

Transcending the Protest Paradigm: Rearticulating Journalism and Activism During Political Upheaval

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Based on interviews with 23 Guatemalan journalists and activists and using the 2015 nationwide protests in Guatemala as a case study, we use *articulation* to understand the discursive construction of journalism and activism. We explore how journalists and activists temporarily united under a shared Guatemalan identity, creating contingent alignments that disrupted traditional power hierarchies and highlighting how professional norms, political dynamics, and social identities intersected to redefine roles and move beyond delegitimizing protest coverage patterns. By examining *context, social actors, content, contingencies, and constraints*, this study adds to scholarship on protest coverage in the Global South, contributing to theoretical and practical understandings of how journalism and activism intersect, particularly in politically charged environments, and how these intersections can challenge or reinforce existing journalistic norms and narratives.

Keywords: activism, articulation theory, Guatemala, journalism, protest paradigm, social movements

The relationship between journalists and activists is often fraught and, at times, even antagonistic. However, the global surge in protest activity, combined with the pervasiveness of social media across journalism and activism, has prompted researchers to view the two fields as increasingly intertwined. Scholars have well documented the ways ordinary citizens and activists have used social media tools to take on journalistic roles, informing about protests and other topics that traditional mainstream media might ignore or be unable to cover (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2012). Previous studies have also considered changing journalistic doxa and roles as journalists adopt activist stances (e.g., Barnard, 2018; Harlow, 2022; Hartley & Askanius, 2021). In this study, we link understandings of journalism and activism by using five dimensions of articulation theory to examine the factors that enabled Guatemalan journalists to adopt activist roles during the historic 2015 national anticorruption protests, focusing on how professional norms, political dynamics, and shared national identity converged to facilitate alignment with protester goals. Through articulation—a process of constructing dynamic connections and identities that develop meaning within cultural and political contexts—our study explores how journalists navigated and redefined their roles in

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response to political crises, offering insights into the contingent nature of journalistic identity and activism within clientelist, commercial media systems.

News coverage worldwide has historically reinforced negative perceptions of social movements, portraying protests and protesters as disruptive and violent, while downplaying their grievances and goals. This pattern, known as the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984; Harlow & Brown, 2023; McLeod & Hertog, 1999), delegitimizes protests and can weaken their support. This study examines critiques of the protest paradigm, particularly how factors such as national outrage, media ownership, elite involvement, protest type, and journalist identity shape coverage. Using the 2015 Guatemalan protests that led to the resignation of a president and vice president as a case study, we explore how contextual factors can reshape journalistic practices and narratives, challenging the protest paradigm and legitimizing protests in public discourse. Employing five dimensions of articulation, this study examines how *context*, *social actors*, *content*, *contingencies*, and *constraints* can reshape dominant narratives, revealing that the roles of “journalist” and “activist” are not fixed. Through interviews with Guatemalan journalists, alternative media producers, and activists, we explore their views on protest coverage before, during, and after the 2015 demonstrations to understand why journalists aligned with protesters. By treating activism as a discursive formation, we argue that the journalist–activist divide is neither fixed nor absolute, but rather a shifting dynamic maintained through ongoing articulations.

Examining the processes behind this alignment is significant for journalism and communication research because it sheds light on the relationship between journalists and social movements in contexts where mainstream media maintains substantial influence. By exploring how Guatemalan journalists aligned with protesters during the 2015 protests, scholars can better understand how professional norms, political pressures, and social identities shape journalistic roles and practices during political upheaval. This case study reveals the conditions under which journalists might adopt activist roles, highlighting the complex dynamics between objectivity and advocacy, particularly in societies with clientelist media structures. It also broadens our understanding of how journalists’ roles shift in response to political events, offering insights that can be applied to disrupting the protest paradigm in similar media environments globally.

The Complex Relationship Between Journalists and Protesters

Social movements have historically depended on mainstream media to amplify their grievances, but their influence over coverage is limited (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Media attention is crucial for increasing a movement’s public visibility (Burstein, 1998), which helps build support and advance its goals (Rohlinger, 2002; Walgrave & Manssens, 2000). However, mainstream coverage is often a double-edged sword, as it tends to be negative and delegitimizing, particularly for movements challenging the status quo (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Journalistic routines, such as prioritizing official sources on deadline (Sobieraj, 2010), frequently sideline activists’ voices. In response, activists may refuse to engage with journalists, adopt combative strategies, or create their own media, reinforcing an adversarial dynamic rooted in mutual misunderstandings (Sobieraj, 2010).

This pattern of coverage, known as the protest paradigm, reflects journalists’ tendency to favor official voices (e.g., government or corporate sources) while portraying protests as violent, deviant, or

disruptive (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Such framing often marginalizes protesters' core messages, weakening public support for their causes (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). However, the protest paradigm is not absolute; coverage varies based on factors such as protest tactics, location, topic, media ownership, and relationships with government and elite actors (e.g., Mourão, 2019; Shahin, Zheng, Sturm, & Fadnis, 2016). Additionally, digital and social media can reshape how protests are represented (Harlow & Brown, 2021). Such patterns highlight a complex and often contradictory relationship between journalists and activists, where differences are emphasized while common ground is obscured. Sobieraj (2010) found that journalists gauge newsworthiness based on perceptions of activists as "authentic" and their actions as "reasonable," leading to a "communicative impasse" (p. 521). Similarly, Micó and Casero-Ripollés (2014) observed this dynamic in Spain's 15M movement, where journalists blamed activists for obstructing their work, while activists felt misrepresented by the media.

Changing Roles: Intersection of Journalism and Activism

Conceptually, we distinguish journalism from activism by examining role orientations within journalism. Role orientations refer to "particular sets of ideas by which journalists, consciously and subconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful" (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, & Lauerer, 2016, p. 2). We understand *activists* to be individuals who actively engage in promoting, impeding, directing, or intervening in social, political, economic, or environmental reform, typically with the aim of bringing about change. Activism involves a sustained commitment to a cause and can take many forms, including advocacy, direct action, awareness campaigns, and organizing within social movements (Diani, 1992; Tilly, 2004). In the Guatemalan context, we understand *journalists* as professionals who gather, verify, and report news and as social actors who often navigate complex political, economic, and social pressures. In Guatemala, journalists have sometimes been seen as advocates for democracy and accountability, adopting roles that blend traditional reporting with activism, particularly in contexts where corruption, violence, and impunity are pervasive (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellado & Lagos, 2014). In a media landscape characterized by elite-controlled outlets and clientelism, journalists must balance the risks of censorship, violence, and economic pressures with a commitment to transparency and truth-telling (Rockwell & Janus, 2003).

Role orientations refer to "particular sets of ideas by which journalists, consciously and subconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful" (Hanitzsch et al., 2016, p. 2). Much of the research on journalistic roles contrasts neutral and participatory approaches, categorizing journalists either as gatekeepers and disseminators or as advocates and missionaries. Historically, the interventionist journalistic role and the detached observer role have dominated Latin American journalism (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, Mick, Oller Alonso, & Olivera, 2017; Mellado, Moreira, Lagos, & Hernández, 2012).

Globally, especially during crises, journalists have been known to assume activist roles, engaging in journalism "that takes a point of view" (Thomas, 2018, p. 393), or what Bell (1998) called "journalism of attachment," setting it apart from the "objective," detached values often associated with mainstream journalism (p. 16). In their study of Israeli journalists, Ginosar and Reich (2022) pointed to a continuum of interventionism, offering "obsessive-activist" as a new model of journalistic interventionism. While

committed to truth-telling and fact-checking, these journalists were motivated by a sense of justice, personally involved in their obsessive issues, and found a way to integrate their personal agendas into their daily reporting. Other research also points to U.S. journalists' willingness to take stands for racial justice (Harlow, 2022) and to Finnish journalists' desire to participate more in political debates as they shift toward interventionism (Reunanen & Koljonen, 2018).

The consolidation of social media in journalism and activism is also contributing to changing roles, norms, and practices, as the lines between the two become increasingly fluid. For example, during the 2018 racial justice protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in the United States, the journalistic and activist fields converged on Twitter, as journalists tweeted in solidarity with protesters (Barnard, 2018). Harlow (2022) found that journalistic doxa were shifting when it came to social media, as journalists took on activist stances. Similarly, Nordic journalists covering the #MeToo movement adopted activist roles to an extent (Hartley & Askanius, 2021). Importantly, though, that turn toward activism was not without consequences, as journalists began "to retrospectively question whether it was worth it, engaging in national discussions of media organizations 'going too far' and responding to accusations of journalists, as a profession, stepping out of line and into the ranks of activists" (Hartley & Askanius, 2021, p. 875).

Despite shifting doxa and a turn toward more of an activist role, the journalists in these studies still identified primarily as journalists—not activists. Steinke and Belair-Gagnon (2020) found that journalists who covered social justice issues wanted to promote the voices of marginalized people and push for social change, but at the same time felt compelled to adhere to traditional journalistic norms like objectivity. Similarly, journalists working at digital-native news sites in Latin America often adopted activist and alternative media values and practices, but still balked at being considered activists (Harlow, 2023).

Existing research does not fully explain what drives journalists to adopt activist or interventionist roles. The current study moves beyond role orientations to show the articulation processes that allowed journalists to align with protesters and adopt more interventionist roles.

Articulation Theory

Often considered the foundational thinker behind articulation theory, Stuart Hall (1986) introduced the concept within cultural studies, emphasizing the idea that social identities, ideologies, and political alliances are not fixed but can be "articulated" or joined together in specific historical contexts. He used articulation theory to analyze how ideologies link with social forces, showing how cultural elements can be reconfigured to support different political agendas. Building on Hall's (1986) work, Laclau (2014) argued that political identities and alliances are contingent and can be rearticulated based on shifting hegemonic struggles.

Slack (1996) extended Hall's (1986) articulation theory to media and communication studies. Slack (1996) emphasized articulation as both a theoretical and methodological approach, useful for examining how media texts and practices construct social relations and identities. Applying articulation to understand popular culture and political movements, Grossberg (1992, 1996) focused on how culture and ideology

intersect, stressing that articulation enables us to see how cultural practices produce specific political and social effects by linking disparate elements.

Articulation is about creating connections between elements (e.g., identities, practices, and discourses) within specific contexts (Grossberg, 1992). These connections are not predetermined but are formed and re-formed depending on historical and social conditions. Articulation is therefore a process of constructing relationships that become meaningful within certain cultural and political contexts. For Grossberg (1996), articulation theory highlights the contingent and fluid nature of identities. He argued that identities are not fixed but are assembled through specific historical and social articulations. This means that individuals and groups can embody different identities or roles depending on the circumstances, reflecting how identity is always subject to rearticulation and change.

Articulation theory suggests that reality is shaped by social actors linking various signifiers to organize and give meaning to social relations (DeLuca, 1999). Since these connections are not fixed, they allow for resistance and rearticulation, enabling new ideological configurations (Hall, 1986). Articulation, and by extension rearticulation, redefines meanings of reality, politics, and power. Rather than uncovering a singular identity, scholars illustrate how discourses are constructed. Here, we apply articulation theory to examine how journalism and activism—often seen as incompatible—temporarily converged in Guatemala, materially shaping collective identity. Therefore, we pose the following broad research question:

RQ1: How did Guatemalan journalists articulate connections between activism and journalism during the 2015 protests, and under what conditions did these roles align to shape collective identity and resistance to dominant discourses?

Methods

Articulation analysis follows five key dimensions: (1) the *context* in which it emerges, (2) the *social actors* involved, including hierarchy and practices, (3) the *content* being articulated, (4) the *contingent linkages* formed, and (5) the *constraints* shaping the process (see Table 1). These dimensions help explain how ideologies, processes, practices, and subjects relate in fluid but nonrandom ways. Articulation theory is a powerful analytical tool that allows scholars to deconstruct discourses and examine the forces that unify them (Jung, 2007). In this case, examining the five dimensions of articulation allows us to take two seemingly distinct roles—journalist and activist—and identify those uniting forces that created the circumstances under which journalists took an activist stance and participated in the 2015 protests. An analysis informed by articulation examines the strength of the resulting ties, who is included/excluded in the process, what meanings are created (Weinstein, n.d.), and the political and ideological connotations of the resulting webs of relationships (Grossberg, 1986, p. 55).

Table 1. Five Dimensions of Articulation in the Guatemalan Case.

Dimension	Conceptualization	Application
Context	How did people make sense of the context? How do social actors articulate context and connect it to local and historical particulars?	Social and economic inequalities, civil unrest
Actors	Who are the social actors engaged in the articulation? What subject positions do they occupy? How do they construct discourses and enact identities? How do they understand their identities and roles?	Journalists and activists are divided by roles and identities; journalists are part of clientelist media system; protesters are framed as uninformed, unorganized, their voices marginalized and causes delegitimized
Content	What is the dominant hegemonic discourse being articulated? What are the antagonisms and competing discourses?	Rupture of protest paradigm in 2015, news coverage reflected alignment of protesters' and journalists' interests
Contingency	What linkages are formed? What is the strength of these bonds? What antagonisms give rise to the disarticulation of the hegemonic discourse? What disarticulations and re-articulations are made possible through resistance and agency?	Journalists and protesters temporarily united under the banner of Guatemalan national identity; journalists adopted activist stances in the name of Guatemala
Constraints	What are the political and historical struggles that shape the articulation? What silences and erasures exist? Who was silenced?	History of clientelism, racism, and classism that delegitimized most protests and protesters

We analyzed five dimensions of articulation using data from interviews with Guatemalan journalists, activists, and alternative media producers (N = 23). See Table 2 for details about the quoted interviewees. Although articulation studies often analyze texts, we focus on discourse producers, using interviews to capture local voices and communication processes. In-depth, semi-structured interviews, each approximately an hour long, were conducted in Spanish in Guatemala during the summer of 2018. The interview guide covered perceptions of protest coverage, journalist-activist relationships, and the 2015 protests. Participants were selected purposively via snowball sampling, beginning with journalists and activists known to one author. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to identify patterns in how participants explicitly and implicitly discussed journalism and activism. The Guatemalan case offers a lens to examine contingent alignments that transcended the

protest paradigm, illustrating how professional norms, political dynamics, and social identities intersected to redefine roles and reshape narratives.

Table 2. Profiles of Interviewees Quoted. *

Name	Gender	Age	Role	Location	Protest Experience
Diego	Man	30s	Activist and marketer	Guatemala City	Novice protester converted into full-time activist
Jorge	Man	30s	Journalist for digital-native news site	Guatemala City	Participant in LGBTQ pride march, reported on protests
Laura	Woman	40s	Mainstream newspaper columnist, alternative media producer	Outside capital	Regularly protested, self-identified feminist, reported on protests
Oscar	Man	50s	Activist, Indigenous community radio communicator	Outside capital	Regularly protested and reported on protests
Jennifer	Woman	30s	Activist, community journalist	Outside capital	Regularly protested and reported on protests
Diana	Woman	50s	Mainstream, online news journalist	Guatemala City	Covered protests
Marcos	Man	30s	Mainstream TV news journalist	Guatemala City	Covered protests
Lucas	Man	60s	Mainstream TV news journalist	Guatemala City	Covered protests

* Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality, per Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol.

Applying Articulation: From #RenunciaYa to #JusticiaYa

In April 2015, a group of friends frustrated with government corruption in Guatemala posted a Facebook message calling for a protest using the hashtag #RenunciaYa ("Resign Now"), demanding the resignation of then-Vice President Roxana Baldetti, who was implicated in corruption and organized crime (Torres, 2015). On April 25, 30,000 people gathered in front of the National Palace, sparking a movement

that evolved into Justicia Ya (“Justice Now”) and ultimately led to the resignation and arrest of Baldetti and former President Otto Pérez Molina. For months, tens of thousands of people protested nationwide, culminating in August 2015, when more than 100,000 demonstrators took to the streets—the largest protest in Guatemala’s history (Nolan, 2015). Beyond its size and peaceful nature, the movement was notable for its unprecedented diversity, bringing together young and middle-class protesters, elite businessmen, students, homemakers, and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. Unlike previous protests, this mobilization transcended socioeconomic, political, class, and racial divides (Associated Press, 2015). “Some observers see a new democratic spring dawning in a rare alliance between the urban middle class and progressive movements forged through common revulsion at outrageous greed and impunity in the current administration” (Copeland, 2015, para. 4). Below, we apply the five dimensions of articulation to these protests.

Dimension 1: Context

This section examines how the participants articulated the broader context and its connection to protests. Guatemala has a limited protest culture, partly because of its 36-year Civil War (1960–1996), which left more than 200,000 people—mostly Indigenous Maya—dead or forcibly disappeared in what the United Nations (UN) classified as genocide. With a population of 17 million, Guatemala is Central America’s largest country, and 44% of its residents are Indigenous, primarily Maya, who have long faced oppression from powerful elites. This history has fueled extreme social and economic inequalities, persistent social resistance, and a poverty rate exceeding 50%. The country also has Central America’s lowest literacy rate (75%).

During the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), leftist rebels—mainly Indigenous Maya, students, peasants, and various guerrilla groups—fought back against years of right-wing military regimes backed by U.S. funding and training. The war ended with the 1996 UN Peace Accords, and dictator and President Efraín Ríos Montt was later convicted of war crimes. Otto Pérez Molina, the president ousted in the 2015 protests, was a retired general who represented the military during the peace accords process and was himself accused of wartime atrocities, including ordering mass killings under Ríos Montt’s scorched-earth campaign.

Within this context, Guatemalan journalism operates within a clientelist media system that prioritizes elite interests over public service (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Media “change the version of things to fulfill a specific agenda,” an agenda of the ruling elites, said Diego, a marketer-turned-activist who helped organize the original Renuncia Ya protest in 2015. Media concentration results in a lack of plurality—ideological and otherwise—that further curtails press freedom (Freedom House, 2017) and has contributed to conservative rule throughout Central America (Rockwell & Janus, 2003). One Guatemalan family is associated with every newspaper and several other media organizations in the country (Rockwell, 2017), while a Mexican media mogul owns most of Guatemala’s commercial television and radio stations (Alpírez, 2015). Community and Indigenous radio, which are the main information channels for people living outside the capital, are mostly outlawed and often must operate illegally, without licenses, and are therefore subject to being shut down (Freedom House, 2017).

In Central America, media owners use their outlets “as mechanisms to allow elite families to frame political discourse” (Rockwell, 2017, p. 69). This elite-controlled, clientelist media system shapes political discourse and influences how protests are covered (Harlow, Camaj, & Pjesivac, 2023). As a result, protests that challenge power hierarchies tend to be, at best, dismissed by mainstream media or, worse, delegitimized, interviewees said. Diego said:

When it’s a peasant group . . . [the media] don’t say who’s doing it or why or what their demands are. So, you see a very different treatment in the media . . . It has to do with classism, which has to do with racism, and has to do with the interests behind the media.

Importantly, media entities are owned by individuals who own land outside the capital city, who often have ties to major industries like agriculture and coffee, and many of the grievances Indigenous peoples are protesting relate to land issues, so the owners’ interests take precedent over those of protesters, said Jorge, a senior reporter for an influential independent, digital-native news site. Consequently, protests that threaten elite power are either ignored or delegitimized, reinforcing Guatemala’s entrenched inequalities.

Dimension 2: Actors

Articulation involves examining social actors, their power, and their place within broader contexts. In Guatemala, journalists and protesters exist in an asymmetrical relationship that favors journalists. Interviews with activists and journalists revealed classic protest paradigm patterns, linking delegitimizing protest coverage to elite-controlled media and traditional journalistic norms and routines. Interviewees explained that activists in Indigenous communities, particularly antimining activists, regularly hold press conferences, but it’s rare for mainstream, commercial media to attend—typically only community media reporters, who often are themselves part of the movements, cover the press conferences. Frustrated by negative portrayals, activists sometimes refuse to engage with journalists or openly denounce them, fueling a cycle of mutual distrust. Outside of the 2015 protests, journalists have generally been hesitant to cover movements, afraid of losing credibility or financial backing, said Laura, a feminist newspaper columnist and alternative media producer. “They’re afraid of what they might lose if they appear to show favoritism to certain groups,” she said.

Journalists for commercial media and independent media acknowledged that financial dependence constrains editorial independence. Jorge explained that journalists often follow directives from editors and owners, who, in turn, answer to advertisers, politicians, and other elite actors. Generally, there is a separation between journalists and social movements, he said, and classism, misogyny, and racism all play a part in the media’s delegitimization of movements, demonstrating the web of connections in the media network. Diego noted that activists in Guatemala City receive more media attention than those in rural areas, particularly Indigenous peasants. “We’re taken seriously as activists in the capital,” he said. “They take our statements, they publish them. But for those who aren’t in the capital, especially Indigenous peasants, they hardly ever interview them or take them seriously. They almost never cover them.”

Most critically, Jorge pointed out that if a movement threatens media owners’ financial interests, journalists will work to delegitimize it. This aligns with research showing that protest coverage reflects the

ideological, political, and financial interests of media outlets and their owners (Harlow et al., 2023; Shahin et al., 2016). The 2015 protests were an exception, as they did not directly challenge media financial interests, creating a rare break in the dominant ideological framework. When the protests were about protecting Guatemala, journalists felt they had the right—even the responsibility—to side with protesters.

Additionally, there's also a lack of understanding among actors as to each other's practices and norms: Social movements do not play by journalists' rules, and they do not necessarily know the best way to get their message across. Activist groups need public relations training to know effective media relations strategies when pitching journalists with story ideas that will appeal to reporters, said Laura, whose work straddles the activist-journalist divide. Activists' unfamiliarity with media relations, coupled with disdain and delegitimizing coverage of protests by journalists, has forced activists to learn to produce and disseminate their own media to communicate their efforts.

While the activists saw their work as journalism, the professional reporters were divided on the idea of journalism as activism. Jorge said journalists should be professional, but they should also be on the side of justice, human rights, and equality. In contrast, a reporter for a popular online news organization, Diana, said journalists are supposed to be "observers. We don't take part." Oscar, an activist who is part of an association of Indigenous community radio stations, said he calls himself a "communicator" and not a "journalist," since he does not have a journalism degree. His work, though, is part journalism and part activism, the difference being that the information he produces meets the demands of the people, not the demands of a media owner or political and economic elites. The actors in this case thus came to the 2015 protests from two different sides: activists saw their work as a form of journalism, but journalists regularly marginalized activists in their coverage.

Dimension 3: Content

In Guatemala, dominant media narratives often depict activists and protesters—especially Indigenous and poor communities—as ignorant political pawns manipulated by elites. Protesters' voices are typically sidelined, as journalists prioritize political and economic elites as credible sources. In 2015, though, media coverage diverged from this pattern by amplifying protesters' grievances and demands, activists and journalists said. In part, the difference could be attributed to social media—with "everyone" at the protests and "everyone" posting about it, mainstream media could not ignore the uprisings, interviewees said. For example, businesses like Domino's Pizza and McDonald's that closed in solidarity with protesters (Escalón, 2015) were framed not as disruptions, as the protest paradigm might suggest, but as evidence of the protests' significance. Independent, digital-native media also helped change the dominant discourse around protests. According to Diego, digital-native news sites—known for their financial and editorial independence, as well as their advocacy for human rights and democracy—from the outset reported fairly and accurately on the protests and included marginalized voices, reframing the protests as legitimate and ultimately influencing mainstream outlets to follow suit. These independent, online-only outlets thus rearticulated negative media narratives about protesters as political pawns or disruptive criminals, putting forth a framework for more equitable protest coverage that mainstream media could follow.

The 2015 protests were notable for their inclusivity, uniting people across class, age, and educational backgrounds, and media content mostly reflected that unity, interviewees said. The 2015 protests were “incredible,” Marcos, a television journalist, said, because the central plaza was full every weekend from April to September, and journalists were present the entire time. “People came who had never before protested,” he said, referencing the presence of demonstrators from the upper- and middle classes, who don’t typically find themselves needing to protest. Marcos continued:

For probably the first time, the media found themselves on the same side as the citizenry . . . I’ve covered Indigenous, peasant, labor, teacher, business union, port worker protests, but I had never seen fathers of families with their kids, their wives, and above all, middle class from the capital, and now I saw them.

And that inclusivity made the protests hard to ignore, Marcos said.

Media content reflected interviewees’ perceptions of unity. A popular Guatemalan news site highlighted how private university students—traditionally apolitical—joined public university students—historically more engaged—in marching together. Reports emphasized the protests’ organization and clear demands, contrasting with past portrayals of disorganized or uninformed protesters. A community news article noted how mainstream media treated the protests as a historic first, bringing together people “from different social sectors” and “of all colors” (Cabanas, 2015, para. 11). International coverage echoed this message of inclusivity and legitimacy. An Associated Press (2015) article in *The Guardian* noted that priests demonstrated “shoulder-to-shoulder with businessmen, and students alongside homemakers, in what Guatemala analysts call an unprecedented mass mobilization cutting across socio-economic, political, even class lines” (para. 2). A BBC Mundo headline dubbed it a “Peaceful Revolution in the Most Violent Region in the World” (Paullier, 2015).

In a deeply stratified society, the protests symbolized national unity. Journalists actively sought out social movement leaders to showcase the movement’s diversity, Jorge said. He noted that ultraconservative outlets, which typically prohibit interviews with certain activists, made exceptions in 2015 to feature a broader range of voices. Jennifer, an activist and community journalist, attributed this to Guatemala’s financial and political elite turning against the president and vice president, inadvertently aligning mainstream media with protesters. “They gave the protests full coverage and were mounted on their own stages as if it were a great show,” she said. Laura added that the protests were highly mediatized and covered around the clock. However, mainstream media still centered on middle-class, urban protesters to maximize public support by showing that elites were also protesting, thus making protests more “acceptable.”

Mainstream news coverage also mostly focused on government corruption and ousting the vice president and president, while in fact protesters’ demands and grievances were much broader in scope, including rampant violence and widespread poverty. In other words, the coverage was favorable toward protesters if the protesters’ demands were limited to anticorruption and thus fit within traditional corporate media narratives. Demands for democracy and an end to corruption were acceptable, but more radical calls for structural transformations of the government and ruling hierarchies were absent from media coverage,

Jennifer said. For example, media interviewed protesters who were Westernized, middle- or upper-class, urban and non-Indigenous, since that fit with the profile of the media owners, even though protests occurred across the country and involved all sectors of society, Jennifer said. Interviewees' perspectives on the limits of journalists' and protesters' support were reflected in a community news story that questioned whether the urban sectors, corporate media companies, conservative opinion leaders, and business groups that were finally "waking up" would extend their newfound support for protest to movements for Indigenous rights and other community movements that had long been marginalized by mainstream media and society (Cabanas, 2015). Thus, while participants noted the momentous shift in 2015 toward more legitimizing protest coverage, they recognized it as a unique moment, doubting whether news media would continue to see themselves on the same side as protesters once their financial and political interests were no longer necessarily aligned.

Dimension 4: Contingent Relationships

Articulations are historically contingent, prompting us to ask, as Grossberg (1986) did, "under what circumstances can a connection be forged?" (p. 53). Normally, journalists and activists see each other in an "us vs. them" light, participants said. Therefore, how did journalists and protesters end up on the same side and how strong was this alliance? Interviewees noted that "everyone" united around a discourse of shared national identity, with governmental corruption as the common enemy. Journalists saw their role as exposing corruption and restoring Guatemala's democratic image.

Laura recalled the emotional power of being part of so many thousands of Guatemalans calling for change and described how indignation and hope fueled solidarity between journalists and protesters. "Activism and journalism should not be divorced," she said, emphasizing that journalism inherently involves advocacy. Oscar noted that in 2015, the traditional boundary between journalism and activism blurred, if not disappeared, as journalists actively defended democracy. Interviewees' comments are rooted in Latin America's long tradition of journalists taking on interventionist or advocacy roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Jorge explained that journalists embraced an activist role because standing against injustice was fundamental to their duty. Since the protests did not threaten media or advertiser interests, journalists were free to take the protesters' side, interviewees said. Media outlets deployed extensive resources—reporters, photojournalists, live streams, and even drones—because they viewed the movement as essential to democracy.

Like the other journalists interviewed, TV journalist Lucas saw it as his duty—both professionally and personally—to cover the 2015 protests, which he called "transcendental" for their inclusivity and scale. Although his station prohibited journalists from actively protesting, others allowed more flexibility. Even when journalists were reporting, they still saw themselves as "accompanying" the protesters rather than as objective observers, Lucas said. Diana noted that many journalists actively crossed into activism. Her outlet led a social media campaign visualizing what the one billion Quetzales allegedly embezzled by Pérez Molina's administration could have funded. The campaign included graphics to print and take as signs to the protests. "This had ethical implications because we did it as a media outlet," Diana said. "We printed a ton of them. We put them at the entrance points of the plaza. We filled the plaza with them." The campaign exemplified

how journalism and activism became intertwined, illustrating a rearticulation where journalists not only reported on protests but actively participated in them.

Dimension 5: Constraints

Articulations are shaped by cultural, economic, and sociopolitical constraints. Before 2015, Guatemalan activists and journalists saw each other as adversaries occupying opposing roles, interviewees said. In 2015, however, this divide temporarily dissolved as both groups united to oust the vice president and president. This shift, though, was constrained by Guatemala's clientelist media system and the structural racism and classism underlying society. Interviewees noted that once the protests ended, the journalist-activist divide resurfaced, reaffirming the limits of this rearticulation.

Sustained change in the journalist-activist relationship is constrained by traditional journalistic norms and commercial media's reliance on government and business advertising. As a result, protest coverage has reverted to the protest paradigm, where movements advocating for Indigenous, LGBTQ+, peasant, feminist, or labor rights are largely ignored or delegitimized. Unlike in 2015, when protesters were framed as defenders of democracy, they were once again being portrayed as criminals, subversives, or pawns of political interests, Jennifer said. The exception, she said, are independent digital-native news sites continuing to challenge this dominant narrative by amplifying marginalized voices. Diana suggested journalists "learned their lesson" in 2015, realizing that taking activist stances risked compromising journalistic credibility. She doubted such a moment would happen again, calling the 2015 protests "unique"—a convergence of factors unlikely to be replicated. Despite the alignment in 2015, she said that no lasting change in protest coverage or the journalist-activist relationship resulted, and political corruption persisted. Jennifer echoed this, stating that the coverage of social movements had reverted to its previous patterns. The return to business as usual suggests that any journalistic rearticulation of activism may be temporal, following a cyclical pattern much like news and protests, and that the tenets of the protest paradigm are deeply entrenched.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study uses articulation theory to examine how identities, roles, and alliances are constructed and redefined within specific historical and social contexts. It evaluates the theory's methodological utility in analyzing discursive formations, showing how Guatemalan journalists and activists temporarily aligned under a shared national identity during the 2015 protests. By exploring the power dynamics and contingencies that disrupted the protest paradigm, we clarify when and how journalism and activism might converge. As Hall (1986) emphasized, these relationships are "non-necessary"—not naturally occurring but shaped by context. Therefore, any rearticulated understanding of journalism and activism remains fluid and adaptable.

Our examination of the context, actors, content, contingencies, and constraints surrounding the role of journalists in the 2015 protests sheds light on this rearticulation when journalists assumed activist roles, disrupting conventional protest coverage. Despite the broader media context typically characterized by distrust and delegitimization of protests, this unique convergence became possible as a diverse coalition

of Guatemalans united against government corruption under a shared sense of national pride, making the protest not only legitimate but emblematic of being Guatemalan. This rearticulation resulted from complex interactions, balancing structural constraints with local agency (Curtin et al., 2015), ultimately proving too transient to endure. However, the study is valuable for identifying the dimensions of articulation to understand the contextual factors contributing to the redefinition of “journalist” and “activist.” Since articulations, such as news and protest cycles, are not static, we should not expect the alignment of journalists and protesters to be permanent. This study enhances scholarship on protest coverage and journalistic roles by showing how journalists and activists can sometimes align. Such an alignment has the potential to diverge from the protest paradigm and lend legitimacy—and, consequently, broader support—to protest movements.

Historically, it was not uncommon for journalists in Latin America to perceive their roles as advocates (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Mellado et al., 2017). However, over time, with an increased emphasis on professionalization, the neutral observer role has become the norm. During Guatemala’s 2015 protests, however, this dynamic shifted as journalists took on protester roles in the name of national identity. Articulation theory explains this alignment, which disrupted the protest paradigm by reframing activism as a national duty to resist corruption. This role reversal brought traditional powerholders, including the oligarchy and financial elites, into alignment with historically marginalized groups, such as peasants and Indigenous organizations, in a united fight against corruption. Rather than representing social movement organizations or political parties, protesters came together as individuals, putting their “specific demands aside in order to be part of the collective demands against corruption” (Bennet, 2016, p. 1). Our study reveals that journalists went beyond merely providing favorable coverage when elites joined the protests; they actively took on activist roles. News outlets—part of the traditional polity—thus had to rearticulate their portrayals of activism and protesters, not just in recognition of the political power of these nontraditional challengers, but because the journalists themselves had become part of the protests.

Content analyses of protest news coverage have identified similar shifts in the discourse and portrayals of protesters, as how protests are covered depends in part on how they fit into a larger political narrative and the extent to which news outlets are aligned with the government (Shahin et al., 2016; Weaver & Scacco, 2013). For example, during Brazil’s 2013 antigovernment protests, initial mainstream media coverage was delegitimizing and focused on violence (Mourão, 2019). As the protests grew, so did support from opposition politicians and elites, and coverage became more validating of the resistance. Similarly, during national anticorruption protests in the Balkans, when the interests of elites aligned with protesters, media coverage was more favorable (Harlow et al., 2023). Our study builds on this research, offering articulation by analyzing context, actors, content, contingencies, and constraints to understand the circumstances that allowed for a rearticulation of journalists’ roles during the 2015 Guatemalan protests. The disruption extended beyond a shift in coverage to a rearticulation of roles, as journalists not only adopted a more activist, interventionist stance but also tacitly endorsed protesting as an expression of Guatemalan identity. This is in line with Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea’s (2024) study of protest coverage in Brazil, Chile, and Romania, which identified a new frame in protest coverage: In the “protests as expression of the true nation” frame (p. 48), journalists favorably covered protests as an expression of national identity without projecting a favorable image of the state. This rare alignment between journalists and protesters temporarily disrupted mainstream media’s typical negative framing of social movements, highlighting how

journalistic norms can shift during political crises. However, once the anticorruption protests ended, journalists reverted to the protest paradigm, disarticulating the image of the protester as a defender of democracy—particularly in coverage of Indigenous and LGBTQ+ movements. Future research should explore why anticorruption protests garner more elite and media support than other types of activism.

Applying articulation theory to this case highlights how journalists and activists can coalesce, forming new alignments when political and ideological interests intersect during national protests (Curtin, 2016). These moments of solidarity show that the journalist–activist relationship is dynamic, evolving as both groups work within “a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). Moving forward, this interconnectedness could pave the way for more nuanced, inclusive media coverage that goes beyond the protest paradigm. Future research should continue to explore how alignments between journalists and protesters form, providing a roadmap for harnessing media power to support social progress on a global scale.

This study is not without limitations, including a three-year gap between the 2015 protests and the time of the interviews. Since the political and social environment likely evolved in the years following the protests, interviewees’ responses might have been influenced by subsequent events or shifts in public sentiment. However, retrospective interviews enable an analysis of how the roles and identities of journalists and activists may have been rearticulated post-2015, aligning with articulation theory’s focus on the fluidity of identities. Furthermore, this study focused on a single protest movement in a country that has since experienced a surge in protest activity. Protests since 2015 have provided an opportunity to examine the temporal dynamics of articulation and evolving discourses. Future research should incorporate quantitative and comparative approaches to explore additional factors shaping the journalist–activist relationship and its impact on protest coverage.

Although rooted in the Guatemalan context, these findings offer broader insights into how media systems worldwide respond to anticorruption protests and challenges to power. Future research should examine how different political and economic contexts shape media coverage of such movements. News coverage leveraged national identity to legitimize protests and transcend the protest paradigm, highlighting how collective identity can rearticulate journalist–activist relationships. Our findings show that while journalistic norms can shift during political upheaval, these changes are often temporary and constrained by broader societal and institutional forces. Future research should explore pathways for more lasting transformations in media systems globally. Ultimately, the 2015 Guatemalan protests illustrate the fluid relationship between journalism and activism, offering both theoretical and practical insights into role redefinition in times of crisis. This study not only advances the understanding of journalism-activism intersections but also provides a foundation for protest coverage that amplifies marginalized voices and legitimizes protesters.

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