



Without reporters amplifying their message, Black Lives Matter protesters have to do the job themselves. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

What do we want? Unbiased reporting! When do we want it? During protests!

January 16, 2020 8.59am EST

The new decade is just days old, but in one respect it is already shaping up like the last one: with mass protests around the world.

Rallies for democracy overseas and anti-war demonstrations in the U.S. come on the back of a year that saw people take to the streets over issues including human rights abuse, corruption and climate change.

Yet, despite the popularity of movements like the global climate strike and the massive women's marches around the globe, most people don't actually attend these events. The general public's opinions about protests and the social movements behind them are instead formed in large part by what they read or see in the media. That puts pressure on journalists to get things right.

But my research has found that some protest movements have more trouble than others in getting coverage that treats them and their issues seriously. In a recent study, my co-author Summer Harlow and I looked at local and metropolitan newspaper coverage of protests. We found that narratives about the women's march and anti-Trump protests gave voice to protesters and significantly explored

Author



Danielle K. Kilgo

Assistant Professor, Indiana University

their grievances. On the other end of the spectrum, protests about anti-black racism and indigenous people's rights received the least legitimizing coverage.

Forming the narrative

Decades ago, scholars James Hertog and Douglas McLeod identified how news coverage of protests contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, a phenomenon referred to as “the protest paradigm.” They held that media narratives tend to emphasize the drama, inconvenience and disruption of protests rather than the demands, grievances and agendas of protesters. These narratives trivialize protests and ultimately dent public support.

Here's how this theoretically plays out today:

Journalists pay little attention to protests that aren't dramatic or unconventional.

Knowing this, protesters find ways to capture media and public attention. They don pink “pussy” hats or kneel during the national anthem. They might even resort to violence and lawlessness. Now the protesters have the media's attention, but what they cover is often superficial or delegitimizing, focusing on the tactics and disruption caused and excluding discussion on the substance of the social movement.

We wanted to explore if this classic theory fit coverage from 2017 – a year of large-scale protests accompanying the first year of Donald Trump's presidency.

To do so, we analyzed the framing of protest reporting from newspapers in Texas. The state's size and diversity made it a good proxy for comparison with the country at large.

In all, we identified 777 articles by searching for terms such as “protest,” “protester,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “Women's March.” This included reports written by journalists in 20 Texas newsrooms, such as the El Paso Times and the Houston Chronicle, as well as syndicated articles from sources like the Associated Press.

We looked at how articles framed the protests in the headline, opening sentence and story structure, and classified the reporting using four recognized frames of protest:

- Riot: Emphasizing disruptive behavior and the use or threat of violence.
- Confrontation: Describing protests as combative, focusing on arrests or “clashes” with police.
- Spectacle: Focusing on the apparel, signs, or dramatic and emotional behavior of protesters.
- Debate: Substantially mentioning protester's demands, agendas, goals and grievances.

In contrast, Dakota Pipeline and anti-black racism related protests got legitimizing coverage less than 25% of the time and were more likely to be described as disruptive and confrontational.

In coverage of a St. Louis protest over the acquittal of a police officer who killed a black man, violence, arrest, unrest and disruption were the leading descriptors, while concern about police brutality and racial injustice was reduced to just a few mentions. Buried more than 10 paragraphs down was the broader context: “The recent St. Louis protests follow a pattern seen since the August 2014 killing of Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson: the majority of demonstrators, though angry, are law-abiding.”

As a consequence of variances in coverage, Texas newspaper readers may form the perception that some protests are more legitimate than others. This contributes to what we call a “hierarchy of social struggle,” in which the voices of some advocacy groups are lifted over others.

Lurking bias

Journalists contribute to this hierarchy by adhering to industry norms that work against less established protest movements. On tight deadlines, reporters may default to official sources for statements and data. This gives authorities more control of narrative framing. This practice especially becomes an issue for movements like Black Lives Matter that are countering the claims of police and other officials.

Implicit bias also lurks in such reporting. Lack of diversity has long plagued newsrooms.

Protest coverage varied widely

Texas papers were more likely to write positively about the aims of protests related to health and immigration, compared to those about racism.

	Riot	Confrontation	Spectacle	Legitimizing
Anti-black racism	43%	25%	55%	22%
Anti-Trump	20%	30%	61%	43%
International	17%	23%	69%	29%
Dakota Pipeline	12%	75%	75%	15%
Immigration	9%	19%	70%	52%
Gender	4%	3%	59%	44%
NFL	1%	0%	71%	25%
Health and environment	0%	19%	75%	56%
Local	0%	7%	59%	41%

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Danielle K. Kilgo, Indiana University • [Get the data](#)

We also kept an eye out for sourcing patterns to identify imbalances that often give more credence to authorities than protesters and advocates.

Overall, news coverage tended to trivialize protests by focusing most often on dramatic action. But some protests suffered more than others.

Reports focused on spectacle more often than substance. Much was made of the **what protesters were wearing**, crowd sizes – large and small, **celebrity involvement** and **flaring tempers**.

The substance of some marches got more play than others. Around half of the reports on anti-Trump protests, immigration rallies, women’s rights demonstrations and environmental actions included substantial information about protesters’ grievances and demands.

Who gets quoted?

Most of the coverage by Texas newsrooms in 2017 wasn't balanced. For some types of protests, official sources appeared more often, and for others, protesters were given more space.

	Protester-dominant	Balanced sourcing	Official-dominant	Neither
Local	30%	19%	11%	41%
International	29%	14%	17%	40%
NFL	17%	13%	27%	43%
Anti-black racism	23%	8%	30%	39%
Anti-Trump	41%	7%	13%	39%
Immigration	54%	7%	12%	26%
Health and environment	59%	6%	9%	25%
Dakota Pipeline	23%	3%	15%	60%
Gender	45%	3%	5%	47%

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Danielle K. Kilgo, Indiana University • [Get the data](#)

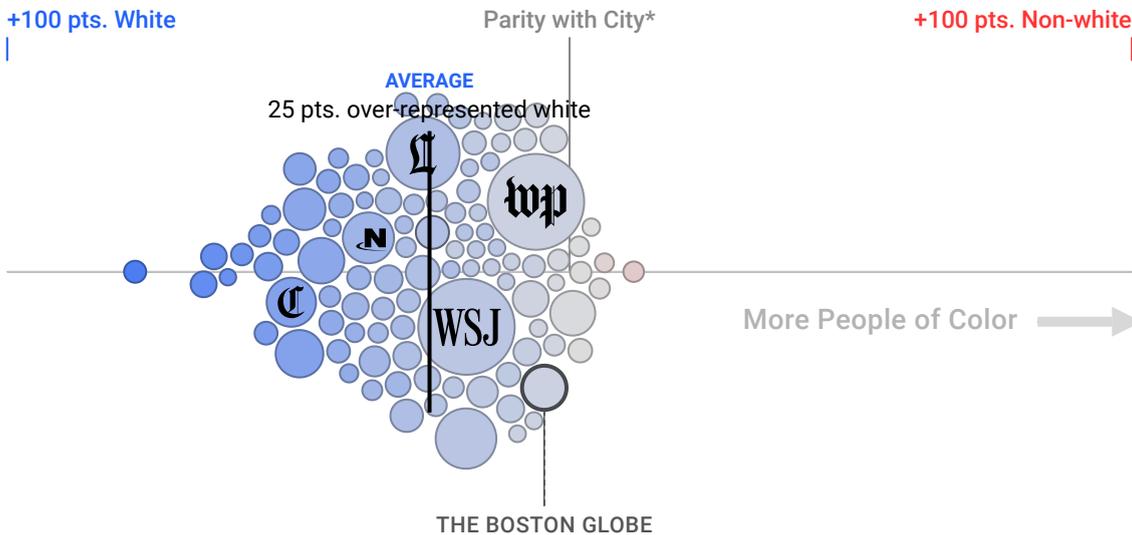
How Diverse Are US Newsrooms?

The Newspaper Diversity Survey measures the percentage of women and minorities working in US newsrooms. The results from 2018's survey are in.

FILTER

- Gender
- Race**
- Results
- Newsroom Leaders
- Top Newsrooms
- Change
- My Newsroom

NEWSROOM WHITE/NON-WHITE BREAKDOWN VS. AUDIENCE



In Partnership with [The Conversation](#) [EMBED THIS CHART](#)

In 2017, the proportion of white journalists at The Dallas Morning News and the Houston Chronicle was more than double the proportion of white people in each city.

Protests identify legitimate grievances in society, and often tackle issues that affect people who lack the power to address them through other means. That's why it is imperative that journalists do not resort to shallow framing narratives that deny significant and consistent space to air the afflicted's concerns while also comforting the very comfortable status quo.

[*Deep knowledge, daily.* Sign up for The Conversation's newsletter.

- Protest
- Journalism
- Protesting
- Donald Trump
- Black Lives Matter
- Race bias
- Women's march