

## Image-Text Congruency in Legacy Press Coverage of Iran's 2019 Bloody November: A Shift Away From the Protest Paradigm?

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This article reports on one salient case where the departure from the protest paradigm was partially met, resulting in incongruent multimodal news content. The case involves the nationwide anti-government protests across Iran in November 2019 because of the drastic hike in petroleum prices. This study conducts a content analysis of citizen eyewitness imagery and the coverage of six Western mainstream news outlets. Our findings show that in words, the news pieces legitimized the protests. The majority of imagery, however, delegitimized protests by focusing on scenes of vandalism, fire, and rare depictions of violent police intervention. The observed incongruency could potentially hinder the learning, sympathy, and engagement of readers with the news stories. We argue that more meticulous observation is required by news outlets when selecting visuals to report to achieve a more informed news compound.

*Keywords: visual gatekeeping, citizen journalism, protests paradigm, Iran, text-image congruency, visual framing*

The legacy news media have traditionally adhered to the “protest paradigm” when covering political protests (Chan & Lee, 1984). Via this framing device, protests challenging the status quo are often delegitimized partially by favoring official over nonofficial sources and dramatic over uneventful imagery (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). The result is often to portray protests as illegitimate and violent.

Although the protest paradigm persists, some shift away has been noticed. The paradigm seems to vary across “different types of protests, by different media, and different types of societies” (Lee, 2014, p. 2726). One factor contributing to this shift in protest coverage is the rise of a more participatory media ecology featuring citizen journalism. The on-site images created by protesters or onlookers now add to and sometimes challenge what might otherwise be a legacy tendency toward the protest paradigm.

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This article focuses on one salient case where the departure from the protest paradigm is expected: covering protests in a distant government—one not favored by Western nations—alongside substantial citizen journalism offering a perspective counter to the government's. The case involves the nationwide anti-government protests across Iran in November 2019 in response to a drastic hike in the national price of petroleum. In response to the protests, the Iranian government largely shut down the Internet, with the only non-state narratives about the protests coming from protesters or onlookers who managed to get through during rare periods of connectivity.

Through qualitative content analysis, this study examines the content of 580 citizen videos that emerged from Iran during the protest period. It explores how much of this content was picked up by the Western legacy press covering Iran at the time and how the selected citizen content was rhetorically framed in legacy news coverage.

This study contributes two key insights: First, it provides a clearer picture of legacy media's growing reliance on citizen journalism. Second, although it partially confirms that the protest paradigm predominantly applies to national-level politics, it reveals that deviations from this paradigm are mostly limited to textual content. Visuals, likely shaped by ingrained stereotypes of protest imagery, tend to remain within the paradigm, even when accompanying texts diverge. The existing literature on the protest paradigm predominantly focuses on the textual aspects of news coverage, leaving the role of visuals underexplored. This is a significant gap, given the unique power of visual elements in multimodal news to shape public perceptions of social movements. By addressing this gap, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between visual and textual elements in news coverage of social movements, extending the analysis beyond the U.S. context.

### **The Iranian Nationwide Protests of November 2019 and the Coverage of the Protests by Iranian State Media**

Even before the government announced the price of petrol, the Iranian public was under significant strain from the government's deficiencies. Then, on November 14, 2019, the government announced a 50% hike in the national price of petroleum (Cunningham, 2019a). The next day, massive protests broke out across the country, the "deadliest"—in body count—anti-government unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (The World Staff, 2019). The Iranian authorities, however, had learned a lesson from the 2009 Green Movement,<sup>1</sup> because of which Iran was labeled the "birthplace of citizen journalism" (Baird, 2010). This time, the government instituted a nationwide Internet shutdown to cut information dissemination. With censored content on Iranian state media and a weeklong Internet outage, rare moments of connectivity ("Internet Disrupted," 2019) became the only means to upload occasional videos.

In covering the protests, the Iranian state media downplayed police abuse of protesters, including actual deaths resulting from unlawful police use of lethal force. On November 19, 2019, four days after the initial protests, the government acknowledged the deaths of only 12 protesters and members of Iran's

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<sup>1</sup> The spontaneous mass demonstration erupted in Iran on June 23, 2009, against the officially declared victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Dabashi, 2013).

security forces (Wintour, 2019b). On December 16, 2019, Amnesty International reported 304 deaths (Batra, 2019). By December 23, 2019, Reuters had reported a death toll of about 1,500 (Reuters Staff, 2019). By May 30, 2020, Iran's minister officially stated that the death toll ranged from 200 to 225 ("Iran Minister," 2020). Finally, by February 27, 2021, Iran International reported a total of 3,000 deaths ("New Report," 2021).

This biased way of covering the protests aligns with the state's decades-long effort "of twisting and falsifying the truth, spreading lies and attempting to deceive and mislead" (Al-Sulami, 2022, para. 8). What primarily aired on Iranian state TV was the imagery of protestors' destruction, aggression, and lack of control. State TV showed images of burned-out buildings, charred vehicles, shattered storefronts, and the putatively irrational individuals responsible for the havoc, calling the protestors "thugs" (Cunningham, 2019b) (Figures 1 and 2). This imagery aligned perfectly with the blame Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, placed on the "sabotage" of foreign enemies. The "sabotage and arson," Khamenei maintained, was being "done by hooligans, not our people. The counter-revolution and Iran's enemies have always supported sabotage and breaches of security and continue to do so" (Wintour, 2019a, para. 3).



**Figure 1. An individual destroying an ATM (IRIB News, 2019, 04:44:15).**



**Figure 2. An individual climbing a governmental building (IRIB News, 2019, 01:44:15).**

### Literature Review

#### *The Protest Paradigm*

Research highlights a general pattern of reporting protests negatively. As in other examples of framing, in the “protest paradigm” (Chan & Lee, 1984), some realities of an event are omitted (Gitlin, 1980). In that regard, “news stories about protests tend to focus on the protesters’ appearances rather than their issues, emphasize their violent actions rather than their social criticism, pit them against the police rather than their chosen targets, and downplay their effectiveness” (McLeod & Detenber, 1999, p. 3). This frame results partially from an over-reliance on official sources that are wont to see a protest as a “riot” or “crime story” and from focusing on the theatrical aspects of the protests (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Past news coverage of Iranian protests has also exemplified this pattern. During the Green Movement, for instance, the legacy media’s sourcing practices favored official sources (Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Knight, 2012). The literature explains this tendency through the importance of source credibility for journalists and the hardship of verifying alternative sources, such as citizen journalism (Mortensen, 2015).

News media outlets may not even cover protests unless protesters engage in dramatic and violent action, drawn by the question of “newsworthiness” (Herkenrath & Knoll, 2011). This pattern follows from journalists’ concerns about audience emotional engagement (Mast & Temmerman, 2021) and coheres with the “dramatization bias” (Bennett, 2016) that characterizes journalism in news outlets funded by advertising revenue. The dramatization bias holds that in covering events, those aspects that tend to be easily dramatized in simple narratives as opposed to a more analytical approach are more likely to be reported. Some evidence indicates that some extreme tactics, such as casting the event as a battle between the

protesters and police, are likely to align with these traditional Western news values (McLeod & Detenber, 1999) and to contribute to adherence to the protest paradigm (Arpan et al., 2006; McLeod & Hertog, 1999).

Visual coverage of protests is significantly important in shaping news audiences' understanding of the issue and their level of support for protestors. News coverage often presents visions of protestors committing acts of destruction, prompting the intervention of law enforcement to ensure public safety (Eastman, 2020). In other words, "ongoing, peaceful protest, from the media's viewpoint, [is] an old story" that fails to draw and maintain viewers' attention (Wittebols, 1996, p. 348). The absence of visuals of police initiating violence before the protestors employ counter-violence could result in protestors, rather than police, being framed as responsible for the disorder. These portrayals, in turn, negatively shape the audience's interpretation of the protests, favoring the following oppression (Brown & Mourão, 2021; Mosallaei, 2024).

Recent studies have argued, however, that not all protests are portrayed as illegitimate. What seems to make a difference in this regard includes news institutions' political ideologies, their identification with protestors' grievances (Lee, 2014), and, in the case of international protest coverage, the political interests of a news outlet's home government (Adegbola, Gearhart, & Cho, 2022; Herkenrath & Knoll, 2011; Teneboim-Weinblatt, 2014). As might be expected, hostility between two governments affects how protests against a foreign government are covered. Specifically, all things being equal, news outlets tend to cover protests more favorably when they are demanding change from governments that are opposed to their own, as is the case under study, the coverage of the 2019 protests in Iran by Western mainstream media.

### ***Citizen Journalism***

The participatory content-creating culture has significantly changed journalists' sourcing practices. Some journalists continue to believe that citizens are generally unqualified to produce news outside breaking stories (Reich, 2008) or soft news content (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Nevertheless, scholarship on eyewitness imagery and crisis communication strongly affirms the value of firsthand and authentic news from nonprofessional journalists. This assessment particularly holds for coverage of distant crises (Ahva & Hellman, 2015). With technological developments in the news ecology, ordinary people's reports from crisis areas have become even more critical. As is so in the case under consideration here, some political crises in authoritarian societies are accompanied by curtailed dissemination of information, including Internet shutdowns designed intentionally to disrupt the mobilization of collective action. The Internet shutdown in the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the 2007 demonstrations in Burma are two important examples (Buck, 2007; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Another important instance is the Iranian Green Movement. In addition to limiting access to X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube, the Iranian government barred all journalists working for foreign media organizations "from reporting from the streets, with a ban on images and eyewitness descriptions of the protests and violence" (Plunkett, 2009, para. 2). However, as in the cases of Egypt and Burma, the restrictions did not prevent citizen journalists from sharing eyewitness imagery with the world through new technology.

Indeed, living in the current era allows journalists access to millions of images. The rise of “social discovery” services, such as Facebook’s “Signal,” has allowed affiliated journalists easy access to citizen content posted on social media by public accounts. Such services can alleviate some time constraints that overworked journalists face in fast-paced journalism environments and discover what is trending in more detail. Journalists can use these tools to access all global trends that ordinary citizens cannot easily access (Usher, 2017) to reach a more “objective” and inclusive account.

In addressing the issue of “objectivity” prevalent in Western journalism (Blaagaard, 2013), and in the case of citizens’ participation from distant and crisis regions, “pragmatic objectivity” (Ward, 2004), which does not presuppose a universal idea of objectivity, suggests taking advantage of amateur images and leveling the potential biases in them by looking at many images. There is no foundational method for determining which point of view is better in accord with reality, and the determination needs to be made on a case-by-case basis by considering background knowledge and the evidence at hand. This understanding of objectivity makes relying on citizen journalism accounts less challenging when covering news.

With the 2019 protests in Iran, even before the government’s Internet shutdown, independent reporting from Iran had been compromised by international tensions, diminishing the number of foreign journalists in the country. The shutdown made matters worse. Only images from eyewitnesses could potentially provide counter-narratives to the sanctioned narrative of the state media and allow the international press to resist the standard protest paradigm, a possibility explored in the present analysis.

### ***Visual Elements’ Significance in Multimodal Content***

Research has investigated the impacts of multimodal content on learning, issue perception, and information recall. Cue summation theory (Severin, 1967) suggests that multimodal content enhances learning by providing additional relevant cues via each channel compared with single-channel communications. This effect is also supported by the dual-coding theory (Paivio, 1971), which proposes two distinct cognitive subsystems specialized for two different types of stimuli. It implies that text and images are processed separately by independent subsystems, and their combination facilitates information recall more effectively than either mode alone (Paivio, 1986). On the same note, Graber (1990) argues that visuals are a crucial component of television news and can significantly enhance viewers’ learning, retention, and recall of information. This is echoed in other studies that suggest that the successful combination of images and texts significantly improves learning (e.g., Schnotz, 2002).

The picture superiority effect (Paivio, 1991) holds that images are recalled more easily than words because images contain more informational content (Graber, 1996). In addition, images, more than texts, are attention-grabbing (Garcia & Stark, 1991). They evoke heightened emotions compared with texts (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006), which, subsequently, may result in augmented persuasion in the audience (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). Thus, when the image and text are incongruent (i.e., they provide different meanings), “attention-grabbing images may dominate and override divergent textual information” (Powell et al., 2015, p. 1001) and neutralize or even oppose the message embedded in the text.

Although the importance of studying the visual content of news stories alongside the news text is well-established, multimodal analysis of news imagery focusing on visual elements is scarce, especially about nonlocal protests. Some exceptions include the works of Alonso-Belmonte and Porto (2020) and Doufesh and Briel (2021), which explore the 2018 protests in the Gaza Strip against the U.S. Embassy's relocation from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem through multimodal content analysis, and O'Halloran et al.'s (2021) study, which approaches multimodality through computational models for big data, including the analysis of Black Lives Matter protests. This study seeks to build on the existing literature by conducting a visual analysis of the protests, given the distinctive impact such an analysis can have on audience perceptions.

### Research Questions

Recent literature suggests that the protest paradigm has begun to relax its grip on the mainstream press, which is becoming more accepting of citizen journalism (Adegbola et al., 2022; Brown, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverria, 2018; Cottle, 2008; Lee, 2014; Teneboim-Weinblatt, 2014). These accounts highlight data that are typically censored at the level of state news, including the states' brutal oppression of the protesters. The protest paradigm traditionally relies on official sources, contributing to the delegitimizing nature of mainstream discourse. However, when news outlets cover regimes opposed by their own governments, there tends to be less reliance on these official sources, marking a departure from the protest paradigm. In such cases, communication from the opposing government is likely viewed with skepticism. Therefore, in the context of the Iranian protests, if citizen eyewitness imagery presents a narrative that contrasts with the state's perspective, it is plausible that the Western press would rely more on these citizen-sourced narratives and less on the official communications of the Iranian state. This potential shift could foster a more legitimizing coverage. These considerations lead to our research questions:

- RQ1: What percentage of citizen videos tended to delegitimize (by providing imagery of vandalism and fire), and what percentage tended to legitimize (by providing imagery of police brutal intervention) the protests?*
- RQ2: How much did legacy news reports rely on citizen videos versus state TV footage in their visual coverage of the protests?*
- RQ3: Did the citizen videos picked up by the legacy press tend to be delegitimizing (by providing imagery of vandalism and fire) or legitimizing (by providing imagery of police brutal intervention) the protests?*
- RQ4: Overall, looking at the whole sample of legacy press news pieces, did their presentations of the protests end up legitimating or delegitimizing them?*

### Methods

Our study employed a comprehensive content analysis approach. Specifically, we analyzed the visual data in citizen videos and identified recurring themes throughout the legacy pieces' multimodal visual,

oral, and textual information. We followed recent approaches to grounded theory in both sections of our analysis, emphasizing the integration of pre-existing theoretical frameworks with insights from the data (Reichert, 2019).

### ***Citizen Eyewitness Videos***

We first collected, to the fullest extent possible, citizen videos of the protests posted between November 15, 2019, when the protests and shutdown began, and November 22, when the shutdown was gradually lifted and the Internet connectivity level rose to 64% of normal ("Internet Being," 2019). We focused on the week of the Internet shutdown to determine what visual sources news channels had in hand to accompany their news stories of the event.

We found 842 videos and downloaded them using a website called TwitterVideoDownloader.com to have easy access offline. Discarding duplicates left 580 videos. In length, they averaged about 30 seconds. They were transmitted on X and Telegram—a cloud-based instant messaging application. Telegram's "channels," tools for broadcasting public messages to large audiences, have turned the platform into a popular news resource among Iranians. The examined Telegram channel was Vahid Online (Vahid Online, n.d.), a popular and active channel created by an anonymous Iranian Internet activist during the 2009 uprising.

To collect videos from X, we used its advanced search tool, looking for three viral hashtags: #IranProtests, #اعتراضات\_سراسری (national protests), and #آبان۹۸ (November 2019). We also searched the official accounts of two foreign Farsi news channels, the *BBC Persian* (BBC News فارسی, n.d.) and *Iran International* (ایران اینترنشنال [Iran International], n.d.); the news section of an opposition channel, *Manoto* (اتاق خبر منوئو [Otagh-e Khabar-e Manoto], n.d.); and another nonaffiliated opposition individual, Masih Alinejad (Masih Alinejad, n.d.).

*BBC Persian*, the local branch of the *BBC*, can be considered legacy media, and its Western roots may broadly influence its editorial stance. However, we relied on this channel to collect as many citizen videos as possible. During the week of the protests, *BBC Persian*, accessible through satellite TV in Iran, maintained communication with the audience, asking for evidence from any citizen who witnessed the ongoing battle between the people and the state. Consequently, some witnesses shared their visual documentation of the protests directly with this channel instead of uploading it to social media platforms. The same applies to *Iran International*, a TV station funded and backed by Saudi Arabia. Because we sought alternative narratives to the lies spread by the Iranian government and its allies outside the country (Al-Sulami, 2022), we did not look at pro-Iranian government sources inside or outside Iran.

All the citizen videos were coded for date and the presence or absence of individual framing devices typically examined in the protest paradigm literature, including depictions of police violence and vandalism (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Our unit of analysis was an individual video. Each of the 580 videos was coded for (1) vandalism in action and its results, (2) fire and its types (destructive or blocking) as a key feature in the videos, (3) police presence, and (4) various forms of police intervention (e.g., use of water cannon, tear



gas, or guns). Relying on prior research (Harlow Salaverría, Brown, & García-Perdomo, 2017; Young, 2013), we categorized vandalism and fires as delegitimizing elements and police violent intervention as a legitimizing element of the stories. Police presence, however, was treated as a neutral element.

After time spent establishing reliable coding criteria, two coders co-coded 50 random videos from the sample. Intercoder reliability using Cohen's kappa showed strong agreement for most variables: 0.87 for vandalism, 1.00 for fire, 0.90 for police presence, and 0.96 for injury. The intercoder reliability for different types of peaceful police intervention (monitoring, talking, diverting) was 0.96; 0.96 also for beating protestors, 1.00 for beating nonhuman objects, 1.00 for shooting, and 1.00 for using tear gas and water cannon.

From the initial variables for fire and vandalism, we created a compound variable labeled "delegitimizing," identifying whether protestors were involved in vandalizing property; setting fire to urban monuments, buildings, or vehicles; or capturing the aftermath of either. Police intervention was categorized into two distinct types: conventional and nonconventional. Notably, neutral police presence, which included monitoring, blocking, talking, and diverting, was explicitly excluded from our definition of police intervention. Using water cannons and employing tear gas were categorized as conventional means of controlling protests, whereas beating people, damaging nonhuman objects, such as cars and store windows, and shooting were categorized as nonconventional police interventions. We eventually categorized all types of conventional and nonconventional police interventions as legitimizing to accommodate the coding of news outlets' coverage. We did not come across any video that included both conventional and nonconventional police interventions. Thus, all codes are mutually exclusive.

Although our coding was primarily based on visual information, we sometimes relied on audio for confirmation. In some cases, we utilized the associated text and context to confirm our interpretation of the images and the sound. For example, noticing public property on fire was not enough to code a video for vandalism. Instead, we relied on the narration or the accompanying text to learn how and why the fire was created. For example, in one video, a narrator mentioned that he saw an undercover police officer set a shop on fire to blame the protestors. Relying on the narration, we did not count such a video as an instance of vandalism by protestors.

### ***Legacy News Media***

We also examined the version of reality transmitted by the coverage of six mainstream Western news outlets. Toward that end, using "Iran" and "protests" as search terms, we initially retrieved news pieces about the protests published on the websites of *CNN*, *Fox News*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *Euronews*, and *France 24*. The first six outlets are among the most popular global news websites (Majid, 2021), and the last two are European news outlets that dedicated lengthy and detailed programs and interviews to the protests under study. As in the case of citizen videos, the search was limited to the week of the Internet shutdown. After discarding non-English pieces and those without videos, 21 stories remained, excluding *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* from our analysis. These stories included 27 videos (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Number of Visuals Included in Legacy News Stories by Outlet and Type.**

	CNN	Fox News	New York Times	Washington Post	The BBC	The Guardian	Euronews	France24	Total
Videos	5	4	0	2	11	0	3	2	27
Photos	9	9	8	11	6	6	5	0	54

Among the videos run by legacy outlets, we identified two distinct categories. The first category merged different scenes from various sources, including citizen eyewitness accounts and footage from Iranian state TV, usually with talking heads. The second category, more prevalent in *BBC's* coverage, involved embedding videos from X within the text of news articles, where the videos were accompanied by captions written by the individual who tweeted them. Sample homogeneity was not an issue since this study focuses on visual content in video news stories. We did not differentiate between types of media reports, such as embedded videos in articles or live-streamed recordings published online.

Our analysis of news story videos involved a four-phase process, which entailed adapting the same codebook and operationalizing the variables and their thematic implications—delegitimizing, legitimizing, and neutral—used to examine the citizen videos. Since some events emerged in the oral components of the videos and textual elements of the news pieces, we deductively coded them based on the existing literature on the protest paradigm (Harlow et al., 2017; Young, 2013). These new events provided public support for protestors, highlighting their demands and the underlying background of the protests, which were categorized as legitimizing. The mention of the arrest of protestors was labeled as delegitimizing.

First, we coded each video for visual content, taking note of the number of protest-related videos and photos shown, their thematic implications, and their sources (citizen eyewitness vs. imagery from Iranian state TV, which was clearly labeled). In the second and third phases of analysis, we scrutinized the thematic implications of oral elements, such as those uttered by hosts, guests, and narrators of English-language videos, as well as textual information, such as subtitles and the tweet accompanying some of the videos embedded in the news articles, categorizing their themes as either legitimizing, delegitimizing, or neutral.

The fourth phase involved analyzing the news piece holistically, examining the videos in conjunction with the content and information conveyed through accompanying news articles (if available), and identifying the dominant theme in each element and whether these elements were congruent with one another.

## **Findings**

### ***Citizen Videos***

RQ1 asked what percentage of citizen videos tended to delegitimize and what percentage tended to legitimize the protests. Our analysis of citizen videos indicates that of the 580 citizen videos, images of vandalism or fire (delegitimizing) were found in 21%. These include any evidence of damage and a range of fire depictions, from contained fires in the street to burning cars or buildings. There were no images like the ones broadcast by the Iranian TV of protestors attacking a traffic light, destroying ATMs, or climbing up buildings.

Thirty-two percent of citizen videos depicted police presence. Of those, 47% displayed police using nonconventional force, such as shooting, beating people, and damaging objects like cars, and 11.3% showed conventional police force, such as using tear gas and water cannon. Of the videos with police presence,

41.7% were neither conventional nor nonconventional, indicating a neutral theme that included monitoring, blocking, talking, and diverting.

We regarded all videos using deadly force as tending to legitimize the protests. To illustrate, in one viral citizen video, a police officer pointing his gun at the protestors runs away for a while to gain some distance from them (Figure 3). He then suddenly stops, turns around, and shoots a protestor. Another video depicts someone so injured that his ankle is barely attached to his leg (Figure 4). In this video, as in others, crowds are shouting, screaming, and mourning for the injured and dead. Still, other citizen videos were recorded in emergency rooms, showing multiple injured protestors. Importantly, most of these brutal videos—with indications of injured and sometimes even dead protestors—went viral and were retweeted thousands of times by ordinary accounts and foreign-based Farsi sources.



**Figure 3.** A screenshot from a citizen video (Vahid Online, 2019b, 00:13:24).



**Figure 4. A screenshot from a citizen video (Vahid Online, 2019a, 00:01:28).**

#### *News Outlets*

RQ2 asks how much legacy news reports rely on citizen videos versus state TV footage in their visual coverage of the protests. It already speaks to the contribution made by citizen journalism that of all 27 videos across all these news outlets, 23 included footage from citizen journalists. The *BBC* stood out by securing all its video material from this source. Other news outlets, however, also relied on citizen-produced videos. In fact, among the 16 other video stories, 12 included at least one video from citizen journalists.

Citizen journalists, however, were only one of the sources of visual content for Western news outlets. Specifically, among the 16 video reports run by *CNN*, *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, *Euronews*, and *France 24*, seven used footage from Iranian state TV. The footage featured people vandalizing properties, destroying buildings, and starting fires (Figure 6). *Fox News* also mistakenly aired a simultaneously occurring protest in Iraq as if it were part of the protest movement in Iran.

RQ3 asks whether the citizen videos adopted by the legacy press tended to delegitimize or legitimize the protests. Table 2 shows the number of legacy press videos that picked up delegitimizing images from the citizen videos, as opposed to the most legitimizing images showing the police force. We did not consider the number of times a frame ended and a new video was shown if the below elements appeared in the videos from different categories. We also kept the conventional and nonconventional police interventions separate for counting. We did not take still photos into consideration in our analysis.

We compared the incidences found in the citizen videos with all the videos of the legacy news outlets. Whereas vandalism and/or fire (delegitimizing) were found in only 21% of the citizen videos, they showed up in almost 63% of the legacy videos. However, the incidence of police presence found among legacy press videos (44.4%) was slightly higher than that of citizen videos (32%). This percentage dropped slightly (31.2%) when we extracted the *BBC* from our press data. Police use of conventional force, that is, tear gas, was found in more than half of the legacy press videos where police were present, a much higher percentage than in citizen videos (11.3%).

**Table 2. Percentages of Delegitimizing, Police Presence, and Police Intervention by Source.**

	Citizen videos	News outlet videos	
		with BBC	without BBC
<b>Number of cases</b>	580	27	16
<b>Delegitimizing Videos</b>	21%	62.9%	75%
<b>Police Presence (Neutral)</b>	32%	44.4%	31.2%
<b>Police Conventional Intervention (Legitimizing)<sup>1</sup></b>	11.3% (3.4% of all videos, with or without police presence)	57.1%	42.8%
<b>Police Nonconventional Intervention (Legitimizing)<sup>1</sup></b>	47% (15% of all videos, with or without police presence)	<b>28.5%</b>	<b>0%</b>

<sup>1</sup> The first percentage is against cases where police were present.

Notwithstanding, as we see in columns two and three of Table 2, the legacy press showed the police using nonconventional intervention in only 28.5% of the videos where police were present, whereas in the citizen videos, the percentage was 47%. In fact, it was only the *BBC* that aired any legacy press videos of police using deadly force (nonconventional intervention); only the *BBC* videos more broadly represented the citizen protest experience, including peaceful gatherings, dramatic imagery of fire, and both conventional and fatal interventions of the police. Still, the Western press emphasized fires or vandalism with or without the *BBC*. Even with the *BBC* included, almost 63% of the videos by the legacy press depicted scenes of fire, violence, or sabotage.

RQ(4) asks whether the legacy press's overall presentations legitimized or delegitimized the protests. We identified the same three themes across all components of news pieces: legitimizing, delegitimizing, and neutralizing. Table 3 presents the prevalent themes identified in the analysis of the news stories as a whole.

**Table 3. Themes Identified in the Video Component of News Pieces.**

	Visual	Oral	Textual
	Examples	Examples	Examples
<b>Legitimizing</b>	Police violence	State killing, injuring, arresting protestors	Internet shutdown
	Peaceful protests	Reasons behind protests e.g., economy and corruption	Police violence
	Internet shutdown related imagery	Global support of protestors	Oppressing protestors
		Internet shutdown and communication disruption Peaceful protests, e.g., chanting and striking Discussing human rights violations	Threatening protestors
<b>Delegitimizing</b>	Protestors' violence	Downgrading the cause of protests	Protestors' violence and disruption
	Vandalism	Vandalism	State standing by fuel price hike
	Chaotic scenes in the city	State trying to maintain security and supporting the fuel price increase Protestors' violence	
<b>Neutral</b>	Police monitoring Unrelated imagery to protests	N/A	N/A

*Legitimizing Theme*

Consistent with expectations was the emergence of the legitimizing theme. In both the oral and textual portions of the news pieces analyzed, the underlying causes of the protests were highlighted, such as economic hardship and state corruption. Other examples of this theme include acknowledging the state's violation of human rights, global support for the protestors, and the Internet shutdown. Visually, the legitimizing theme portrays the protestors as peaceful individuals oppressed and subjected to police violence. The videos showcasing this theme were predominantly sourced from citizen eyewitness accounts. For example, Figure 5 displays a screenshot from a *CNN* video that captures all the key elements of the legitimizing theme.



**Figure 5. A screenshot of the CNN coverage of the protests, showing protestors being targeted by a water cannon and a subtitle that entails state violence against protestors (Paget, 2019, 00:09:11).**

#### *Delegitimizing Theme*

The delegitimizing theme, which aligns with the protest paradigm, portrays protestors as irrational and deviant, discrediting their cause of frustration. Oral and textual delegitimizing themes included citing incidents of vandalism and violence committed by protestors, emphasizing the state's need to maintain order and security, and labeling protestors as "rioters," "thugs," or "hooligans," often quoting from state officials. The visual content supporting this theme depicted scenes of protestors engaging in violence and vandalism and the chaotic results. While citizen eyewitnesses captured some of the delegitimizing visual content, most of it was obtained from Iranian state television (Figure 6). Notably, *CNN*—despite relying a lot on citizen eyewitness imagery as showcased in Figure 5—employed tailored versions of some citizens, legitimizing videos that ended up delegitimizing the protests. One *CNN* clip, for example, depicts protestors throwing stones at the police. Cropped out was what appeared in the original citizen video: Police shooting at the people. Thus, what we coded as legitimizing in our citizen eyewitness imagery shows up here as delegitimizing.





**Figure 6.** A screenshot from Euronews, with a delegitimizing scene derived from the state TV, a delegitimizing subtitle that undermines the cause and calls the protests violent ("Video. Iran," 2019, 00:12:03).

#### Neutral Theme

The neutral theme, neither legitimizing nor delegitimizing, was the least frequent. This theme was found predominantly in the visual component of the news pieces that showed ordinary scenes of life in Iran, such as people at the bazaar and filling their cars (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** A screenshot from CNN. An ordinary scene of Tehran Grand Bazaar (CNN 10, 2019, 02:54:19).

### News Pieces as a Whole

Going beyond the individual components to consider the news pieces as a whole, we found that most news pieces exhibited a legitimizing tone in their textual and oral components while often delegitimizing the protests through their visual representation.

Theme	Verbal Component	Theme	Visual Component
Green	describing the internet shutdown	Red	cars on fire and fire on street
	citizen journalists in diaspora receive videos and try to verify them		fire on street
	explaining why there is internet shutdown because of violence and people getting killed		burnt gas station
	even telephone lines are disrupted		blocked road and fire on street
	people coordinating on Waiz		building on fire
	national and protected internet		cityscape with riot police monitoring
	revolutionary guards and other military organs trying to scare people of being on streets	Yellow	building on fire
		Red	building on fire
			burnt car
			burnt gas station
			rubbed bank
			fire on street and people detaching the guardrail
			one person destroying the traffic light
			people destroying urban elements
			kicking a bicycle station
			people climbing governmental buildings
			car and street on fire
			fire on street
			and all previous vidoes on repeat again
		Green	people on the road gathered peacefully

**Figure 8. Analysis of a Euronews piece. Green indicates legitimizing, red highlights delegitimizing, and yellow shows neutral elements.**

Figure 8 showcases one example of our coding, analyzing a *France 24* broadcast ("Digital Repression," 2019), which indicated a mix of legitimizing oral and textual elements alongside predominantly delegitimizing imagery. The extract features side-by-side with the narration of standard Iranian government videos of protesters tearing down light poles, throwing rocks at buildings, and starting fires. These are images we would consider delegitimizing, and Iranian TV did use them as such. While these videos were shown, the constant caption read, "Digital Repression: How Iran shut off the Internet amid protests" (Shantyaiei, Cheval, Fevrier, & Baritello, 2019). The descriptor "repression" here makes what might otherwise be illegitimate into a critique. In fact, the whole segment was on the illegitimate state shutdown of the Internet, communication disruption, and citizen journalism. Again, the accompanying text reframed potentially negative images of the protest as just standard images of the protest. However, there were a few instances, predominantly from the *BBC*, where words and images conveyed a consistent, legitimizing message that supported the protests and portrayed the government in a negative light. For instance, headlines such as "Videos Reveal Crackdown Regime Tried to Hide From World" (Gol, 2019) or "Iran Protests: At Least 12 Killed at Unrest Over Petrol Price Rise" ("Iran Protests," 2019) exemplify this trend. In these cases, the *BBC* provided excerpts from citizen videos that depicted police brutality, including the beatings and shootings of protestors.

Altogether, news texts generally condemned the Internet shutdown and the Iranian government's use of force and, if anything, spun the news protests positively by citing pronouncements from the United Nations or the United States supporting the protests or at least criticizing the Iranian government.

Simultaneously, their visuals of burned or sabotaged buildings and blocked, smoke-filled streets, whether taken from the Iranian government or citizen videos, were frequently what we viewed as delegitimizing.

### Discussion

This study has several major findings. First, as the literature also suggests, we see a departure from the protest paradigm in covering protests at the international level. In fact, in the case of the Iranian protests, the Western legacy press textually legitimized them. In total, however, whatever images the legacy press used—legitimizing or delegitimizing—the accompanying text (i.e., the text of news articles, the written elements in the videos such as subtitles, and the spoken words of the anchor or guest speaker of the program) legitimized the protests in virtually all cases. This reinforces a significant trend identified in recent studies of the protest paradigm: When legacy media disapproves of a government, such as Iran's, it tends to portray protests against that government more favorably, deviating from the traditional protest paradigm.

Second, the study confirms that the press incorporated videos from citizen journalists, but these were notably underutilized. Despite citizen videos offering clear evidence of police brutality, only the *BBC* consistently featured them. The visual coverage of the protests across other outlets disproportionately emphasized delegitimizing themes, focusing more on scenes of vandalism and fire than on police violence. This resulted in mixed messages, where the textual content was frequently critical of the government and its human rights abuses, but the visuals conveyed a more chaotic and violent portrayal of the protests.

Our findings reveal a significant incongruity between text and image in most Western legacy media coverage of these protests. Previous research, particularly given the scarcity of multimodal analysis, does not offer a clear theoretical framework for this discrepancy. In interpreting this finding, we propose that the persistence of the protest paradigm, along with the media's preference for dramatic imagery, may lead legacy outlets to uphold a stereotypical portrayal of protests as chaotic, forceful, and even vandalistic. This incongruity between text and image likely sends mixed signals to the audience. Studies on the influence of multimodal messages (e.g., Gibson & Zillmann, 2000) suggest that when there is a clash between visual and textual elements, images often dominate, potentially neutralizing or contradicting the textual message. Whether or how audiences perceive this incongruity warrants further investigation.

To elaborate, our analysis encompassed 26 news videos, with *BBC* accounting for 11 of these, notably abstaining from the use of state TV footage. Among the remaining 15 videos, seven incorporated state TV content, while only three lacked any citizen-sourced material. However, it is important to note that these figures may not accurately represent the broader distribution of visual sources across all media coverage. For instance, *CNN*, the second outlet primarily dependent on citizen eyewitness imagery, fell short in revealing censored narratives by cropping videos and omitting footage of brutal police interventions. The selective use of citizen videos, particularly those highlighting scenes of vandalism and fire, contributed to a narrative that framed the protests as non-peaceful. While conventional police actions, such as tear gas deployment and water cannon use, were commonly depicted, the absence of more severe police violence in these visual representations suggests that even citizen-sourced content, despite its value, might inadvertently present an incomplete portrayal of events.

*BBC* stood out as the sole outlet to exclusively rely on citizen eyewitness imagery, uniquely providing its audience with documentation of injuries and police use of deadly force. This was achieved by sourcing citizen videos from the X accounts of Iranian *BBC Persian* journalists, who received content directly from their Farsi-speaking audiences. However, the outlet alerts viewers on its website that it “is not responsible for the content of external sites” (BBC, n.d.).

We acknowledge potential variations in visual motifs across different news outlets, particularly given the overrepresentation of *BBC* videos in the sample. This overrepresentation could have influenced the observed differences in the depiction of police presence and actions. While similar fluctuations might occur if other outlets were more dominant in the sample, the *BBC*’s consistent portrayal of more violent police actions sets it apart from other outlets, a noteworthy observation warranting further investigation. To address concerns about sample bias and determine whether the variations observed are due to the *BBC*’s distinctive reporting or its dominance in the sample, more extensive data collection would be ideal. However, such an expansion falls outside the scope of this review. Nonetheless, the findings presented here offer valuable insights into the complexities of visual reporting on protests and the potential impact of source selection on narrative framing.

When analyzing multimodal media content, it is crucial to consider how individual elements interact. We argue that the incongruency between the visual and textual elements in these news stories may impede readers’ understanding, empathy, and engagement with the events. Consequently, significant narratives of unlawful confrontations with protesters, censored at the national level, remain obscure when visibility is most critical. It is almost as if the legacy press, even when it judges protest legitimate, considers the stock image of such activity to be chaos.

The findings of this study have important implications for media scholars and professionals. For researchers examining social movements, these results emphasize the need to analyze protest coverage with attention to both textual and visual elements. For media practitioners, the study underscores the critical role of responsible visual editing. In authoritarian regimes, where state control of information is strong, international media’s role becomes even more vital. News outlets can provide “secondary visibility” (Goldsmith, 2010), amplifying the voices of protesters and challenging state narratives. By leveraging citizen eyewitness videos, Western media can offer a more accurate portrayal of protests, countering official propaganda and questioning state legitimacy.

However, this raises concerns about the reliability of nonofficial sources in international reporting. We argue that the concept of journalistic objectivity needs reevaluation in such contexts. Following Porpora and Sekalala’s (2019) case-by-case approach to objective reality, we contend that citizen journalists often offer more credible accounts than official Iranian sources, given the state’s history of disinformation. Journalists covering Iran face significant challenges, with restricted access and local reporters facing intimidation and imprisonment (e.g., Rezaian, 2022). In this environment, innovative sourcing, including citizen-centered coverage, is not just beneficial but essential for accurate reporting. Although citizen journalists may lack formal training and have biases, their perspectives are often crucial in providing insights absent from official narratives. The tension between traditional journalistic practices, which favor verifiable

official sources, and the need for informed reporting is clear. In authoritarian contexts, relying solely on official sources can lead to distorted coverage.

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