv* are almost identical with scores close to the overall average (72.4%) and *Haaretz* and *Israel Hayom* are at 13.6% above and 9.9% below average respectively. *Israel Hayom* is also distinguishable in the placement of articles about the movement within the newspaper, i.e., its *page-number bias*. An article about the movement in *Israel Hayom* starts on page 13.76 on average and is between 2.3 and 4.1 pages (17% and 30%) down within the newspaper pages relative to its market competitors.⁷ These results suggest that in some contexts a single measure may either not reveal partisan bias or may even yield inaccurate or false portrayals of PMB.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the results, we analyze the relations between the different measures and description bias. Here the similarities and differences between the news outlets become more pronounced. Table 1 summarizes the results for the different measures of PMB through the three values (i.e., positive, neutral, negative) of description bias. The table shows that newspapers appear to prioritize positive and negative articles about the story through their placement on the front-page, the size allotted to each, the attachment of visuals, and in the spectrum of opinions published by each outlet.

⁷ Page-number bias is calculated by the overall average of the first page on which each of the articles in the newspaper begins. The cross comparisons between the average page number of *Haaretz*, *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Maariv* are statistically *insignificant*, but the difference between *Israel Hayom* and each of the other three outlets is statistically significant with over 95% confidence in a multiple-comparison Scheffe test.

Table 1 Description bias within other forms of PMB (in percentage)

Newspaper	Form of bias	Volume bias	Front-page bias	Size bias	Visual bias	Opinion spectrum bias
<i>Haaretz</i> <i>N</i> =447	Positive	53.5	58.0	56.0	49.5	60.3
	Neutral	39.6	36.7	37.2	44.8	32.6
	Negative	6.9	5.3	6.8	5.7	7.1
<i>Yedioth Ahronoth</i> <i>N</i> =383	Positive	77.5	80.4	81.2	81.4	76.5
	Neutral	9.9	9.8	8.0	8.1	11.2
	Negative	12.5	9.8	10.8	10.6	12.4
<i>Maariv</i> <i>N</i> =369	Positive	61.5	66.8	61.9	64.6	58.8
	Neutral	15.6	12.5	13.9	16.2	13.1
	Negative	22.9	20.7	24.2	19.2	28.1
<i>Israel Hayom</i> <i>N</i> =357	Positive	30.3	38.4	32.4	33.0	27.5
	Neutral	38.4	30.4	32.9	39.2	37.3
	Negative	31.4	31.2	34.8	27.8	35.3

Opinion columns are one way to illustrate the normative stance (or partisan bias) that each newspaper took toward the movement. For example, *Israel Hayom* is the only major newspaper which published more negative opinion columns (35.3%) about the protests than positive ones while many of its readers (i.e., public opinion) were largely in favor of the movement. The average of negative opinion columns in the three other outlets is 15.9% where *Haaretz* (7.1%) has marginal negative-rates. Moreover, Table 1 clearly shows that the rates of positive and negative opinion columns intensify each outlet's overall rates of description bias.

The analysis of visual bias, size bias and front-page bias also illustrates that news editors strategically employ them. For instance, *Yedioth Ahronoth* employed visuals alongside 81.4% of its positive articles about the movement, compared to its use of visuals alongside only 10.6% of its negative articles. *Maariv* used visuals for 64.6% of its positive articles and 19% of its negative articles. *Israel Hayom* is different than its market competitors, using visuals for only 33% of its positive article (lowest compared to its market competitors) and 27.8% of its negative articles (highest) about the movement. The size of articles is also not random. On the one hand, size emphasis increases the rates of positive articles in *all* outlets. On the other hand, size emphasis is dissimilar in relation to negative articles: *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz* rates of emphasized negative articles are lower than their already overall low negative rates; while *Maariv* and *Israel Hayom* rates of emphasized negative articles are higher relative to their overall negative rates.

When we examine articles that receive front-page headlines, we similarly find that they are 3–8% more positive in *all* outlets compared to their overall positive averages. However, the rates of negative articles on the front-pages are not unified across the outlets. The percentage of negative front-page articles decreases (relative to newspaper average) in *Haaretz* (−1.6%), *Yedioth Ahronoth* (−2.7%), and *Maariv* (−2.2%), but stays stable in *Israel Hayom* (−0.2%). Moreover, *Israel Hayom* stands

out compared to its market competitors with the lowest rates of positive articles on the front-page (− 22.5% of total outlets average) and a significantly high rate of negative articles highlighted on its front-page (+ 14.5% of total average).

The findings illustrate that the use of emphases such as front-page headlines, article size, and visuals is strategic and not random in relation to description bias. If the use of such editorial tools were based solely on consideration of article merit, let alone considerations of balance, we would see either inconsistency in their application across positive and negative articles or some form of haphazard balance. However, the application of emphases shows clear consistencies and discloses the newspapers' overall stance toward the movement. *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz* emphasize positive articles and downplay negative articles about the protest in all bias measures. *Maariv* is similar to the former two in emphasizing positive coverage but has more than double the emphasis of its negative articles compared to the latter two. *Israel Hayom* is in a class of its own. Compared to its three market competitors, this outlet emphasizes negative articles and downplays positive articles in all measures.

Size and Front-Page Matter: Predicting Description Bias

Given the apparent association between description bias and the different forms of selection bias in Table 1, we conducted further analyses to test the statistical relations between the variables and to examine the possibility that there may be outlet-specific mechanisms, despite the fact that the four market competitors have largely the same resources, news holes, supplements, and have similar styles of print (e.g., color photos and page-layout styles). We conducted a statistical analysis of interactions effects between 'newspaper' and all other variables. We did not find any factor which is unique to a newspaper in an interaction mode. In other words, it is unlikely that the results are affected by outlet specific variables.

We then conducted univariate analysis between all variables. We find a strong correlation between size bias and visual bias. Hence, we omit visual bias and choose size bias to avoid multicollinearity, also because size bias is the more general and important of the two (sizable articles tend to be accompanied by visuals).⁸ A multiple logistic regression, with the forward approach, was then used to test the predictive utility of different variables for description bias and to select the most parsimonious set of correlates.⁹ When controlling for newspaper, front-page, and size bias, these factors are found significantly associated with description bias. The most parsimonious model set thus includes: newspaper, front-page (OR = 1.391; 95% CI

⁸ For similar reasons, opinion spectrum bias is considered a sub-set of description bias.

⁹ In order to present the findings in a simpler and more accessible format, we conducted a logistic regression with positive versus neutral-negative. In a follow up research we conducted a multinomial logistic regression and reached similar findings. Statistical code for replication is available at <https://doi.org/10.13140/rg.2.2.30421.68327>.

Table 2 Logistic regression of independent variables of description bias

Parameter	OR	SE	Wald	<i>p</i> value	95% CI
<i>Yedioth Ahronoth</i> ¹	3.058	0.156	51.025	0.000	2.251–4.156
<i>Yisrael Hayom</i> ¹	0.404	0.152	35.330	0.000	0.300–0.545
<i>Maariv</i> ¹	1.347	0.146	4.184	0.041	1.013–1.791
Front-page bias ²	1.391	0.115	8.191	0.004	1.110–1.745
Size bias ³	1.381	0.127	6.494	0.011	1.077–1.770

¹Reference group for Newspaper is *Haaretz*

²Reference group for front-page is 0 for no front-page headline

³Reference group for size bias is 0 for marginal article size

1.110–1.745, $p=0.004$) and size bias (OR = 1.381; 95% CI 1.077–1.770, $p=0.011$), as shown in Table 2.

In other words, we found three statistically significant factors that affect the likelihood of a positive article. The first factor is the news outlet itself. The model thus confirms general Hypothesis 1 and reinforces the picture that arises from descriptive statistics that each newspaper has its own political orientation and coverage strategy toward the news story. Beyond the news outlet itself, we found two additional contributing factors to description bias. Articles with front-page headlines and articles of major size also increase the likelihood of a positive content. This does not mean that the four news outlets used those emphases to the same extent. As Table 1 shows, each outlet employed those means to a different extent and, in fact, *Israel Hayom* used frontpage headlines to emphasize negative articles about the movement as well.

Conclusions

There is both public and scholarly contention over media bias. The very notion of bias assumes an objective truth and reality on which the media can report, rather than their having to present value judgments and opinions. Our approach does not enter these ontological debates about truth and reality. Nor is it necessary to agree about the main drivers of PMB or about owners' possible motivations, both of which may change over time. Similarly, we argue that there is no sense in talking about partisan bias of an entire dynamic media market made up of numerous outlets, despite popular sentiments that “the media” has a fixed slant (Dalton et al. 1998; Groseclose 2011). It is more accurate to ask whether a media outlet was affected by partisan considerations around a certain issue and event at a given time. Our approach thus calls for caution in interpreting both findings and non-findings of PMB (e.g., D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Niven 2001, 2003).¹⁰ Partisan influences are likely stronger in specific contexts involving threats and opportunities for news

¹⁰ As this study illustrates, different variables yield different results, including non-findings and haphazard results. Findings and non-findings are highly susceptible to the type of PMB measure we employ.

organizations but *perceptions* of those threats and opportunities, real or imagined, are dynamic and may increase or reverse as events and stories develop.

The approach we offer holds that PMB occurs when organizational pressures influence news content and article characteristics in specific circumstances involving event, timing, and issue considerations (on issue-specific PMB see Puglisi and Snyder 2015a, b). When PMB influences enter news production, a news outlet (or outlets) will depart from their unbiased market competitors. When PMB is absent, media outlets behave and look largely the same. Using this approach, we believe we were able to illustrate that PMB exists while not relying on absolute measures of balance or objective baselines (Groseclose 2011; Hopmann et al. 2012). We confirmed Hypothesis 1 in both descriptive statistics and in logistic regression predicting positive articles where the *newspaper* itself plays an explanatory factor. We can clearly see that one news outlet, *Israel Hayom*, stands out in every measure (Hypothesis 1.4). There is not a single measure in which *Israel Hayom* is not the least positive and the most negative toward the movement compared to its direct market competitors.

One can argue that *Israel Hayom* was the only unbiased outlet and that its three market competitors were biased. However, that is unlikely in this case because the three other major newspapers kept in line with public opinion around a consensus movement. In any event, there are also interesting differences between the other three market competitors. *Yedioth Ahronoth*'s partisan coverage is evidenced by the fact that this centrist outlet surpassed the liberal *Haaretz* in positive coverage, contrary to Hypothesis 1.2. This fact corroborates inside reports that newspaper owner, Arnon Moses, used the movement as a means to attack PM Netanyahu in their prolonged conflict (Goldman and Siemaszko 2018; Tucker 2016). *Haaretz*'s partisan support for the movement is manifested in the marginal share allotted to critical articles about the movement. Similarly, *Maariv* (Hypothesis 1.3) showed a mix of measures, being favorable toward the movement in some respects while publishing significantly more critical articles compared to *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz*. Hypotheses 1.1–1.3 are thus partly confirmed while suggesting that different outlets may have somewhat different PMB strategies.

Our findings further suggest that PMB operates in two interrelated ways on the organizational level. The first dimension of PMB is *description bias* (i.e., content bias). It involves editorial decisions which directly (e.g., commission and omission) and indirectly (e.g., modifications and headlines) influence the content of news products. The second dimension occurs through editorial choices that highlight and downplay the various articles according to their content type. This conclusion stems from the statistical analysis showing that the newspaper itself is a factor that predicts overall description bias. It also manifests itself in that the use of emphases mechanisms is not random: it is strategically employed by the different outlets while prioritizing news products according to their normative stand toward the protest.

Hypothesis 2 premised that the main mechanism is front-page headlines. The hypothesis is confirmed as this variable was indeed found to be statistically significant. We also found that the sizing of the article on the page was a major predictor of description bias. While front-page headlines are a more known mechanism of selection bias, the sizing of articles is a less known method. A page of any newspaper is a type

of news hole. Page editors and chief editors seem to toe the newspaper line by taking editorial decisions to enlarge or downsize articles according to their content. This is a selection bias instrument acting like audio volume which is raised and lowered based on the content being aired. In sum, articles with front-page headlines and major size are thus good predictors of a news outlet's editorial policy about a news story.

Our findings and conclusions can be easily generalized and modified to study PMB in different types of news outlets in all countries. We hope that this study will lead to the testing of this model and to its extension and improvement in other studies on partisan media coverage.

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