Triggering the Protest Paradigm:
Examining Factors Affecting News Coverage of Protests

FRANCIS L. F. LEE[1]
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong, People's Republic of China

Communication scholars have articulated the concept of protest paradigm to capture the news media's tendency to portray social protests as deviant, threatening, or impotent. Developments in the media and social environment have led to more diversified media representations of protests, however. Correspondingly, scholars have started to treat the protest paradigm as a variable. Extending this line of research, this study content-analyzed Hong Kong newspaper coverage of protests. The results show that the protest paradigm is more likely to emerge if the protest involved radical tactics, if the protest's target responded to the media, and, in politically conservative newspapers, when the protest addressed political topics. Protest coverage is less negative when the protest addressed a political matter, and there is evidence that protest coverage has become less negative over time.

Keywords: social protests, protest paradigm, news coverage of protest, radicalism, content analysis

Introduction

Protests constitute an important means in contemporary societies through which citizens press their claims and voice their concerns. But most protests happen in highly specific times and places and are witnessed by only small numbers of people. Hence, the capability of protests to communicate their messages and achieve the desired outcomes depends on whether and how they are portrayed by the mass media (e.g., Agnone, 2007; King, 2011). Positive and prominent coverage can amplify and legitimize the protesters' voices, thus enhancing the chances for a protest to enlist public support and influence governmental authorities (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Francis L. F. Lee: francis_lee@cuhk.edu.hk

Scholars have long criticized the mainstream media for marginalizing and delegitimizing protests through portraying such actions as deviant, threatening, or impotent (e.g., Boykoff, 2006; Gitlin, 1980; Small, 1995). Chan and Lee (1984) articulated the concept of the protest paradigm to refer to the pattern of delegitimizing news coverage of protest and dissent. However, as a result of changes in the media environment and in the field of social movement, researchers have noted that the contemporary news media are "capable of exhibiting a more complex relation to the politics of protest than assumed in the past" (Cottle, 2008, p. 859). Studies focusing on the concept of the protest paradigm have also begun to treat the pattern of media coverage as a variable—that is, instead of assuming or trying to prove that the mainstream media are biased against social protests, the pattern of delegitimizing coverage is treated as existing to varying degrees in the coverage of different types of protests, by different media, or in different types of societies (e.g., Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Weaver & Scacco, 2013).

This article also examines the protest paradigm as a variable. It thus follows an established line of inquiry, yet also aims at extending it. This study examines how multiple factors combine to influence protest coverage. Specifically, it examines how media outlets' political stances, radicalism of protest tactics, responses from the protests' targets, protest topic, and general social discontent shape news coverage. This study examines the case of Hong Kong, where social mobilization has become increasingly prominent in the past decade (Lee & Chan, 2011; So, 2011). The case allows us to test hypotheses that may broaden our understanding of the factors shaping protest coverage in varying sociopolitical contexts. Overall, this study adds to our knowledge of the conditions under which the mainstream media's social control function is triggered.

Media Representation of Protests and the Concept of Protest Paradigm

The relationship between social movements and the media is complex and multifaceted. Cammaerts (2012) developed the notion of mediation opportunity structure to characterize the range of communication opportunities and constraints facing social movements. The mediation opportunity structure encompasses how the mainstream media represent protest movements, the discursive environment within which movements articulate their frames, and the technological environment within which media practices may constitute protest actions.

The mainstream media, indeed, is not the only platform for social movements to communicate with the public. Activist alternative media, for example, have grown in prominence in the Internet age (Forde, 2011; Harcup, 2013). Depending on ideologies and available resources, some movement groups may not put much emphasis on gaining access to the mainstream media. But generally speaking, the mainstream media have retained a considerable degree of power to set agenda, reach a more diverse audience, and confer status and legitimacy (Liebes & Blum-Kulka, 2004). For many social movements, new media technologies may provide the tools for them to attract, rather than bypass, mainstream media attention (Lester & Hutchins, 2009). Media representation of protests and movements thus remains a crucial analytical concern.

Media coverage of protests results from the dynamic interactions between journalists and protester groups. A significant number of studies thus have employed interviews and field observations to

derive in-depth insights into the processes of co-construction and negotiation between movements and media (e.g., Rohlinger, 2002; Ryan, Anastario, & Jeffreys, 2005). Yet a substantial body of literature employs content analysis to examine media coverage of many protests. This latter type of studies sheds light on broad patterns of protest coverage and allows a more systematic testing of hypotheses about the factors influencing news coverage. This study follows the latter tradition.

Social movement scholars have devoted much effort to analyzing the selection and description biases in the news. Selection biases refer to the factors influencing whether a protest would feature in the news. Studies have found that protest events are more likely to be covered if they fit well with the production routines of news organizations and if they have features that make them newsworthy (e.g., McCarthy, McPhail, & Smith, 1996; Myers & Caniglia, 2004; Wilkes, Corrigall-Brown, & Myers, 2010). Description biases refer to how protests are covered. Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustyn (2001), for instance, found that protests featuring arrests, violence, and counterdemonstrators tended to generate episodic coverage focusing on the protest events instead of the underlying issues. The same factors also lead to coverage favorable to the authorities.

Smith et al.'s (2001) findings echo a long line of research by communication scholars on how the mainstream media has undermined protest movements (Boykoff, 2006; Gitlin, 1980). Chan and Lee (1984) argued that the mainstream media are agents of social control—that is, they tend to uphold existing norms and values and support established institutions and systems. The media take up the social control function because of the embedding of media organizations in larger political economic structures (e.g., Bagdikian, 2004; Baker, 1996) and the power of hegemonic cultural common sense (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Robert, 1978; Lee, 2008). Practically, the social control function is realized through newsroom management (e.g., Breed, 1955; Chomsky, 1999), the routinization of news production (e.g., Tuchman, 1978), and unreflective practices of journalistic norms (e.g., Glasser, 1992; Hackett & Zhao, 1998).

One manifestation of the media's social control function is the media's tendency to cover protests and movements that challenge the status quo by adopting the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984). The protest paradigm refers to a pattern of coverage that focuses on the violent and disruptive aspects of the protest actions, describes protests using the script of crime news, highlights the protesters' (strange) appearance and/or ignorance, portrays protests as ineffective, focuses on the theatrical aspects of the protests and neglects the substantive issues, invokes public opinion against the protesters, and privileges sources from or supporting the government (McLeod & Hertog, 1998). The protest paradigm, in other words, can be considered as a heuristic notion summarizing a pattern of news coverage that expresses disapproval toward protests and dissent.

For researchers, the concept of protest paradigm is useful because it captures a specific type of media coverage and makes theoretical sense of it. In fact, some studies in the past decade have continued to illustrate the presence of the protest paradigm in cases ranging from Australian newspaper coverage of the 1999 anti–World Trade Organization protests in Seattle (McFarlane & Hay, 2003) to U.S. newspaper coverage of Occupy Wall Street (Xu, 2013). Other studies not using the concept also produced findings consistent with the argument (e.g., Di Cicco, 2010; Leung, 2009).

However, as noted, other scholars have found that media coverage of social protests has become less clear and predictable over time (Cottle, 2008). Part of the reason is that movements and protests have become routinized and normalized in what Meyer and Tarrow (1998) have called the social movement society. A wider range of groups are engaging in mobilization on a wider range of issues, leading to a "cacophonous field of protest" (Cottle, 2008, p. 857) against which the news media exhibit a more complex range of responses. In some countries, parts of the media sector have become more willing to take up positions on issues and causes as a result of increasing competition in a more fragmented media environment (Milne, 2005; Stroud, 2010). It follows that these media organizations can be supportive toward specific movements and protests when the latter are consistent with their own professed positions and ideology.

Once the assumption that the mainstream news media is biased against social protests is abandoned, it becomes meaningful to examine variations in the applicability of the protest paradigm. Boyle et al. (2012) found that, not surprisingly, protests employing more radical tactics are portrayed more negatively. McCluskey, Stein, Boyle, and McLeod (2009) found that news coverage of protests in U.S. newspapers belonging to less pluralistic communities conforms more to the protest paradigm. This is because less pluralistic communities do not have established mechanisms for resolving conflicts; thus, the news media have a stronger role on maintaining community consensus. Others have focused on variations across types of media outlets. Weaver and Scacco (2013) found that MSNBC, a left-leaning media outlet, is more likely than the right-leaning FOX to portray the Tea Party movement as idiotic. Harlow and Johnson (2011) found that the online alternative media outlet Global Voices covered the Egyptian revolution in ways that conform less to the protest paradigm than *The New York Times*.

In sum, early research on media coverage of movements and protests has noted the dominance of a protest paradigm that delegitimizes social protests. Changes in the media and social environments have led to more diversified media coverage, however. Hence, recent studies, as well as the present article, treat the protest paradigm as a variable and attempt to discern the factors that shape protest coverage.

Background and Research Hypotheses

Lui and Chiu (2000) argued that local social movements and protest politics in Hong Kong can be traced back to the late 1960s. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, protests and movements constituted an important undercurrent in the local political scene (Lam, 2004). The prominence of protests and social mobilization then grew substantially in the 2000s as a result of a persistent legitimacy crisis of the undemocratic government, the failure of political parties and other institutions to communicate public opinion into the policy process, value change among the population, and the development of new media technologies that facilitate more effective mobilization (Lee & Chan, 2011; Ma, 2007, 2011; So, 2011).

Large-scale protests in the city have included a historic July 1 protest in 2003 that forced the government to postpone planned national security legislation. The July 1 protest has since become an annual event. The June 4 candlelight vigil commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen movement in China constituted another annual protest where citizens called for democratization in China. Thousands of

citizens have participated in other recurring protests against government policies, addressing issues ranging from national education in schools to free television licensing. Some of these protests have successfully forced the government to make concessions. Such successes have heightened Hong Kong people's feelings of collective efficacy (Lee, 2006) and further fueled social mobilization.

More generally, Lee and Chan (2013) have noted that, similar to Meyer and Tarrow's (1998) description of Western countries, a wider range of groups and organizations has become active in organizing collective actions on a wider range of issues and against a wider range of targets. Notably, the rise of social media and other new media technologies also has facilitated the emergence of "citizen self-mobilization": Hong Kong has witnessed numerous protest events in recent years initiated and organized by ordinary citizens unaffiliated with social and political groups. In some cases, citizen self-mobilization coupled with social movement organizations to generate dynamic collective action campaigns (Lee, 2014).

The prominence of protests makes Hong Kong a suitable and important site for analyzing issues concerning media coverage of protests. Drawing from the literature, this study focuses on three features of newspaper coverage that are used as indicators of the protest paradigm: (1) emphasis on violence and disruption, (2) inclusion of the protesters' voices, and (3) quotation of statements from other sources that explicitly criticize or praise the protests or protesters. A news article is regarded as manifesting the protest paradigm to the extent that it emphasizes violence and disruption, excludes the protesters' voices, and quotes statements from other sources that are primarily critical toward the protests.

With the indicators established, hypotheses about the factors that may trigger the protest paradigm are proposed. First, following Boyle et al. (2012), this study expects the protest paradigm to be manifested to a greater extent when the protests employ more radical tactics. Radical protests pose a more serious challenge to established social norms and values, and hence are more likely to trigger the social control function of the press.

H1:   *Coverage of protests with radical tactics exhibits features of the protest paradigm more so than coverage of protests without such tactics.*

Second, the manifestation of the protest paradigm may relate to whether the protests' targets are willing to respond to the media. Some studies on media coverage of protests have focused on the dyadic movement-media relationship (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Few studies have expanded the analysis to a triadic framework (cf. Oliver & Maney, 2000). But in reality, protest coverage is likely to be affected by not only what the protesters do but how the target of the protest responds. Professional norms such as balance and fairness require journalists covering a protest to seek responses from the target. If the target handles the media proactively and strategically, media framing may become more favorable to the target, and the protest paradigm may become more conspicuously exhibited. This study uses the presence of responses from a protest's target in a news article to indicate the target's willingness to engage the media. The hypothesis is therefore stated as follows:

H2:   *Coverage of protests that features responses from the protests' targets exhibits features of the protest paradigm to a greater extent.*

Whereas *H1* and *H2* are derived from general theoretical considerations, the following hypotheses are derived from a combination of theoretical arguments and contextual considerations. Following Rohlinger, Kail, Taylor, and Conn's (2012) argument that the journalistic field is heterogeneous and Weaver and Scacco's (2013) finding, this article predicts that protest coverage varies across newspapers with different political orientations. Specifically, the analysis focuses on *Apple Daily* (*Apple*), *Oriental Daily* (*Oriental*), *Ming Pao* (*MP*), and *Sing Tao Daily* (*STD*). *Apple* and *Oriental* are the two most widely circulated mass-oriented newspapers in Hong Kong, while *MP* and *STD* are the two most prominent middle-class–oriented papers in the city. Politically, *Apple* adopted a prodemocracy and anticommunist stance and is most likely to support contentious politics. At the other end of the spectrum, *STD* has a close relationship with the government and adopts largely conservative stances on political and economic issues. The political stances of *Oriental* and *MP* are more complicated and issue specific. Reflecting its populist approach, *Oriental* can be highly critical toward the Hong Kong government, yet it also tends to avoid provoking the Chinese government on political matters. *MP* emphasizes its professionalism and thus a more objective approach to the news. Yet the liberal orientation of its middle-class readership also compels it to take up the liberal-progressive agenda at times (Lee & Chan, 2009). Given the complexity of the cases of *MP* and *Oriental*, a hypothesis focusing on the difference between *Apple* and *STD* is stated:

H3:   *Compared to the prodemocracy* Apple Daily, *protest coverage in the conservative* Sing Tao Daily *exhibits features of the protest paradigm to a greater extent.*

The analysis also considers the possibility of change over time. As mentioned, social movement scholars have noted the routinization and normalization of protests in Western societies (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). The proliferation of collective actions in Hong Kong should also have "normalized" the idea and practice of protests to a certain extent (Lee & Chan, 2013). Correspondingly, media coverage of protests may also become less negative over time. Therefore:

H4:   *Protest coverage exhibits features of the protest paradigm to a lesser extent over time.*

While *H4* predicts a linear change over time, media coverage also may vary according to fluctuations in social atmosphere. One basic professional role of the news media is to reflect public opinion (Schudson, 1995). In Hong Kong, levels of public dissatisfaction about the government have fluctuated substantially. When discontent is widespread, the news media may regard protests as representative of the public opinion climate and thus treat protests as more legitimate. In contrast, when social discontent is low, protest may be seen as challenging a status quo backed by a social consensus. This study uses dissatisfaction against the government as an indicator of general social discontent. *H5* is stated as follows:

H5:   *Protest coverage exhibits features of the protest paradigm to a lesser extent when dissatisfaction against the government is high.*

In addition, this study explores whether news coverage varies according to whether a protest addresses political topics. On the one hand, political protests—protests addressing issues pertinent to the organization of the political institutions and distribution of political power—present more fundamental challenges to the established system than protests addressing social policies or other nonpolitical matters.

One may therefore expect the protest paradigm to emerge more clearly when the media cover political protests. On the other hand, as already noted, the rise of protest politics in Hong Kong is partly a result of the persistent legitimacy crisis of an undemocratic government. In other words, the current political system does not enjoy the support of a social consensus. One might even argue that there is a social consensus for reforming the system. Such contextual considerations would lead one to expect the protest paradigm to appear less frequently and clearly when the media cover political protests in Hong Kong. Given the competing possibilities, a research question is posed:

RQ1:   *Does protest coverage exhibit features of the protest paradigm to a greater or lesser extent for protests addressing political issues?*

Last, the analysis treats political versus nonpolitical protests as a moderating variable that might shape the relationships between media coverage and other factors. Specifically, the expectation of *H3*— that conservative papers tend to exhibit the protest paradigm to a greater extent—is likely to be more applicable to political protests. It is less clear how the impact of other factors may vary depending on protest topic. Hence, this part of the analysis will be guided by one hypothesis and one research question:

H6:   *The impact of newspapers' political orientation as stated in H3 is stronger when the protests being covered address political issues.*

RQ2:   *Does the impact of the other factors—protest tactics, response from targets, time, and social discontent—vary depending on whether the protests address political issues?*

Method and Data

Data analyzed came from a content analysis of news reports of protests published by four newspapers—*Apple*, *Oriental*, *MP*, and *STD*— between 2001 and 2012. Articles were derived from the electronic news archive Wise News. A search was conducted to first find articles mentioning any one of nine keywords: *kang-yi* (protest), *ji-hui* (rally), *jing-zuo* (sit-in), *shi-wei* (demonstration), *ba-gong* (labor strike), *ba-ke* (student strike), *man-shi* (slow driving), *jue-shi* (hunger strike), and *you-xing* (marching). The search was restricted to the main news pages and Hong Kong news sections. Research assistants reviewed thousands of articles to identify the relevant ones—news reports of a protest action conducted on the previous day in Hong Kong. A protest action is defined as a public, performative action conducted by more than a single person making a claim that is against the interests and/or intention of another party. The procedures resulted in a sample of 1,767 articles: 512 from *Apple*, 485 from *Oriental*, 407 from *MP*, and 363 from *STD*.

The sampling procedure does not capture all articles covering protests. The keyword set includes the most frequently utilized and most identifiable forms of collective actions in Hong Kong as well as the general term *protest*. It is possible that some news reports of unconventional forms of protest actions may not include any of the keywords. Nevertheless, the procedure should have captured a substantial proportion of relevant articles. The sample should suffice for this study.

Two assistants coded the articles after several rounds of training. Intercoder reliability was calculated by the coders coding the same 188 articles derived from systematic sampling. All items used in this article had Scott's *pi* higher than 0.80 or percent of agreement above 95%.

Descriptive statistics of the main variables are discussed in the next section. Their operationalizations are explained here. Two indicators of emphasis on violence and disruption were constructed. First, the coders identified whether the headline or lead paragraph of an article mentioned "arrests," "injuries or damages," "violence/conflict," and "disruption" (e.g., a traffic jam). The four items were coded separately. To simplify the analysis, a single dichotomous variable of *disruption or violence in headline/lead* was created with 1 = at least one item was mentioned, and 0 = none of the four items was mentioned. The coders also identified whether other parts of the article mention "protesters' use of force," "scuffles," "damage to properties," "disruption of traffic," "disruption of business activities," "disruption of other aspects of everyday life," "arrests," and "injuries." A single dichotomous variable of *disruption or violence in article* was created with 1 = at least one item was mentioned, and 0 = none of the items was mentioned.

The coders identified up to the first 10 sources quoted in an article. Each source was categorized according to the source's relation to the protest. The categories include organizers/leaders, participants, target, police/security, mediator between protesters and targets, counterprotesters, observers/bystanders, and others. Two variables about emphasis on the protesters' voices were created. The first is *number of protester-sources quoted* (i.e., organizers/leaders or participants) But sheer number does not necessarily reflect the extent to which protester-sources dominate an article. An article can also quote multiple protester-sources and an even larger number of other sources. Therefore, the second variable created is *protester-sources' share of voice*, which refers to the proportion of sources being protester-sources.

For sources belonging to the bystander/observer or others categories, the coders registered whether the sources explicitly praised and criticized the protests or protesters. Only the bystander/observer and others categories count here, because the variable was designed to capture how public opinion is invoked—a core element in the protest paradigm (McLeod & Hertog, 1998). Explicit praise and criticisms were coded separately as dichotomous variables. For simplicity, a single variable, *explicit praise and criticisms*, was created. It is the number of praising sources minus the number of critical sources. A higher score thus represents an overall more positive public opinion invoked in the news.

For protest tactics, the coders recorded whether the protests involved (1) marching, (2) a sit-in, (3) disruption of ongoing activities of targets, (4) strike actions or slow driving, (5) a hunger strike, (6) handing in of letters or objects, and (7) burning or destroying of objects (each being a dichotomous item). *Radical tactics* is a dichotomous variable with 1 = involving disruption of ongoing activities, strike actions, slow driving, hunger strike, or burning or destroying of objects, and 0 = not involving any of the above. The classification is based on past research on public acceptance of different protest tactics in Hong Kong (Lee & Chan, 2013). As a point of comparison, the analysis will also use "involving marching or not" as a control so that the peculiar effects of radical tactics can be discerned more clearly.

Response from target of protest is a dichotomous variable on whether the article included a verbal response from the protest's target. The analysis also includes a dichotomous variable on whether the protest involved *direct contact between the protesters and the target's representatives*. This variable is added to compare the impact of the protest target's responsiveness to the media to that of responsiveness to protesters.

Information about public opinion was derived from the website of the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong, which conducted monthly government approval rating polls.[2] *Public dissatisfaction toward the government* is the percentage of citizens saying they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" toward the government in the month the news article was published. For *protest topics*, the coders classified the main topic addressed by the protest into one of 19 categories, including Hong Kong politics, economy and finance, business, labor, and so on. A dichotomous variable was created so that 1 = Hong Kong politics, media and press freedom, or China-related, and 0 = all others. The categories of media and press freedom and China-related are included as political topics because press freedom has been a heated political issue in Hong Kong, and most of the China-related protests held in Hong Kong, such as the June 4 rally, are political in nature. Last, the *time* variable used to examine changes over time scores from 1 to 144 with 1 = January 2001, 2 = February 2001, and so on, up to 144 = December 2012.

Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the major variables derived from the content analysis. About 10% of the articles mentioned disruption or violence in the headlines or lead paragraphs, whereas about 14% mentioned disruption or violence somewhere else in the article. Without comparing with records of protest events derived from alternative sources, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the Hong Kong media overemphasized violent and disruptive protests. But the percentages seem small, perhaps reflecting the fact that protests in Hong Kong typically do not involve violence or highly disruptive actions.

Number of protester-sources quoted is slightly less than 1 per article. The total number of news sources per article is only 2.11. Therefore, the mean score of the protester-sources' share of voice is close to 50%. Interestingly, 26.1% of the articles that had quoted at least one news source had a score of 100% on protester-sources' share of voice—that is, these articles quoted only protesters and no one else. These articles tend to be short: length of article (in number of words) and protester-sources' share of voice is significantly negatively correlated ($r = -0.26$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that protester-sources may dominate news coverage when the journalists completed only a simple factual report of the event and did not attempt to invite more and different types of sources to comment on the protests and the issues.

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[2] See http://hkupop.hku.hk.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables.

	Descriptive statistics
Indicators of protest paradigm	
Disruption/violence in headline/lead	Yes = 10.4%; No = 89.6%
Disruption/violence in article	Yes = 14.1%; No =8 5.9%
Number of protester-sources	M = 0.96, SD = 1.15
Protester-sources' share of voice	M = 0.51, SD = 0.41
Explicit praise and criticisms	M = −0.01, SD = 0.27
Other variables	
Radical tactics	Yes = 15.3%; No = 84.7%
Marching	Yes = 36.3%; No = 63.7%
Target's media response	Yes = 35.1%; No = 64.9%
Target-protester contact	Yes = 20.8%; No = 79.2%
Protest topic	Political = 15.8%; nonpolitical = 84.2%

Note: N = 1,437 for protester-sources' share of voice. *N* = 1,767 for all other variables. The percentages of "Yes" and "No" refer to the percentages of articles having or not having the feature/characteristic. For interval level variables, the mean scores and standard deviations are reported.

The explicit praise and criticisms variable has a mean score close to zero. This means that, on average, the overall tone of the statements made by sources belonging to the bystander/observer and others categories is close to neutral. Considered together, the statistics shown in the top half of Table 1 suggest that the protest paradigm has not been extensively applied in protest coverage in contemporary Hong Kong.

Marching is a common form of protest actions. More than one-third of the articles reported a protest involving marching. Based on the original coding, 1.4% of the articles reported a protest involving disruption of ongoing events/activities, 7.8% involved strikes or slow driving, 2.8% involved a hunger strike, and 3.6% involved burning or destroying objects. Combined, 15.3% of the articles reported a protest involving one of these relatively radical tactics.

Political protests constituted the subject of coverage in 15.8% of the articles. About one in five articles reported a protest involving direct contact between protesters and the target's representatives. The targets were more likely to respond to the media; more than one-third of the articles include a response from the target. This is understandable because journalists are likely to proactively seek responses from the protests' targets.

Predictors of Features of Protest Coverage

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the hypotheses and research question regarding the predictors of protest coverage. In addition to the main independent variables, two control variables—marching and direct contact between protesters and representatives of the targets—were included. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

As predicted, news articles about protests involving radical tactics were more likely to have mentioned violence or disruption. In one sense, the news simply reflects the reality of the presence of violence and disruption in the more radical protests. At the same time, protester-sources' share of voice, but not the sheer number of protester-sources, is smaller in articles about radical protests. Moreover, the mix of explicit praise and criticisms featured in articles about radical protests is significantly more negative. On the whole, the pattern of findings supports *H1*.

Notably, the marching variable relates positively to number of protester-sources and protester-sources' share of voice. One explanation is that journalists can easily interview participants during a protest march. For the analysis here, the important point is that different protest tactics may relate to features of protest coverage differently.

News articles including a response from the protest target were more likely to mention violence or disruption in the headline/lead, mention violence or disruption in other parts of the article, give protester-sources a smaller share of voice, and provide more negative statements from bystanders. Inclusion of a target's response relates positively to number of protester-sources, though. This probably reflects the journalistic norm of balance: When one side of the conflict is quoted, the other side also tends to be quoted. But on the whole, the findings largely support *H2*. Meanwhile, direct contact between protesters and representatives of the target does not relate to features of news coverage. It shows that the protest target's responses to media, rather than responses to the protesters, mattered to news coverage.

H3 is partly supported. Given the political stances of the newspapers, one can expect clear differences between *Apple* (used as the reference category) and *STD*. Table 2 shows that significant differences between the two papers exist in number of protester-sources quoted and protester-sources' share of voice. As expected, the conservative *STD* emphasized the protesters' voices to a lesser extent. Interestingly, *MP* and *Oriental* also emphasized the protesters' voices significantly less than *Apple*.

H4 is strongly supported. Time relates significantly to four of the dependent variables in the expected direction, and the relationship in the fifth case is also close to being statistically significant. From 2001 to 2012, Hong Kong newspaper coverage of protests exhibited the features of the protest paradigm to a lesser extent.

Table 2. Predictors of Features of Protest Coverage.

	Disruption or violence in headline or lead	Disruption or violence in article	Number of protester-sources	Share of voice of protesters	Explicit praise and criticisms
Time	−.08**	−.07**	.04	.10***	.05*
MP	−.02	.01	−.10***	−.05	−.01
Oriental	.04	.04	−.06*	−.09**	−.03
STD	.03	.05#	−.09**	−.08**	−.02
Radical tactics	.17***	.20***	−.02	−.05#	−.08**
Marching	−.01	.01	.17***	.21***	.02
Contact	.02	.03	.01	.05#	−.01
Target's response	.07**	.06*	.10***	−.31***	−.06*
Dissatisfied with government	.00	−.01	.06*	.02	.01
Political topic	0.08**	0.07**	.07**	.01	.01
Adjusted R^2	0.046***	0.053***	.048***	.166***	0.011**
N	1,767	1,767	1,767	1,439	1,767

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Time ranges from 1=January 2001 to 144=December 2012. *Apple Daily* is used as the reference category and therefore does not appear as an independent variable.
*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. # $p < .06$.

Public dissatisfaction with the government relates significantly only to number of protester-sources. When public discontent is high, news articles feature more protester-sources. This is consistent with the idea that the news media may see protests as more reflective of the public opinion climate when the general level of social discontent is high. But the findings are not consistent enough to support *H5*.

Finally, the data shown in Table 2 indicate that news articles about political protests are more likely to mention violence and disruption. But the articles are also more likely to have interviewed more protester-sources. The findings are therefore mixed. It is possible that political protests in Hong Kong are indeed more likely to contain violence, and yet the media also treat the political protests as addressing especially important issues and the voices expressed through such protests as demanding a hearing.

Predictors of Protest Coverage by Protest Topics

The differences between newspapers with different political stances are not clear-cut, but, as *H6* predicts, the between-newspapers differences may be more prevalent only when the protests address political issues. The same regression analysis was therefore conducted with the sample separated into political protest coverage and nonpolitical protest coverage.

The data shown in Table 3 provide some support for *H6*. Focusing on the contrast between *Apple* and *STD* again, the regression coefficients obtained by *STD* are nominally stronger in the case of political protests across all dependent variables. The coefficients of *STD* for the two types of protests differ from each other significantly in the case of disruption or violence in other parts of the article and protester-sources' share of voice. The difference between the two coefficients is also close to being significant ($p <$ .055) in the number of protester-sources quoted. On the whole, *STD* covered political protests in ways that conform more to the protest paradigm than *Apple*.

The impact of other independent variables does not vary consistently and substantially according to the protest topic. The increase over time in the number of protester-sources and protester-sources' share of voice are applicable only to coverage of nonpolitical protests, but the other findings are not consistent enough to suggest that the decline of the protest paradigm is more applicable to nonpolitical protests. The situation is similar when radical tactics and responses from the target are concerned. The sporadic significant differences do not constitute consistent patterns.

Discussion

This study is interested in the factors affecting the extent to which the news media exercise their social control function and adopt the protest paradigm. Focusing on newspaper coverage of protests from 2001 to 2012 in Hong Kong, the analysis reveals that several features of the protest paradigm—such as emphasis on violence and disruption, de-emphasis of the protesters' voices, and invocation of negative comments from bystanders—were more likely to appear if the protests involve radical tactics. This finding replicates the results of Boyle et al. (2012). Additionally, in line with Weaver and Scacco (2013), political orientation of the media outlets matters. The protest paradigm was more likely to be manifested in the conservative *STD* than in the prodemocracy *Apple Daily*, though the difference is manifested more clearly only in news articles on political protests.

Table 3. Predictors of Features of Coverage for Political and Nonpolitical Protest.

	Disruption or violence in headline or lead		Disruption or violence in article		Explicit praises/criticisms	
	Nonpolitical protests	Political protests	Nonpolitical protests	Political protests	Nonpolitical protests	Political protests
Time	−.07*	−.14*	−.05*	−.10	.05	.01
MP	−.01	−.09	.01	−.01	.01	−.08
Oriental	.04	.03	.05	.03	−.00	−.12
STD	.02	.10	.03$_a$	.19**$_a$	−.01	−.06
Radical tactics	.18***	.13*	.23***$_b$	.04$_b$	−.11***	.03
Marching	.00	−.07	.01	.01	.00	.08
Contact	.02	−.01	.03	.02	−.02	−.00
Target's response	.08**	.06	.07**	−.07	−.07*	.01
Dissatisfied with government	−.01	.06	−.03	.10	−.00	.06
Adjusted R^2	.044***	.033*	.069***	.026	.016***	−.007

	Number of protester-sources		Protesters' share of voice		
	Nonpolitical protests	Political protests	Nonpolitical protests	Political protests	
Time	.06*$_c$	−.09$_c$	.12***	.01	
MP	−.07*$_d$	−.20**$_d$	−.04	−.09	
Oriental	.00$_e$	−.22**$_e$	−.07*	−.16*	
STD	−.06*	−.16*	−.05$_h$	−.24**$_h$	
Radical tactics	−.01	−.07	−.04	−.10	
Marching	.15***	.22***	.21***	.20**	
Contact	.03$_f$	−.13*$_f$	.06*	.01	
Target's response	.07**$_g$	.22**$_g$	−.31***	−.28***	
Dissatisfied with govt.	.06*	−.01	.02	.02	
Adjusted R^2	.034***	.120***	.163***	.174***	

Notes: Entries are standardized regression coefficients. N = 1,487 for nonpolitical topics and 279 for political topics. Entries sharing the same subscript have corresponding unstandardized coefficients differing from one another significantly at $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Beyond replicating existing findings, this study extends the literature by showing that whether the protest target responds to the media can affect media coverage. Because most protests target specific groups or institutions, from the perspective of the journalists, the targets are also part of the news story. Given the norm of balance, journalists covering protests often have to proactively seek responses from the targets. Scholars have emphasized how movements and activists can shape news coverage by their media strategies and interactions with journalists (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). By the same token, the protest targets' media strategies also can influence coverage. For instance, the coverage may become more favorable to the protest target and by implication less favorable to the protester if a protest target is forthcoming and well prepared when dealing with the media. Theoretically, the finding points to the need to consider media coverage as the result of a triadic interaction involving the media, movements and activists, and the targets of collective actions.

This study also shows that media coverage of protests became relatively less negative in Hong Kong between 2001 and 2012. The change over time was not huge, but the trend is statistically significant and applicable to most of the indicators. The finding suggests that, as movements and protests become more common in the city and as the local public becomes more receptive toward the idea that social groups and citizens have the right to press their claims via collective actions (Lee & Chan, 2011, 2013), the news media have also become less likely to treat protests as deviant. In fact, as shown in the descriptive statistics in Table 1, features of the protest paradigm did not appear extensively in protest coverage. The findings likely reflect in part the actual characteristics of protests in the city. At the same time, the findings show that not all kinds of protest activities are dismissed as deviant and threatening.

Another implication of the findings is that, as protests have become more common in the city, the news media have not become desensitized about protests. If the media did become desensitized, we would expect the media to either ignore protests or focus on more radical and sensational protests in their coverage. The findings show that neither of these happened.

The generalizability of the finding regarding change over time needs to be qualified. Although social movement scholars have noted the normalization and routinization of protests in contemporary liberal democracies (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998), studies have not shown linear changes over time in media coverage of protests in such countries. One possible reason for the recent weakening of the protest paradigm in Hong Kong is that the political system itself does not enjoy high degrees of legitimacy. The status quo, in other words, is not built on as solid a social consensus. This may have weakened the news media's social control function on behalf of the status quo. More generally speaking, the findings about change over time point to the possibility of cultural change at the societal level influencing media coverage of protest actions, at least under specific conditions. How cultural changes and media systems shape media coverage of protests are questions awaiting examination by comparative research.

The analysis finds that the coverage of political protests did not consistently exhibit the features of the protest paradigm more clearly. Political protests in Hong Kong often present challenges to the authority of the political power holders and demand changes in the political system. Such protests may be regarded as presenting stronger and more fundamental challenges to the legitimacy of the established system. Following the conventional theoretical argument of the protest paradigm, one may expect the

protest paradigm to emerge more clearly when the news media cover political protests. The mixed findings suggest, again, how the media politics of protest may differ in a context in which the political system itself does not enjoy the support of a strong social consensus. Although the mainstream news media in Hong Kong manifest the tendency to defend the general cultural norm in the city that protests should be "peaceful and rational" (Lee & Chan, 2011), and hence they have the tendency to undermine the legitimacy of radical protests, they do not necessarily treat challenges to the established political system as more illegitimate than other kinds of contentious claims.

It should be noted that the dichotomy of political versus nonpolitical protests can be only a rough indicator of the extent to which the protests challenge the legitimacy of existing systems. The most rancorous protests on social issues may present a bigger challenge to legitimacy than some political protests. Future research can attempt to develop better indicators of challenge to legitimacy for analysis.

On the whole, this article shows that the protest paradigm should be understood as a pattern of coverage applicable to the coverage of some, but not all, types of protests, and the likelihood for the protest paradigm to emerge can be predicted by various factors. Treating the protest paradigm as a variable allows us to discern the conditions under which the social control function of the mainstream news media is triggered.

In relation to the broader literature on media and protests, this study is consistent with other scholars' observations that the contemporary mainstream news media have become less one-sidedly and consistently biased against contentious collective actions (Cottle, 2008). Media representations of protests can be regarded as part of a broader mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012) within which social movements conduct their communication work. Studies illustrating the factors affecting media coverage can clarify the makeup of a part of the mediation opportunity structure. The protest paradigm, because of its ability to summarize various features of news coverage into a meaningful ideal type, remains a highly useful concept in guiding such analysis of news content.

Besides theoretical implications, some findings also have practical implications for actors engaging in contentious politics. For example, this study replicates the finding that radicalism triggers the protest paradigm. At the same time, protests that involve marching tend to receive coverage in which protester-sources have larger shares of voice (see Table 2). It has been suggested that marching makes it convenient for journalists to interview protesters. By the same reasoning, coverage of radical protests may give smaller shares of voice to protester-sources not completely because of how radicalism triggers the social control function of the press; it may also be due partly to the relative difficulties for journalists to talk to protesters during radical protest actions. Protest organizers who want to engage the mainstream news media may consider the possibility of planning their actions—regardless of whether the actions are radical—in ways that can facilitate journalist-protester interactions.

Another practical implication is related to the finding regarding the influence of the target's responses. Because journalists are likely to seek responses from the targets of protests, and the targets' responses may influence media coverage, protest organizers and movement organizations may need to try to monitor whether and how their targets respond to the media and be more proactive in responding

to how their targets respond to the media. The discursive contestation that shapes media coverage does not end with the protest event itself.

A few limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. First, although some of the hypotheses in this study involve arguments about how the characteristics of the protests affect media coverage, some of the indicators of protest characteristics were also based on content of media coverage. This is inevitable for the present study because of the absence of alternative records of protest events. Movement scholars have acknowledged that, despite its obvious limitations, media coverage still serves as one of the most useful records of protest events (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004). Nevertheless, treating some aspects of media coverage as reflecting objective characteristics of the protests and other aspects of media coverage as features of journalistic constructions remains potentially problematic. It should be acknowledged as a limitation.

Second, although this study extends previous studies on the protest paradigm by simultaneously considering multiple factors that can shape media coverage, the range of factors examined is certainly not comprehensive. In fact, the explanatory power of the regression models is generally weak. Future studies can identify additional factors and construct more systematic frameworks to explain the appearance of the protest paradigm.

Third, this study follows the tradition of using quantitative content analysis to examine media coverage of a huge number of protests. The study facilitates the mapping of the overall pattern of media coverage and the testing of hypotheses regarding how features of protests and features of coverage may relate to one another. But the analysis cannot delve into the dynamic processes of journalist-movement interactions; nor can it adequately explore the nuances of meanings in news texts. For example, counting the number of protester-sources does not reveal much about how the words of the protesters were represented in the news. The presence or absence of a target's response in the news is also only a rough and simplistic indicator of the protest target's handling of media. Future studies can consider other additional measures to capture the features of the protest paradigm. Equally important, some of the arguments and issues raised through this study—such as the question of how the interactions between the media and the protest target shape news coverage—need to be further developed through qualitative research.

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