

Policing and Racial (In)Justice in the Media: Newspaper Portrayals of the "Black Lives Matter" Movement

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The "Black Lives Matter" movement, centered on fighting racial injustice and inequality (particularly in the criminal justice system), has garnered a great deal of media attention in recent years. Given the relatively recent emergence of the movement, there exists very little scholarly research on media portrayals of the movement. In this article, I report findings from a qualitative examination of major newspaper portrayals of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement between April and August 2016, before the particularly divisive 2016 presidential election. Inductive textual analyses of 131 newspaper articles indicate that, although the movement's goals were represented positively and from the perspective of members of the movement, the newspapers politicized and sensationalized the movement, and they focused far more on supposed negative consequences of the movement. I discuss these findings by drawing on the "protest paradigm" and the "public nuisance paradigm" in media coverage of social protest movements, arguing that the latter is particularly useful for interpreting portrayals of Black Lives Matter in the prevailing US political climate.

INTRODUCTION: THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

In 2013 George Zimmerman was acquitted on the charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American. This incident prompted national outrage at what many perceive to be the unjust treatment of African Americans in the United States, especially in the context of the criminal justice system. Several other highly publicized deaths of African Americans involving police action rapidly followed Trayvon Martin's death: In Staten Island, New York, Eric Garner was placed in a chokehold when officers attempted to restrain him, and he ultimately died on July 17th, 2014 from complications arising from the chokehold. In Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown was fatally shot in a police encounter on August 9th, 2014. In Baltimore, Maryland, Freddie Gray fell into a coma while being transported in a police van, and he died on April 19th, 2015 from injuries to his spinal cord that many believe he sustained while in police custody. In 2016 a grand jury returned a bill of no indictment against the officers charged in the death of Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American who was shot on November 22nd, 2014 because the officers mistakenly believed he was brandishing a real gun. In the same year, Alton Sterling was fatally shot by an officer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (on July 5th) and Philando Castile was fatally shot by an officer in Falcon Heights, Minnesota (on July 6th). In 2017 a jury found the officer involved in the Philando Castile shooting not guilty of manslaughter, and in 2018 the Louisiana attorney general announced that he would not pursue criminal charges against the officers involved in the death of Alton Sterling. These cases represent just a few of the many police-involved deaths of African Americans that precipitated and sustained the emergence of the Black Lives

Matter (BLM) social movement.

The BLM movement was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman (Garza 2014). BLM represents a critique of racial injustice in the United States. In addition to more general criticisms regarding the lack of acknowledgment of African American contributions to American society, the movement also specifically protests the devaluing of African American lives within the US criminal justice system (Garza 2014). In this context, BLM critiques the dozens of deaths of (especially young and male) African Americans resulting from police action. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" also reflects the movement's criticism of how criminal justice policies disparately impact African Americans. Racial inequality in the criminal justice system has resulted in the "ghettoization" of American prisons (Wacquant 2000), whereby African Americans are spatially segregated en masse and their life opportunities drastically curtailed. Although the Black Lives Matter movement is broadly committed to fighting injustice, the movement has gained visibility through organized marches protesting the disproportionate targeting of African Americans in the criminal justice system. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" thus represents a vocal opposition to the criminal justice system's rendering of African Americans as disposable, a phenomenon manifested most obviously in the deaths of African Americans as a result of police action.

BLM has sparked a lively, though often fractious, debate about police-citizen relations, especially in predominantly African American communities. Because it emerged so recently, however, there exists relatively little scholarly research on the movement. This study explores newspaper coverage of BLM during a particularly interesting period in American social and political history—the summer before the 2016 US elections that marked the beginning of Donald

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Trump’s presidency. In addition to the lead-up to a very contentious and polarizing presidential election, during this period, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile (both African American men) died as a result of police action; police shot but did not kill Charles Kinsey (another African American man); and police officers were shot in Dallas by an African American man who claimed to be responding to police killings of African Americans. Rather than arguing that the findings discussed here are representative of portrayals of BLM more generally, I investigate how the movement was portrayed during a unique and specific time period during which the United States was wracked by extremely divisive political and cultural debates, many of which centered on race. In particular, I explore how mainstream newspapers portrayed the victims, police officers, protesters, and critics involved in conversations about BLM during this important period, and I also investigate how the political landscape of the time was reflected in portrayals of BLM. Drawing on the “protest” and “public nuisance” paradigms (described later), I thus explore how different actors related to BLM were situated in newspaper narratives about the movement during a period when several African American men were injured or killed as a result of police action, and when race-related debates were raging in the public sphere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RACE, POLICING, AND SOCIAL PROTEST

The fact that supporters of BLM perceive a need to protest police use of excessive force with African Americans is in itself unsurprising, given that research has repeatedly confirmed the racial bias in policing in the United States. For instance, several years before Eric Garner died following a forceful restraint by NYPD officers, African Americans in New York City were stopped by police 23 percent more frequently than Whites were, and they made up 51 percent of all stops, despite representing only 26 percent of the New York City population (Gelman, Fagan, and Kiss 2007). African Americans are more likely to have their cars checked during a stop (Langton and Durose 2013), even though they are less likely than Whites to be found with contraband (Gelman, Fagan, and Kiss 2007), and they are also more likely to become targets for use of force (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 2007), including lethal force (Worden 2015). Whites are also more likely than African Americans to support police use of force (Elicker 2008). Tonry (2011) has argued that the willingness of Whites to excuse police brutality against African American civilians is rooted in racial animus—a conclusion consistent with research demonstrating that the American public tends to visualize the “typical” criminal as African American (Chaney and Robertson 2013).

The research has further revealed a problematic imbalance between the racial composition of police forces and the communities for which they are responsible (Dulaney 1996; Hawkins and Thomas 1991). Some scholars have concluded that as police forces become more diverse, police officers become better behaved, pointing to the need for police forces more adequately to represent the diversity of the communities that they serve (Kane and White 2009). Others, however, have argued that increasing police diversity fails to consider the macro-level context within which troubled race relations are embedded and thus does not necessarily result in better police-citizen interactions (Brunson and Gau 2011).

When these findings are taken together, it should come as no surprise that the public generally, and members of

racial minorities in particular, perceive a need for an overhaul in policing, particularly in urban, racially and socioeconomically diverse communities. Nevertheless, the perception of injustice—however rational—cannot in itself explain why social protest movements emerge (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). To understand why BLM was able to emerge as a powerful social protest movement, it is helpful to turn instead to social psychological literature that has for many decades investigated the fundamental question of why people protest. Early theory on this issue suggested that individuals protest as a response to perceived injustice, but the question regarding why some aggrieved individuals protest while others do not remained. Social psychologists have since concluded that a number of further variables predict participation in social movements, including opportunity, resources, and social embeddedness (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). BLM represents a particularly modern form of social protest: it emerged as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) on Twitter that has grown into one of the most powerful movements against racial injustice. Social media platforms such as Twitter have served as sources for potential protesters not only to discuss opportunities to protest but also to gain the sense of social embeddedness and community that predicts engagement in social protest movements (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).

As BLM has grown, counternarratives opposing the movement’s ideas have also emerged (Ray et al. 2017). Criticisms of the movement include the argument that “all lives matter” and that the movement represents a deliberate and pernicious effort to cause racial tension. Some critics also believe that protesters have waged a “war on police” (Mac Donald 2015, 2016), and ex-FBI director James Comey (2015) even argued that the movement has resulted in a “Ferguson effect” on policing. The “Ferguson effect” (named as such because of the protests that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri, following the killing of Michael Brown) most commonly refers to the hypothesis that violent crime has risen in urban cities in part because police officers are unwilling to perform their jobs proactively out of a fear of backlash through protests and excessive public scrutiny. The “Ferguson effect” is thus a shorthand way of referring to the “depolicing” effect of widely covered social protests.

Scholars (Maguire, Nix, and Campbell 2016; Shjarback et al. 2017) have maintained that a handful of large cities were responsible for the recent spike in homicide rates and that if homicide rates had not increased in these cities, there would be significantly less panic about rising violence in the nation (Rosenfeld 2016). Still, officers believe that civilians’ attitudes toward policing are worse than in prior years, and negative media attention increases officers’ fears that they will be the victims of false allegations (Nix and Pickett 2017). Further, recent qualitative research (Adams 2019; Deuchar, Fallik, and Crichlow 2019) has revealed that police officers are fearful, that they worry about citizen distrust, and that their morale is lower in the post-Ferguson era, lending credence to the notion that media scrutiny following police scandals has resulted in depolicing. Wolfe and Nix (2016), however, found that when officers believe that the agency they work for is fair, and when they have confidence in their authority, evidence of a “Ferguson effect” disappears.

Although many experts have discredited the possibility of a chilling effect on policing following the protests (Campbell, Nix, and Maguire 2018; Rosenfeld 2015; Shjarback et al. 2017), a debate remains on how the term “Ferguson effect” should even be interpreted. Instead of referring

to a chilling effect of protests on police action, for instance, perhaps it simply refers to the argument that crime rises following highly publicized police scandals. There is less consensus about this version of the Ferguson effect, with scholars noting that crime increased in some cities following police scandals and not in others (Pyrooz et al. 2016).

Yet another interpretation of the “Ferguson effect” has focused less on the impact of police-citizen confrontations on police officers’ willingness to do their jobs, and more on citizens’ trust in the criminal justice system. Desmond, Pappachristos, and Kirk (2016), for instance, argued that public safety may be threatened by highly publicized police violence because these scandals produce a legal cynicism among African Americans, who are then reluctant to report crime after witnessing members of their racial group being harmed and killed by the police. The public’s loss of trust in the police force could thus result in lower reporting of crime, which in turn may result in higher rates of crime. Further, a spike in crime following a highly publicized police scandal may be a violent eruption of citizens’ discontentment with the criminal justice system (Rosenfeld 2016). In this account, any spike in crime following highly publicized police scandals is the product of citizens’ frustration with what they perceive to be a deeply flawed criminal justice system rather than the result of police officers being unwilling to do their jobs. There may thus indeed be a Ferguson effect whereby crime rises following heavily publicized police scandals—but primarily because citizens lose their trust in the police following widespread media coverage of police shootings (Rosenfeld 2016).

As such, the conclusion that violent crime increased following highly publicized police violence and the ensuing public protests is still contested, and even in those cities that saw an increase in crime, it is unclear which interpretation of the “Ferguson effect” best explains the reasons for this spike. Ultimately, although scholars are producing valuable research on the legitimacy of the Ferguson effect, the literature has yet to formulate a clear-cut consensus, resulting in the Ferguson effect still being somewhat “long on anecdotes and short on data” (Deuchar, Fallik, and Crichlow 2019, 1042). Despite many scholars’ arguments that there are only limited grounds to be concerned about a chilling effect on policing, however, the hypothesis has gained traction among members of the public, and the events that triggered and sustained the power of the BLM movement have also been the focus of an immense amount of media attention, as have the BLM protests themselves.

SOCIAL PROTEST AND THE MEDIA

The media’s treatment of social protests impacts viewers’ responses to such protests (McLeod and Detenber 1999), and the media are also instrumental in disseminating information about protests (Andrews and Biggs 2006). In their research on coverage of an anarchist protest, for instance, McLeod and Detenber (1999) found that the media’s support for the status quo made viewers more critical of the protesters and less likely to identify with them. Although freedom of the press can, in principle, be instrumental in keeping the power of the government in check, in reality, the media generally support maintaining the status quo, and they function as an ideological tool that advances state interests (Althusser 1971). For instance, the media treat moderate reform and radical reform protests more critically than protests supporting the status quo, and they tend to ignore radical social protests unless protesters employ extreme tactics that are newsworthy (Boyle et al. 2004). Newspaper coverage of radical protests also places greater em-

phasis on specific events rather than on the goals of the protests (Boyle et al. 2004). Although the impact of media coverage of social protests varies depending on the specific social context being covered, it is therefore clear that the media are instrumental in shaping public awareness and knowledge of the purpose of social protest movements.

Given the grassroots nature of BLM, researchers thus far have focused primarily on the role of social media in the movement. Carney (2016), for instance, examined the use of Twitter to explore the ways in which young people of color were able to use social media to make their voices heard following the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Other researchers have investigated Twitter users’ interaction with BLM-related hashtags (Yang 2016), arguing that such interaction serves to modify the framing of the movement (Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017). The important tie between BLM and social media is therefore well established (M. Brown et al. 2017; Carney 2016; Cox 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017; Langford and Speight 2015; Yang 2016), but there is significantly less research on the relationship between more traditional news media and BLM. In one of the few studies that have touched on this topic, Obasogie and Newman (2016) found that journalists in local newspapers continue to overstate the legitimacy of police use of lethal force, and their coverage of these deaths reflected a trivializing of the lives lost. In their examination of portrayals of BLM in newspapers, Leopold and Bell (2017) relied on literature related to the “protest paradigm,” finding that major newspapers conformed to this paradigm, with news coverage portraying BLM unfavorably. In this study, I utilize the protest paradigm on which Leopold and Bell relied, but I also examine the relevance of an alternative “public nuisance” paradigm (Di Cicco 2010). I describe both of these theoretical frameworks next.

THE PROTEST AND PUBLIC NUISANCE PARADIGMS

Much of the literature on media portrayals of social protest movements has focused on the “protest paradigm,” which draws on the early work of Chan and Lee (1984), arguing that the media assert a “social control function” to suppress the strength of marginalized groups challenging the status quo (Boyle and Schmierbach 2009, 6). According to research in this area, protests are “predestined to be covered negatively” (McCurdy 2012, 245) because of the very nature of journalism, which is driven by extraneous factors such as news cycle lengths and professional standards demanding “objectivity” (McCurdy 2012). Mainstream news media do not cover protests and protesters as they do other topics (Boyle and Schmierbach 2009), and protests that threaten the status quo are particularly at risk for no coverage or negative coverage, with this risk increasing as the threat of the protest movement to the status quo grows (Boyle and Schmierbach 2009). Journalists do not give sources that challenge the status quo the opportunity to present their case fully, the claims of these sources are not seen as “significant” among journalists (Ketchum 2004, 35), and these sources lack control over how they are framed in the news media (Boyle and Schmierbach 2009). Further, journalists do not encourage their audiences to engage in communicative debate about political disagreements that they cover, instead focusing on “discrete facts” (Ketchum 2004, 35) that elide the values that form the basis of oppositional social movements. Driven by their pursuit of sensationalism, media coverage risks justifying the disproportionate policing of protesters challenging the status quo by positioning

them as violent “folk devils” (McCurdy 2012, 245).

Scholars have thus argued convincingly that media outlets tend to dismiss social protests by portraying specific protest behaviors/protesters negatively, while failing to pay attention to the goals and motivations of the protesters (McCurdy 2012). The protest paradigm is specifically characterized by (1) news frames that either emphasize the criminal behavior of protesters or trivialize the protesters’ work; (2) a reliance on official sources and official definitions, instead of those of the protesters; (3) a reliance on bystanders’ (rather than protesters’) voices; (4) delegitimization of the protest, where the protest’s goals are emphasized far less than specific protest events; and (5) demonization of protesters through an emphasis on protester-police conflict or on protesters’ disruptive/criminal behavior (Leopold and Bell 2017; McLeod 2007). Media utilizing the protest paradigm thus portray protests through an overly simplistic, sensationalist lens, emphasizing protesters’ violence instead of their goals and agendas.

Di Cicco (2010) proposed a “public nuisance” paradigm to contrast with the more frequently discussed protest paradigm. Although both paradigms are characterized by negative portrayals of social protests, Di Cicco argued that media coverage of protests was becoming increasingly dismissive, emphasizing the irritations that social protests pose to daily life (rather than the violence and the criminal behavior of protests that are the focus of the protest paradigm). Di Cicco linked the emergence of the public nuisance program to growing conservatism in the United States. Specifically, with the rise of political conservatism in the United States beginning in the mid- to late 1970s, acquiescence to cultural authorities has become a marker of moral uprightness, resulting in the view that protest movements that challenge these authorities are bothersome, morally suspect, and—perhaps most interestingly—unpatriotic. Protesters, when portrayed using the public nuisance paradigm, are depicted as ungrateful for the freedoms enjoyed by Americans. When portrayed in this way, protests are seen as impotent and perhaps even something that should be forbidden because they hurt the nation (Di Cicco 2010). Whereas the focus of the protest paradigm is on the demonization of protesters as violent and criminal, the public nuisance paradigm portrays these protesters as ungrateful, patriotic, and irritating. Di Cicco (2010) further hypothesized that, given the politically conservative roots of the public nuisance paradigm, coverage of protests with liberal ideologies would be more likely to invoke features of this paradigm. By making explicit the role of the political landscape in media coverage, the public nuisance paradigm thus provides helpful context for exploring the variations in media coverage of social protest movements based on the ideologies advanced by the protesters.

The literature on media portrayals of social protests generally and on BLM coverage specifically thus suggests that news media serve to reinforce the status quo, casting a negative light on social protest movements that critique this status quo. However, there is no research exploring the salience of alternatives to the protest paradigm in media coverage of BLM. Leopold and Bell (2017) argued that an examination of news coverage of BLM around the time of the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, was important because it offered a glimpse of media coverage immediately before and after a key event in the movement. In this study, I explore the continued salience of the protest paradigm as well as the alternative public nuisance paradigm in news media during another significant period for BLM, two years after the killing of Michael Brown, and with the divi-

sive 2016 presidential elections coming up. Although there are overlaps in the protest and public nuisance paradigms, examining the role of the latter is particularly important in the months preceding the 2016 elections, given that political conservatism lies at the root of this paradigm. Indeed, Trump’s political rhetoric centers heavily on the promotion of conservative patriotism, embodied most obviously in his campaign slogan: Make America Great Again. The political conservatism that is the basis of the public nuisance paradigm thus goes hand in hand with the brand of patriotism that critics of social protest movements invoke to characterize protesters as ungrateful for American freedoms. As such, although it is reasonable to predict that newspapers would continue to draw primarily on the protest paradigm, the rise to power of Donald Trump—as well as the political causes and consequences of his presidential win—makes the public nuisance paradigm especially relevant in this study.

METHOD SAMPLE

Data for this study were obtained primarily using Westlaw, an online database that contains major newspapers from all over the country. I used the database to search for all headlines containing the term “Black Lives Matter” in eight major US newspapers between April and August 2016: the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Denver Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*. The *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* were not available through the Westlaw database, so I retrieved the sample of reports from these outlets by accessing their online archives. The final sample included 100 articles retrieved from Westlaw, 21 retrieved from the *New York Times* online archive, and 10 retrieved from the *Wall Street Journal* online archive, for a final sample of 131 newspaper articles.

ANALYSIS

I conducted inductive textual analyses of the data using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, focusing on the cultural assumptions underlying the text of the newspaper articles (Dworkin and Wachs 2004). I began with initial open (line-by-line) coding to identify patterns of similarities and differences within the data. Here, I coded for the overall tone of the articles (e.g., emotional, factual, descriptive, etc.); the key actors/claims makers in the article (e.g., police, victim, victim’s family, prosecutor, judge, etc.); and the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement. When coding for key actors/claims makers in the article, I also coded for gender, class (e.g., references to the victim’s structural disadvantages, economic difficulties, etc.), and themes related to policing as an occupation (e.g., police stress, officer commendations, past record of misconduct, etc.). Following the emergence of initial patterns from this open coding scheme, I conducted focused coding to strengthen and develop key emerging themes.

RESULTS

In this section, I present the key themes that consistently emerged during analysis of the articles. First, I describe the key actors and claims makers in articles about BLM. Here, I discuss the surprising invisibility of the African Americans who died as a result of police action, and I discuss which actors and narratives were centered in descriptions of the goals of the movement and its consequences. I then discuss

findings related to the politicization and sensationalizing of the Black Lives Matter movement.

(1) WHOSE STORIES ARE HEARD? ACTORS AND CLAIMS MAKERS IN BLM NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

(1A) THE VICTIMS

Perhaps the most interesting finding stemming from close analysis of the newspapers is the relative invisibility of the African Americans whose deaths triggered the protests. The time period that the sample covers overlapped with the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, but there was very little coverage of the events that led to these deaths. In fact, of the few reports that described any of the events that triggered the movement, one argued that the dominant narrative of Michael Brown’s death was false:

To some, McSpadden represents the suffering of mothers who have lost children to needless gun violence. To others, she represents a far different truth. That truth, read from the comprehensive Justice report, is that her son was a violent aggressor who stole from a convenience store, forcefully shoved a shopkeeper when confronted, and assaulted officer Wilson as he sat in the police car. The unarmed teenager struggled with Wilson for the officer’s weapon before being shot through the hand, turned to run, then turned back to charge the officer, who finally fatally shot the 300-pound Brown. (*USA Today*, July 28, 2016)

It is possible that a search for reports on the victims themselves would yield more substantive coverage of the events that led to their deaths, and I thus do not argue that there was no such coverage in newspapers at all. Rather, I point to the surprising finding that such coverage was absent in reports about the protests that directly followed the deaths of Castile and Sterling. Although the victims’ names were not absent from the reports, missing were descriptions of the incidents that resulted in their deaths. The quotes below exemplify the limited appearance of the victims in the newspaper reports about the movement, and the focus instead on the victims’ families and loved ones.

The show of strength—with hundreds of participants pouring into the streets—comes as leaders of the protest movement say they’ve doubled down on their mission in light of the fatal police shootings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in a St. Paul, Minn., suburb—black men whose deaths were captured on video. (*Washington Post*, July 22, 2016)
Diamond Reynolds, the Minnesota woman whose viral Facebook video of her dying boyfriend, Philando Castile, after a police shooting spurred national protests, said at a Friday news conference that the Dallas shootings were “bigger than all of us.”
“I want justice for everyone, everyone around the world,” she said. (*Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2016)

Instead of highlighting the victims’ lives and the events that caused their deaths, Castile and Sterling were referenced only obliquely as reasons for the protests, and the focus of the articles was instead the protests themselves. In the quote above, for instance, these men were introduced simply as “black men whose deaths were captured on video,” omitting pertinent details about the events leading up to their deaths. Despite the fact that the tragic deaths of Castile and Sterling served as the impetus for the rise in BLM protest activity during the summer of 2016, therefore, the victims’ stories and identities were not the focus of major newspaper articles on BLM during this period.

(1B) THE OFFICERS

It is particularly noteworthy that, compared to the relative invisibility of the African Americans who died as a result of police action, the police officers who died in the Dallas shooting that occurred on July 7, 2016, were at the center of discussions of the incident. Moreover, there were detailed descriptions of how that event unfolded, with real-time accounts from witnesses and bystanders. The quote below is representative of the broader coverage of the Dallas shooting, which portrayed the officers in an unwaveringly positive light. Although this is perhaps neither unexpected nor unjustified, the absence of similarly detailed coverage of the civilians who died as a result of police action is significant.

When Sharay Santora and her two children first arrived in downtown Dallas on Thursday to join the protest, she said the interaction between marchers and officers was peaceful, loving. Officers lined the streets as a massive crowd marched past.
“They gave us high-fives, hugs, were taking selfies,” Santora, 37, told *The Post*. “It was such an instance of love and understanding, that ‘I’m here for you.’ You could feel it. There was no animosity in the air. That was the feeling throughout.” (*Washington Post*, July 8, 2016)

Coverage of the Dallas shootings also focused heavily on the role of the Black Lives Matter movement as a motivating force behind the shooter’s actions. The articles did not always blame the movement explicitly for the incident, instead opting to use “linkage” (Surette and Otto 2001)—the process through which the media convey a connection between two events/phenomena by linking them in a narrative. In the quotes below, for instance, the articles linked the police shootings of African American civilians with the ensuing protests but then linked the protests with the subsequent shooting of the police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge.

But the [Southern Poverty Law Center’s] most recent critique came this summer from some conservatives after ambush shootings killed eight police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, days after Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the country to denounce the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of law enforcement. (*Washington Post*, August 31, 2016)
Criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement exploded after five police officers in Dallas were gunned down during a demonstration against police shootings of two black men in Baton Rouge and suburban Minneapolis. The following week, three police officers were ambushed and shot dead in Baton Rouge. In both cases, black men who expressed anger about the police shootings were believed to be responsible. Both were killed at the scene. (*Washington Post*, July 29, 2016)

It is worth distinguishing the quotations above from the more explicit blaming of the movement that appeared in other reports, as the quote below demonstrates. Instead of implicitly drawing a connection between the protests and the killing of police officers, the article below very explicitly condemned BLM for advancing an antipolice rhetoric. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the articles tied the protests to the deaths of the police officers in Dallas, lending credibility to the perception that members of the Black Lives Matter movement were waging a war against police officers.

Since the Dallas killings, the El Paso police chief told

reporters that Black Lives Matter was “a radical hate group.” Former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani called the group “inherently racist” and said that it essentially put targets on the backs of police officers. (*Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2016)

Whether implicitly or explicitly, therefore, the articles attributed the Dallas police shootings to BLM, focusing far more on the details of these shootings than they did on the details of the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Further, compared to the invisibility of these African American men in reports about the protests that erupted following their deaths, the police officers in Dallas were key actors in articles written about the shootings. These articles relied on bystanders’ positive experiences with the officers before the shootings to portray the officers as innocent victims, while failing to explore in any depth the victimhood of the African American men who died in police shootings in the same period.

(1C) THE PROTESTERS

The protests themselves were described in largely factual terms, and the goals of the movement were often presented from the perspectives of the protesters, centering their voices instead of those of bystanders—a key divergence from the protest paradigm (Leopold and Bell 2017). Themes of racial justice and injustice were thus portrayed through the lens of those most affected by these issues, rather than filtered through the perspective of state-affiliated claims makers. Despite the absence of detail about the people whose deaths were the motivating factors for the protests, the articles were accurate in their descriptions of the movement’s purpose. In fact, the protesters were often portrayed in a positive light, with reports explicitly noting that they were peacefully exercising their First Amendment rights.

From a microphone in the back of a pickup, speakers took turns urging the crowd to focus on the plight of minorities—black, brown and indigenous people—who have been killed in confrontations with police. Dozens in the crowd held signs with the names of men, women and children who were killed in police-involved shootings. (*USA Today*, July 26, 2016)

Given the extensive coverage of the protests themselves, however, there was virtually no content related to any positive impact of the movement. There was the occasional voice of support for the movement’s agenda, arguing that the movement had managed to bring to the forefront issues of racial injustice and inequality, yet quotes like the one below did not appear consistently across the newspapers. Although it is predictable that the cofounder of Black Lives Matter would extol the impact of the movement, it is important to recognize that including her as a claims maker in the first place is a deliberate decision that may reflect the newspaper’s support for the movement.

“Four years ago, no one was talking about black people the ways that we’re talking about black people now,” said Patrisse Cullors, one of the three co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter, the activist network that shares a name with the broader protest movement. “There wasn’t a national narrative around the fight for black lives; there wasn’t a national narrative about how racism still existed.” (*Washington Post*, June 27, 2016)

(1D) CRITICS OF BLM

When the newspapers did focus on the consequences of BLM, it was through the words of politically conservative

claims makers who believed that the “Ferguson effect”—interpreted as the chilling effect on police action of mass protests—was real. As mentioned earlier, this message was embedded in coverage of the Dallas police shootings, which frequently linked the shootings to BLM protests. A particularly prominent claims maker in discussions of the chilling effect of BLM protests was Heather Mac Donald, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Mac Donald was quoted arguing that there was a “war on cops” initiated by protesters and that this war was, in turn, making it difficult for police officers to do their jobs. Mac Donald, along with a number of other politically conservative claims makers (such as Rudolph Giuliani and Donald Trump), was also quoted expressing her belief that the racial disparities that BLM supporters spoke of were misleading at best and factually inaccurate at worst.

“Officers are very race-conscious right now because you’ve got this false narrative that says that cops are the biggest threat facing young black men today, something that [President] Obama, Hillary Clinton and Mayor Bill de Blasio have all seconded,” Mac Donald said on John Catsimatidis’s radio show.

“When officers stop making pedestrian stops, people start carrying guns again,” she said. (*New York Post*, August 1, 2016)

Absent from these reports, however, were the voices of social scientists who have examined the relationship between the protests and policing. The scholarly research on the impact of the movement on policing is admittedly limited, given the recent emergence of the movement. Nevertheless, there was not a single mention of social scientific research exploring the objective validity of any form of a “Ferguson effect.” This absence is particularly significant given the extent to which the newspapers appeared willing to devote space to the argument that BLM was responsible for police demoralization and a subsequent increase in crime. The research on the impact (whether positive or negative) of the movement, while scarce, was ignored entirely in the newspapers. Articles in these newspapers thus focused far more on the possibility that the movement represented a “war on cops” than on the more optimistic possibility that it was successful in combating racial injustice. Indeed, they even failed to consider the possibility that, to the extent that the movements were disrupting policing, this may have been attributable to citizens’ mistrust in the police and not on the movement’s alleged “war on cops.”

(2) POLITICIZING AND SENSATIONALIZING BLACK LIVES MATTER

The sample in this study covered a time frame that led up to the 2016 presidential election, which was particularly contentious. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the newspaper reports in this study linked the Black Lives Matter movement to the ongoing presidential campaigns. Already a politically charged movement, Black Lives Matter was rendered even more political through discussions of its mission against a backdrop of a divisive election in which racial justice was a hotly debated topic.

Giuliani continued his criticism of the movement Monday, saying in a television interview that the group is “inherently racist” and “divides” America. “They don’t mean ‘black lives matter,’” Giuliani said in a Fox News interview Monday. “They mean ‘let’s agitate against the police matters.’” Presumptive GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump

described himself Monday as the “law and order” candidate and declared that the nation must work “to ensure every American feels that their safety is protected.” (*USA Today*, July 12, 2016)

In spite of the newspapers’ lack of coverage of any positive consequences of BLM, they were surprisingly sympathetic in their portrayals of protesters’ critiques of American penal policies. The articles were otherwise quite mute in their assessment of US government policies, which makes their support for criticisms of the American penal system all the more notable. This finding, however, makes more sense when interpreted in the context of the newspapers’ broader focus on politicizing the movement. With the 2016 presidential elections around the corner, the newspapers presented their discussions of BLM in the context of an acrimonious presidential race in which the leading candidates (Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump) held strikingly different positions on criminal justice policies. Against this backdrop, BLM’s critique of crime bills that resulted in the mass incarceration of African American men in particular was a natural focal point for the news media.

In addition to focusing heavily on politicians’ views on the movement, the newspapers also homed in on specific events that underscored the political leanings of BLM. For instance, the newspapers paid a great deal of attention to ex-president Bill Clinton’s heated exchange with protesters when he was confronted with his role in passing the 1994 crime bill, which resulted in the incarceration of massive numbers of African Americans.

For days now, Bill Clinton has been attempting to extricate himself from a confrontation with Black protesters, trying both to hold to his position and step back from it. It’s been an awkward dance. (*Washington Post*, April 13, 2016)

Despite sensationalizing the exchange between Bill Clinton and the BLM supporters, these articles also brought attention to themes of racial injustice by underscoring the role that the ex-president played in bringing about the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the criminal justice system when he signed the 1994 crime bill. This focus was consistent with the reports’ surprisingly detailed coverage of the history of racial injustice in the United States, as can be seen in the quote below, which reminds readers of the similarities between the divisive political and social landscape of 2016 and that of the 1960s.

The nation is so different today that any direct comparison with 1968 rings false. But the racial unrest of the 1960s offers an insight into the not-so-distant roots of many of today’s divisions—and a lesson that would be well-heeded today: Fear is a powerful force in American politics. (*Washington Post*, July 10, 2016)

Unfortunately, the newspapers seemed more willing to critique past social and legal policies than they were to present a similarly critical perspective on current issues of racial injustice. Instead of exploring the connections between historic and contemporary racial inequality, the newspapers opted instead to sensationalize BLM by highlighting squabbles between politicians and protesters. Further, the newspapers sensationalized BLM by portraying it as newsworthy not because of its goals but because of celebrities’ (occasional) connections to the movement. Note (again) in the quote below the centering of the politically conservative perspective and the linkage between BLM and the Dallas police shootings.

But [Beyoncé’s] willingness to be brutally honest about one of the most charged problems facing America today has also drawn vitriol from some conservative outlets and online commenters who have accused the pop star of helping inspire violence against police—including in the aftermath of a Dallas shooting after an otherwise peaceful Black Lives Matter protest Thursday night that left five police officers dead and seven others wounded. (*Washington Post*, July 10, 2016)

Although music stars, athletes, and other celebrities brought attention to the movement, the newspapers focused less on BLM and more on the celebrities themselves and the public’s response to their views on the movement. The newspapers’ focus on specific events during which celebrities commented on the movement thus detracted from their emphasis on the historical and sociopolitical roots of BLM, devoting space instead to the relatively frivolous controversy generated by the celebrities’ engagement with the movement.

DISCUSSION

Scholars studying how the media frame news stories have reported that the media often employ a “one-sided” framing that fails to account for the complex and multifaceted nature of newsworthy events (Norris, Kern, and Just 2004). Indeed, the media’s ideological power lies partly in their ability to filter out narratives that compete with the one(s) they wish to disseminate (Surette and Otto 2001). A result of the filtering process in the media is that certain perspectives are given more credibility, attention, and legitimacy than others.

This one-sided framing was particularly evident in the current study. Consistent with Leopold and Bell’s (2017) study, there was strong evidence in this study of the “protest paradigm.” A key element of this paradigm is the use of news frames that highlight certain negative features of protests, offering at best an incomplete story about the protest. In this study, the newspapers focused on the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement primarily by including the voices of claims makers who believe that the movement was responsible for waging a “war on police,” resulting in the deaths of police officers. In reality, criminological research has concluded that the number of fatal police shootings neither increased nor decreased post-Ferguson, suggesting that concerns about the effect of heavily publicized police scandals (and ensuing protests) on police fatalities are based on weak analyses and random, short-term fluctuations (Campbell, Nix, and Maguire 2018). Despite this reality, newspapers relied heavily on crime story and riot frames that emphasized the criminal behavior and disorder caused by the protests.

The use of crime and riot frames is problematic because it suggests to readers who rely on the articles for understanding the nature and impact of the protests that the movement poses a threat—both to officers directly and to the community generally—to the extent that protests result in diminished police responsiveness to calls. In reality, as mentioned earlier, the research on the general impact of the movement on police action is at best mixed, making the absence of criminologists’ and sociologists’ perspectives on the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on police action all the more notable. The usage of a riot frame to depict the movement’s impact as negative and dangerous reflects what Leopold and Bell (2017) labeled “blame attribution”: the tendency of news coverage to attribute crime or violence to protesters even when there is limited evidence

that such attribution is warranted. This type of blame attribution was evident in the exhaustive focus on the connection between the protests and the Dallas shootings.

A critical analysis of the framing of the movement as antipolice requires a closer examination of the relationship between the media and the state. Scholars have argued that the media function as a tool for the state to advance its power (Althusser 1971) by exploiting their ability both to create knowledge as well as to mute competing narratives that threaten the dominant discourse. Taken together, the findings in this study reinforce the view that the media serve the government’s interests over those of grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter (Boyle et al. 2004). Consistent with prior research (Boyle et al. 2004), as a social movement that is heavily critical of the status quo of race relations in the United States, BLM did not generally appear to have the support of the news media. The findings in this study thus provide support for the argument that social movements such as BLM are constrained in their ability to confront hegemonic power such as that wielded by the government (in this case represented by the police).

More significantly, the findings here directly call into question the belief that the media foster an “us versus them” perspective that disadvantages officers by sensationalizing the deaths of African American citizens (Deputy Matt 2014). Although police officers may feel that their mistrust of the media is justified (Deputy Matt 2014), the newspapers examined here demonstrate strong support for police officers insofar as they portrayed the police victims of the Dallas shooting unwaveringly positively, and they devoted a significant amount of time and space to discussions of the negative consequences of BLM on officers.

Despite the ample evidence of the protest paradigm in this study, the findings here also point to the importance of considering political context in discussions of media coverage of social protests. To this end, the public nuisance paradigm is particularly helpful: it overlaps with the protest paradigm insofar as both feature negative portrayals of social protests, but it offers a more nuanced way of understanding *which* protests are portrayed in a negative light and *why*. Specifically, because of a rise in political conservatism, the public nuisance paradigm portrays liberal protests more negatively than protests espousing more conservative ideologies (Di Cicco 2010). As was seen in this study, in an era of strong political conservatism, liberal protesters’ rejection of the legitimacy of state institutions’ authority resulted in more critical media coverage. The findings in this study support Di Cicco’s contention that, with the rise of political conservatism, social protest movements that question cultural authorities (such as the police) are increasingly portrayed as bothersome and—more importantly—unpatriotic. The articles in this sample highlighted the voices of conservative critics of BLM, such as Donald Trump, Rudolph Giuliani, and Heather Mac Donald. Importantly, these critics couched their objections in explicitly moral terms, condemning the movement for waging a “war on police” and for promoting racial divisiveness. The framing of BLM as antipolice is reflective of what political scientists have termed “uncritical patriotism,” a brand of patriotism demonstrated more strongly among political conservatives. Uncritical patriotism is linked to an authoritarianism that is, in turn, characterized by “a tendency to defer to authority figures and support them unconditionally” (Huddy and Khatib 2007, 64). The moral condemnation of BLM for its failure to respect the authority of the police thus represents an invocation of an uncritical patriotism that is consistent with conservative ideology, thus pointing to the relevance

and importance of the public nuisance paradigm.

In contrast to the media’s focus on the negative consequences of BLM, Boykoff and Laschever (2011) found that media covering the Tea Party movement (a politically conservative social protest movement) defined that movement in generally favorable terms. In fact, the authors argued that the positive coverage of the Tea Party movement in US media helped the movement to develop a solid basis for successful collective action. The finding that a politically conservative protest movement was covered favorably by the media underscores the impact that BLM’s liberal ideology likely had on how it was covered by the newspapers in this study. Although the protest paradigm is helpful in making sense of the newspapers’ emphasis on the dangers to public safety posed by the protests, the public nuisance paradigm highlights the significance of the political conservatism to which Di Cicco (2010) has pointed. Specifically, when interpreted using the public nuisance paradigm, it is unsurprising that critics featured so heavily in articles about the BLM movement, given the liberal ideology of the movement and its persistent questioning of the moral authority and legitimacy of the police force.

The public nuisance paradigm is especially relevant in the period covered in this study because the centering of critiques of BLM as unpatriotic, irresponsible, and immoral in articles preceding the 2016 presidential elections was likely a deliberate choice made against a backdrop of newsworthy racial debates occurring in the political sphere. Indeed, the central role played by political claims makers and actors such as Donald Trump, Rudolph Giuliani, and even the more politically progressive Bill Clinton (all of whom participated in political debates about race during the buildup to the 2016 elections) is evidence that the newspapers reflected the political upheaval of that period. Although there continues to be strong evidence of the protest paradigm in portrayals of BLM (Leopold and Bell 2017), therefore, the findings in this study suggest that the public nuisance paradigm—with its emphasis on the political landscape against which media coverage is constructed—offers an even more nuanced way to interpret the negative media attention that BLM garnered.

In communicating messages related to crime and justice, the media make claims that are either factual or interpretative (Surette 2015). The reports in this study relied on factual claims in describing the history of racial injustice in the United States, but the impact of BLM was presented primarily through interpretative claims, using claims makers who (as mentioned) focused on the negative consequences of the BLM protests. Missing, however, were consistent interpretative claims that spoke of the possible benefits of the movement—a finding that reflects the newspapers’ commitment to riot and crime story frames instead of more positive frames that have been used to cover conservative social protests (Boykoff and Laschever 2011). It is, of course, possible that the articles failed to mention any positive impact of BLM because there is no such demonstrable impact yet. Once again, because the movement emerged so recently, there is limited empirical evidence of what the movement has actually accomplished. This does not, however, explain why the reports did not focus on the views of scholars who have begun the complicated task of examining the legitimacy of the “Ferguson effect.” Further, reports of celebrities lending their names to the movement presented a natural opportunity to describe the positive social impact of this movement—but the newspapers instead focused on the fractious response of the public to the celebrities’ involvement, opting to sensationalize discussions of the movement

instead of focusing on informing the public of its goals.

In spite of the lack of content regarding any positive consequences of BLM, it is important to note that the portrayals of the protests and protesters were not uniformly—or even explicitly—negative or critical. Contrary to Leopold and Bell’s (2017) study, the articles in this study diverged from the protest paradigm by displaying a remarkable depth and sensitivity when disseminating information about the contexts in which the protests emerged. Specifically, there was limited evidence of the “delegitimization” that is a key component of the protest paradigm, whereby media coverage of protests fails to consider the goals of the movement, instead defining the movement by the actions of the protesters. Leopold and Bell (2017) found that the articles they analyzed emphasized the protesters’ theatrical strategies without describing the goals of the movement. In contrast, the reports in this study devoted significant space to careful considerations of the roots of BLM. For example, in discussions of mass incarceration in the United States, the articles featured scholars and activists as claims makers, presenting a critical perspective that stood in stark contrast to the articles’ portrayal of the chilling effect of BLM on police action.

One could argue that the newspapers’ willingness to critique the American penal system by presenting a historical perspective on racial injustice contradicts the claim that the media tend to promote narratives that are “dramatic, are favored by powerful groups, and are related to preestablished cultural themes” (Surette 2015, 35). However, these critiques of mass incarceration are less surprising than they would have been several decades ago, and they may, in fact, even be seen as a “preestablished cultural theme” in recent years. Research has demonstrated that Americans have grown more critical of the government’s “get tough” criminal justice policies (Ramirez 2013), and politicians and policymakers all over the country have joined the movement to reduce the prison population (Pickett 2016), resulting in a recent shift toward decarceration (Phelps and Pager 2016). The fact that the newspapers critiqued the government’s criminal justice policies is thus less surprising and novel when one recognizes that American culture already appears gradually to be shifting toward supporting a less punitive state. The critique of mass incarceration may also be rooted in the role that criminal justice reform played in the 2016 presidential elections, as evidenced by the heavy coverage of BLM protesters’ challenge of the Clinton campaign because of Bill Clinton’s crime bill in the 1990s. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to test this hypothesis, it is possible that the emphasis on criminal justice reform in the 2016 presidential elections (and the heavy role that BLM played in bringing about that emphasis) resulted in less “delegitimization” of BLM compared to coverage a few years earlier (Leopold and Bell 2017).

Although Americans’ attitudes may generally have become less punitive over the years, however, racial resentment continues to be a strong predictor of Americans’ punitive views (E. K. Brown and Socia 2017). Whether the well-known racial typification of crime was captured in the newspaper articles was impossible to determine because the victims of police violence were simply not the focus of the articles. The relative absence of focus on the victims of police action themselves, however, is noteworthy because even reports that critiqued American penal policies and that also dwelt on the American history of racial injustice did not underscore the extent to which the latter has influenced (and continues to influence) the former. This is a particularly important finding because it suggests that media cover-

age of BLM accurately reflects the fact that Americans are less supportive of punitive penal policies than they used to be; but it also reflects the fact that Americans’ changing views have little to do with concerns about racial justice.

To conclude, in his recommendations for moving away from the protest paradigm, McLeod (2007, 192–94) argued that media should identify key issues and stakeholders; explain the positions and rationales of stakeholders; explain the protests’ underlying policy implications; consider using a debate frame that presents both sides of the issue being protested; give voice to protesters; seek responses from institutions being challenged; ignore bystanders in the protest; take the time to write important (rather than acceptable) stories; and avoid the pitfalls of the protest paradigm. The articles in this study reflect success in at least some of these areas. The reports did, in fact, discuss the goals of the movement (thereby identifying key issues); they described them through the perspectives of the protesters (thereby giving them voice); they included responses from police agencies and officers who were being challenged by the movement; and the authors took the time to delve into the historical roots of the racial injustice being protested.

However, despite representing the goals of the movement faithfully through the perspectives of protesters, the movement’s goal of raising awareness of racial injustice was sidelined in favor of more sensational stories linking the movement with violence against police. Moreover, the reports relied heavily on bystander accounts of the Dallas police shootings, emphasizing the voices of less-informed members of the community instead of relying on the perspectives of experts in race and policing. Perhaps most frustratingly, the reports reverted to writing “acceptable” rather than “important” (McLeod 2007) stories when they focused on celebrity involvement with the movement. These articles only superficially mentioned the protesters’ goals, instead opting to focus on the public controversy that celebrities generated by voicing opinions on the movement. Ultimately, however, although articles in this study did not completely avoid the pitfalls of the protest paradigm, there was significant departure from this paradigm. This may reflect the fact that the 2016 presidential elections were around the corner (making the “public nuisance” paradigm a more relevant theoretical framework for understanding coverage of BLM during this period), but it may also reflect the gradual growth in BLM’s legitimacy in mainstream media.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study represents one of very few scholarly examinations of how mainstream news media portray the Black Lives Matter movement. An inductive analysis of articles related to the BLM movement in some of the country’s leading newspapers reveals a disproportionate focus on the negative effects of the movement on police, despite mixed findings about such effects in the scholarly research. Missing from the reports is any discussion of the positive consequences of the Black Lives Matter protests. Future research should explore in more depth these positive consequences, and perhaps more importantly, academics and social scientists should attempt to make their research more accessible to nonacademic audiences to help counteract the newspapers’ emphasis on politically conservative viewpoints. Developing liaisons between academics and journalists would be especially helpful in facilitating movement away from an overreliance on a protest paradigm that characterizes protesters as dangerous and violent.

This sample covers a relatively short time frame, and future researchers may examine how portrayals of BLM develop as the movement gains or loses momentum based on further interactions between African Americans and police officers as well as on broader policy changes intended to respond to calls to reduce racial inequality. The salience of BLM in articles discussing the 2016 elections reveals the extent to which portrayals of the movement are heavily contingent on temporal social and political events. Activists and journalists should also be aware of the impact of political context on media coverage of social protest movements that question the status quo. In addition to taking seriously McLeod’s (2007) recommendations for strategies to shift news media’s focus on the protest paradigm, journalists should be sensitive to the dangers of reinforcing dominant political rhetoric about the impact of protests on public safety—especially when this rhetoric is not supported by social scientific research. Put differently, just as McLeod warned of the dangers of an overreliance on the protest paradigm, the findings here suggest that journalists should be wary of an overreliance on the public nuisance paradigm.

Finally, the literature on social movements, media, and race would benefit from further investigations of how media portrayals of BLM shift based on current events. In particular, there is merit in continuing the effort advanced in this

study of applying theoretical frameworks that move beyond the oft-discussed protest paradigm to explore in a more nuanced way how the prevailing political and social landscape shapes coverage of social protest movements such as BLM.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The author has no competing interests to report.

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