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## A TALE OF TWO SITES: JOURNALIST PERSPECTIVES AND PATTERNS IN COVERAGE OF OCCUPY WALL STREET

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### Abstract

Considerable research has demonstrated that protesters often receive critical coverage of their actions and events. However, questions still remain about the reasons why journalists cover protests in the way they do. This study utilizes a thematic analysis of news coverage and interviews with journalists at two Occupy Wall Street sites (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Madison, Wisconsin) to explore patterns in coverage and reasons behind those patterns. The findings suggest that protest group characteristics such as level of organization and focus of message as well as community norms such as history of protest activity can have an impact on both the success of protest activity and the nature of resulting coverage. Implications for theory, journalists, and protesters are discussed.

### Keywords

social protest, news coverage, protest paradigm

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The first protest activity associated with the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement began on September 17, 2011 in New York City. Spurred by issues of income inequality and corporate greed the initial occupy location was situated in New York City's financial district. By the middle of October of that same year, hundreds of other occupy locations had sprung up in cities all across the United States and the world, including Philadelphia (PA), Madison (WI), Topeka (KS), and Des Moines (IA) among many others (Nichols, 2011). In some cases these location-specific protests lasted only a day or two, but others continued, in at least some form, for months or even years beyond the initial protests.

The volume of the protests and the visual nature of the many encampments made the OWS movement ripe for news coverage. Although the spectacle of the events was in part designed to generate news coverage, considerable research reveals that the resulting news coverage of protest events is often unfavorable (McLeod, 1999; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). According to the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984), the more that groups threaten the system - e.g., governmental or societal norms in place - the more likely they are to be treated critically by mainstream news media. Numerous explanations have been offered for why this pattern exists with both protester and journalistic characteristics being offered as antecedents to critical coverage. The end result is that, in many cases, increased news coverage and attention for the group does not always lead to positive outcomes (Sobieraj, 2011).

However, there were many unique aspects to OWS that may have affected not only the coverage received but also the interactions between the protesters and journalists. For instance, the OWS movement has demonstrated greater longevity than many protests, brought together a wide array of causes under one umbrella, and actively pursued an organizational structure that did not have clear leaders in place. Overall, these characteristics of OWS make it more likely that a range of journalists would cover the movement as it made for news at many levels and in many areas (e.g., crime, city, and government beats). Further cementing the unique relationship between media and OWS, in some cases, journalists were arrested alongside the protesters they were covering (Powell, 2011; Turner, 2011).

Because of these many unique characteristics and circumstances, OWS provides an excellent opportunity to better understand the processes behind resulting news coverage and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the protest paradigm. To that end, the current paper presents two case studies of separate Occupy locations, one of which continues to this day - Occupy Madison - and one that lasted just over two months - Occupy Philly. Specifically, the case studies combine qualitative interviews with journalists who covered OWS with a qualitative analysis of news stories on the movement, connecting the journalistic process with the resulting coverage. Additionally, the use of two case studies allows for a more nuanced exploration of how unique location characteristics can affect application of the protest paradigm.

## **The Occupy Movement**

The first official actions from the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement occurred on September 17, 2011 in New York City's Zuccotti Park (Gaby & Caren, 2012). However, the seeds of the movement were planted earlier, rooted in the financial crisis, the growing income inequality gap, and the Arab Spring protests from the previous year (Mirzoeff, 2012). Protest became such a dominant theme during 2010 and 2011 that *Time* magazine featured "the protester" as its person of the year for 2011 (Bishop, 2013). Although often seen as a solely grassroots organization, the initial protests were driven by the consumer activist group Adbusters (Costanza-Chock, 2012). For instance, Adbusters registered the domain name for OccupyWallStreet.org on June 9 of 2011

(Berrett, 2011; The Week Staff, 2011).

After these initial protests, the movement quickly spread to many cities throughout the United States and the world (Wood & Goodale, 2011). OWS strived to maintain a decentralized organizational structure that did not have traditional leaders (Berrett, 2011; Wood & Goodale, 2011). Instead, the movement preferred to make consensus-based decisions rooted in direct democracy through a general assembly (Rathke, 2011). This structure resulted in numerous critiques of leaderless movements rooted in concerns about their long-term viability (see Gladwell, 2010). Some have suggested that the structure of the group is rooted in Anarchism, yet many of the activists themselves are closer to liberalism in political orientation, making the leaderless structure a threat to long-term viability (Fox, 2011). However, others saw less of an issue with the lack of leadership (O'Reilly, 2011). For instance, sociologist Nina Eliasoph speaking to *The Christian Science Monitor* indicated that “The problem isn’t leaderless-ness, but spokesperson-less-ness” (Wood & Goodale, 2011). The sentiment raised by Eliasoph gets at the core of one of the ongoing critiques of OWS - a lack of clearly articulated goals. Wolf (2011) suggests that this critique was overstated by the media and was partly a function of an organized effort by the government and right-wing media to minimize the movement. Ultimately, many of the Occupy locations began to close down by mid- to late-November after nearly two months of activity (Fox, 2011).

Specific to this current study are two United States locations: Madison, WI and Philadelphia, PA. These locations were selected because they both featured Occupy sites that lasted at least one month. However, the sites had distinct enough features to allow for an assessment of how characteristics of each site might have influenced resulting media coverage. Occupy Madison began on October 7, 2011 (Idrus, 2011). Madison is the state capital of Wisconsin and is home to the University of Wisconsin. It also has a noted history of activism stretching back to heightened activism during the Vietnam War era. The Occupy Madison group evolved into a homeless advocacy group and pushed for the development of a “Tiny Home Village” to provide housing for local homeless people (Savidge, 2014). Occupy Philly began its first encampment on October 6, 2011 with a march to City Hall (Stillwell, 2011). Philadelphia is the largest city in Pennsylvania, although the state capital is Harrisburg (roughly two hours to the west). Philadelphia is home to several large universities, although they were not as closely linked to the location of Occupy Philly as the University of Wisconsin was to Occupy Madison. Protesters from the encampment were evicted on November 30, 2011, ending the official Occupy aspect of Occupy Philly. Activists associated with the organization continued to engage in activities beyond the lifespan of the encampment itself (Steele & Matthew, 2012).

### **Patterns in Media Coverage of Protest**

OWS attracted considerable attention from the media although such attention was not immediate (Stelter, 2011a; 2011b). However, once the media picked up the Occupy issue, it captured considerable news space for an extended period of time (Stelter, 2011a). The size and scope of the protests, the proximity of issues to the financial crisis, and location of the start (New York City) made it an easy subject for both print and television news. The movement also offered easy visuals in the form of the protesters themselves and simple slogans (“We are the 99%”; “Occupy”) allowed for easy ways to discuss the movement without having to get too in-depth with analysis or coverage. Generally speaking, protesters and the media share a unique relationship with protesters looking for attention for their cause and media outlets looking to fill space with interesting content. Because protests often feature conflict and interesting visuals

they make for compelling news. At the same time, protest groups often feel pressure to engage in actions specifically designed to generate media attention (Boykoff, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

However, the ability to generate news coverage does not guarantee that resulting coverage will be favorable. In fact, considerable research suggests the opposite (Boyle, et al. 2005; McLeod, & Hertog, 1992). Coverage of protests tends to focus on events rather than goals, highlighting physical characteristics of the protesters (e.g., what they look like), and rife with disparaging labels and frames (McLeod, 1999). This resulting pattern of media coverage is typically referred to as the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984). The central hypothesis of the protest paradigm is that the more a protest group threatens the status quo, the more critical resulting news coverage is likely to be (Boyle et al, 2004; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009).

Work by McLeod (1999) demonstrated that news coverage of student protesters as part of the “Right to party” movement accentuated the more violent aspects of the protesters, often pitting them as at odds with police. McLeod’s work identified a series of marginalizing frames whereby journalists would present the protests as out of step with public opinion, violent, and disorganized, among other things. Research by Dardis (2006) examining Iraq war protests expanded this notion further to characterize the varied techniques journalists use to diminish protesters. Dardis found that stories that negatively characterized protesters included more marginalizing devices including general lawlessness, police confrontation, and protesters as anti-troop. Numerous empirical studies have found similar patterns. McLeod and Hertog (1992) found that news coverage of Anarchist protests focused on the failures of the group to enact change. Shoemaker’s (1984) work with journalists revealed similar patterns in the portrayal of protesters with more extreme groups being subject to more critical and disparaging labels than groups that were perceived to be less of a threat to the system. Work by Boyle and colleagues (Boyle et al, 2004; Boyle et al, 2005) confirmed these patterns, further noting that when protesters sought greater degrees of reform, resulting news coverage focused more on their actions than their goals and generally treated protesters more critically both in the body of the article and the headline. This reinforced the central themes of the protest paradigm that news coverage is not only critical but de-emphasizes goals and details in favor of events and conflict.

In addition to these general themes, coverage of protesters tends to utilize official sources to tell the story often ignoring the voice of the protester. For instance, McLeod and Hertog’s (1992) study on Anarchist protests revealed that reporters typically told the story of the protest through government and police sources. They further argued that such quotes allowed journalists to maintain ‘objectivity’ while still critiquing the protesters through the lens of official sources. AlMaskati (2012) found a similar pattern when studying news coverage of the 2011 protests in Egypt, where journalists also tended to rely on official sources.

This recurring pattern of news coverage of protest events is important because it can have implications for the protesters themselves. For instance, experiments conducted by McLeod (1999) and McLeod and Detenber (1999) showed that even subtle changes in story characteristics can have a negative effect on attitudes toward protest groups and can even reduce the willingness of individuals to express opinions (Boyle et al., 2006). Because of the implications of this pattern, scholars have worked to identify the reasons behind why the pattern of the protest paradigm exists. As previously discussed, protester characteristics play a role in the coverage they receive. However, it is also likely that factors beyond the protesters’ control affect how they will be covered. In particular, characteristics about journalistic norms and patterns will likely play a role.

Although it is expected that the patterns of the protest paradigm will emerge also regarding the OWS sites studied in this paper, it is unclear the extent to which one site will be treated differently than another. Thus, the following research questions are examined in this paper:

RQ1a: To what extent will marginalizing frames and labels be present in local coverage of Occupy?

RQ1b: To what extent will sources used in news stories serve to marginalize the protesters of Occupy?

### **Journalistic Practices and Protest Coverage**

Journalists are expected to report on events as they occur and a core expectation of news coverage is that it be unbiased and accurate (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005). However, Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter (2005) also indicate that there is simultaneously an expectation that newspaper stories reflect a community-focused perspective, which demonstrates caring about the community. This dual expectation of news content underscores some of the challenges faced by journalists. Although audiences expect to get the “true” story, they also want stories that fit more of a civic journalism model of community caring. While these goals are not mutually exclusive, there are times when they may not be in alignment. Further, journalists are also faced with other pressures such as deadlines and limited resources. Additionally, shifts in media to more convergence (e.g., writing for print while also producing video or other media for the Web) can affect the journalistic process (Singer, 2004). Journalists simply have to do more which could, in turn, affect the finished product. For instance, Parmelee (2013) found that social media - particularly Twitter - have had a major influence on the reporting process.

These broader shifts in journalistic practices and norms suggest that journalists face added challenges to the specific goals they have in reporting on stories such as finding sources, developing leads, and understanding the story they need to report on. Additionally, a reporter’s beat, or the area of news they typically focus on such as environment, business, local government, etc., can affect their coverage of issues by shaping their perspective as well as the pool of sources they typically draw from. For instance, McCluskey (2008) found that reporter beat affected characteristics of resulting stories such that “stories by environmental reporters were more positive toward environmental groups than those written by reporters on other beats” (p. 93). Broadly, reporters from different beats focused on different things and responded to different aspects of the groups.

Shoemaker (1983) found that journalists’ perceptions of a group can shape reporting on that group. She found that when journalists perceived a group to be more deviant, coverage of the group was subtly shifted to paint that group in a more critical light. Specifically, more critical unattributed words were used to describe the group, whereas attributed information tended to remain more neutral across coverage of different groups. Pfau and colleagues (2004) found that when reporters were embedded with troops, the resulting coverage was more favorable when compared to stories by reporters who were not embedded. They also found coverage to be more episodic and focused on individual members of the military.

Work by Barker-Plummer (2002) showed that activist groups can also exert some influence on how journalists cover them. Looking specifically at tactics used by the National Organization for Women (NOW), Barker-Plummer found that deliberate attempts to build relationships with the media and to create its identity (in part as an expert source for sex discrimination) allowed the organization greater control in the coverage it received. NOW also specifically targeted female reporters hoping to build a “women’s issue beat” (pp. 197-198) with the goal to make women’s issues a regular part of the news.

To summarize, the literature suggests that while journalists strive for objectivity and fair

coverage, a number of factors can exert influence on resulting news coverage they produce. Two central factors are likely at work in influencing coverage of protest groups. First, reporter characteristics such as beat, interest in protest activity, and interest in issues addressed by protesters will likely drive coverage at least in subtle ways (e.g., whether and in what detail a group is covered). Second, group characteristics - particularly media savvy - will likely influence the amount and nature of coverage received. To that end, it is important to understand particular challenges faced by reporters covering Occupy. As such, the following research question is examined:

RQ2: What challenges were unique to covering Occupy?

## Methods

Two OWS locations were chosen to serve as separate case studies to answer the three research questions. The case study approach allows for a more nuanced exploration of both news coverage and journalistic perceptions of the Occupy movement. Occupy Madison (WI) and Occupy Philly (PA) were selected as case studies for three main reasons. First, each contained an OWS encampment that lasted more than a month, with Occupy Madison still ongoing and Occupy Philly lasting just about two months. Second, both cities are host to two (or more) distinct newspapers that offered coverage of OWS. Third, the two cities are distinct in important ways to allow for an assessment of how site characteristics can influence coverage. For instance, Madison is the state capital of WI (population 240,000), has a longstanding history of activism, and the capitol building is just a few blocks down the street from a major university (UW-Madison). Philadelphia (population 1.5 million), on the other hand, is the fifth most populous city in the United States, covers a considerably larger geographic area than Madison, is not the governmental center of the state (the state capital is Harrisburg, PA), and does not have the same history of activism that Madison does.

Each case study involved two qualitative methods. The first method used was a textual analysis of common indicators of the protest paradigm in news coverage provided by local newspapers for the two Occupy sites. The second method used was qualitative interviews with local journalists who covered the Occupy encampments in their local city. Further details on these two approaches are provided in the space below.

### *Newspaper Texts*

Articles from two newspapers for each of the OWS locations were included in this analysis. The two papers from Madison, WI were the *Wisconsin State Journal* ( $n = 17$ ) and *The Capital Times* ( $n = 10$ ). The two papers from Philadelphia, PA were *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ( $n = 21$ ) and *The Philadelphia Daily News* ( $n = 8$ ). The initial (non-AP or wire service) articles appeared in early October of 2011. The final OWS article from *The Capital Times* appeared in the November 28, 2012 edition. As of this writing, the *Wisconsin State Journal* has continued to cover Occupy Madison with the last article analyzed from the February 20, 2014 edition. The final articles analyzed for the Philadelphia papers appeared in the June 29, 2012 edition for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the September 17, 2012 edition for *The Philadelphia Daily News*.

In total, 56 newspaper articles were examined. A qualitative analysis of coverage themes was carried out using three specific content elements. First, the presence or absence of common frames used in protest coverage was assessed. These frames include marginalizing frames, mixed frames, and sympathetic frames identified in research by McLeod (1999; McLeod & Hertog,

1999) and others (see Dardis, 2006). Second, labels and other descriptors used to characterize the protesters were assessed, rooted in work by Shoemaker (1984) and others (McLeod, 1999; McLeod & Hertog, 1999), including characterizations of norms and norm violations. Finally, quotes from protesters, bystanders, politicians, and police were also assessed for their support or opposition to the movement, similar to the approach used by McLeod and Hertog (1992). Considering these three indicators provided a bigger picture assessment of the nature of the coverage received by the Occupy encampments at the two locations.

### ***Interviews***

Journalists (includes those who identify as “reporter/journalist” and “columnist”) who had written three or more stories about the local Occupy movement in Madison or Philadelphia were contacted with a request to discuss their reporting process. If a journalist expressed interest in the interview, he or she was then given a consent form with a general overview of the interview process although specific questions were not indicated ahead of time. In total, four journalists were interviewed via phone - two Philadelphia-based journalists (“Philly A” and “Philly B”) and two Madison-based journalists (“Madison C” and “Madison D”). To protect the privacy of the journalists, pseudonyms are used in place of their real names.

Each interview was conducted over the phone and lasted between 30-45 minutes. In each case a semi-structured interview approach was used. All four interviews started with the same question: “Tell me a bit about your background and how long you have been a journalist.” The interviews diverged from there depending on the responses given by each journalist. In some cases, Occupy came up earlier in the conversation, and in other instances the topic did not arise until a few questions were asked. Broadly, each of the interviews covered the following specific topics: 1) experience as a journalist; 2) discussion of specific articles written about Occupy; 3) discussion of the process of writing an article and whether the process of writing about Occupy was unique; and 4) the process of source selection. Interviews were analyzed using an iterative process to identify central themes relevant to the guiding questions asked to the journalists.

### **Case Study One: Occupy Philadelphia**

Broadly, news treatment of Occupy Philly followed a trajectory of three key themes by first focusing on the theme of the “regular” people in early coverage, then turning to the theme of stagnation at the Occupy site before ending with a focus on extremism as the movement waned. Interview data from the journalists correspond with this trajectory and provides clarification as far as why this pattern emerged. Further analysis is provided below.

#### ***Philadelphia Coverage***

**The regular people.** News coverage of OWS and Occupy Philly in the two prominent Philadelphia newspapers started off as positive in nature and focused on giving the perspective of the protesters. For instance, an early article in *The Daily News* opened with a positive focus on one protester: “Evidently a lot of people do. Occupy Philly - the group founded by Kitchen and friends, one of dozens of such groups in cities across America - has attracted more than 5,000 followers on Facebook” (Bunch, 10/4/2011). Coverage during this early phase of the movement continued to be detailed and painted a full picture of the group while also giving space to local politicians dealing with the realities of making sure things go smoothly. This initial coverage tended to fall under the sympathetic frames discussed by McLeod and Hertog (1992), specifically employing a sympathetic psychoanalysis frame in which the reader gets detailed insights on the

motivations and feelings of the protesters.

Early coverage in the *Inquirer* followed suit with an emphasis on how “regular” people are involved. This extract from an article by Brubaker (October 7, 2011) demonstrates this theme: “This is the first time we’ve done anything like this,” said Marty Collins, 65, a former manager at a bar/restaurant in New Jersey. “It’s reached a point where I’m really worried for the first time.” Early reports continued to emphasize slow growth, but also stressed that protests were calm, which is captured by the headline “Occupy Philadelphia stays calm, hopes turnout grows” (Steele, October 8, 2011). The Steele (October 8, 2011) article also included a statement from a spokesperson for Mayor Michael Nutter: “They’ve been law-abiding; there have been no arrests or citations; they’ve controlled their site very well; they have cooperated with police... they’re exercising their right to free speech, and they’re going about it in a very mature way.” Note the use of positive labels - law-abiding and mature - to describe the protesters.

Throughout most of October, the coverage tended to emphasize the growth of the movement, the connection of the Philadelphia location to the larger OWS movement, and the involvement of many different kinds of people. An article by Lin (October 9, 2011) exemplified the level of detail and positive support protesters received early in the movement: “While tilting young, the crowd included everyone from avowed socialists to military families like the Dycks of Fort Washington...Her husband, Scott Dyck, 37, a personal trainer and former member of the Army National Guard who served for a year in Iraq, carried a sign that said: ‘I’m here because I prefer an America that bails out homeless veterans and lets billionaires fend for themselves.’” More supportive labels and sympathetic to neutral frames continued through most of the first month of Occupy Philly.

**Stagnation and filth.** The sympathetic coverage did not last and began to change as the movement appeared to stagnate, policing costs continued to grow, and increasing pressure from the City to move the protesters from a construction site mounted. This quote from a Bender and Zalot (November 14, 2011) article exemplifies this transition to the more critical frames identified by McLeod and Hertog (1992): “Nothing against drum circles, but the 40-day urban camping session, which has already cost taxpayers more than \$500,000 in police and other expenses, is now threatening to derail a \$50 million revitalization project at Dilworth Plaza... Plus, the campsite is getting kind of nasty.” Specifically, this quote demonstrates the emphasis on police as well as the focus on the negative consequences of the protest. This transition reflects the general pattern of the protest paradigm whereby the emphasis turns to visual descriptions and conflict when it is present (e.g., Gitlin, 1980; McLeod, 1999). In particular, disparaging labels begin to emerge during this period including terms such as *nasty* and *anarchist*, among others.

Once the coverage turned in this direction, violence, disorganization, costs, and even fecal matter became recurring themes. *The Daily News* transitioned to more critical coverage by mid- to late-November, with *The Philadelphia Inquirer* more slowly adapting to a negative tone by mid-December. An article by Gambacorta, Nark, and Bunch (November 16, 2011) exemplified this shift in coverage: “The positive political message of the Occupy movement was increasingly drowned out by a drumbeat of negative headlines, including an alleged rape over the weekend and increasingly unsanitary conditions. Police yesterday made two more arrests and said someone painted the concourse walls below the plaza with feces and graffiti.” Further, this piece used a quote from Police Chief Inspector Joseph Sullivan that exemplifies both the shift in tone, but also in control of the narrative to official sources: “It started off well. They were very cooperative, and we cooperated with them, escorting them on marches and stopping traffic for them. Now we’re hearing ‘F\_ \_ \_ you, pigs!’ and ‘Death to pigs!’”

**Here come the extremists.** The theme of the transition away from a broader and more

successful movement was also exemplified. Specifically, articles focused on the shift from a movement open to many to one that was run by a more extreme type of protester with the article referring to them using labels such as “hard-core,” “anarchists,” and as feuding with “Occupy Philly’s more moderate originators” (Gambacorta, Nark, & Bucnh, 2011). This splintering of the group, often suggested to be at the hands of more extreme protesters, became a recurring theme. As a result, dissension became a central topic and emphasis of the coverage. Such patterns are similar to those identified by Gitlin (1980) and others. Gitlin observed that anti-war protesters received increasingly critical coverage as the movement became more extreme and conflict within the group intensified. A nearly identical pattern is present in this case as well. When things were going well, the coverage was generally fair (if not positive) yet once conflict and other issues bubbled to the surface the coverage turned negative. As such, in response to RQ1a & RQ1b, the case of Occupy Philadelphia demonstrates that the pattern suggested by the protest paradigm fits very closely with how the coverage of the group evolved. Specifically, negative frames and labels along with quotes that disparaged the movement increased in frequency as the group became more extreme and thus a greater threat to the status quo.

### ***The Journalist’s Perspective***

Reporters from Philadelphia newspapers indicated that the lack of a defined leadership structure from OWS made it difficult to obtain clear and focused information. Philly B spoke directly to the difficulty of getting a clear message from protesters: “I asked people a lot what they were looking for and it was really hard to get a clear answer out of anybody. I think their contribution was pretty significant, but from our point of view it was pretty hard to sum up what they were going for because *they* had a hard time summing up what they were going for.” Further clarifying this response: “They were trying to amass some political power... there were a lot of really valuable conversations they were having and we tried our best to get that out there. But there was a bit of purposelessness to it.” Philly A attributed this problem to be “part of their downfall” and lamented the difficulties it caused in generating clear stories, specifically highlighting the chaotic nature of planning meetings: “I went to some of the meetings at night and it was eye-opening. Their process was, just, so... they just couldn’t get anything done. Everyone was allowed to speak.” Clearly one of the organizational decisions that OWS made had an impact on the nature of the coverage they received. Philly A further noted that the group changed over time becoming more radical, ultimately driving away more moderate members of the group, specifically noting: “There was a lot of division in the group at the end. There were some weird characters involved at the end. These people, as far as I can tell, had nothing to do with the original movement. That is who the city ended up negotiating with... just some very weird things happened... it started to become very bizarre at the end.” This parallels closely to the pattern exemplified in the coverage of Occupy Philly.

Second, apart from difficulty in connecting to official OWS spokespeople, both reporters spoke to the challenge of meeting deadlines and the role that their beat assignment played in structuring coverage. Due to some changes at higher levels within the paper, the reporters faced additional challenges to their time as the number of people that were (or could be) assigned to cover the issue dwindled. Philly A spoke to this concern and how it can affect the overall reporting that someone can do: “Ultimately a weakness of many reporters [is] to go back to [the] same sources... but you are so often in a hurry... you kind of have to do it.” Philly A further noted: “Every journalist there would want to have more journalists... It used to be that you would get time to do a story... With staffing levels that just really changed.”

Philly B characterized the day-to-day interactions with the Occupy site and how it fit with

his/her beat: “It became immediately clear that there was not going to be any kind of police clash with this group... It just became a matter of checking in with what’s happening with Occupy and making sure things are still peaceful... Make sure we talk to the police and see how things are going, how much overtime this is costing the city, have there been any arrests... sometimes we would send an intern down or just walk through City Hall and make sure everything was okay. If it had been the size of the New York protest, it would have been different.” This characterization provides insight into how the lack of the direction from Occupy allowed the story to ultimately progress to a more typical protest story with the government and police becoming focal points.

In response to RQ2, the unique characteristics of OWS may have affected the nature of the reporting on the group for reporters in Philadelphia. Overall, both reporters pointed toward issues with Occupy leadership and handling of the press in the overall negative tone of the coverage. Both reporters indicated that they approached the issue with an open mind and as generally supportive (or at least not oppositional). However, the difficulty in getting clear information and a clear sense of what the protesters were doing made building the story in a thorough way difficult. The result is that one of the easiest stories that could be told was that of the group splintering, becoming more radical, and dissolving.

### **Case Study Two: Occupy Madison**

Analysis of newspaper coverage and interviews with journalists covering Occupy Madison reveals a much different trajectory than that of Occupy Philly. Coverage in Madison started with an initial focus on the slow build-up of the movement, followed by characterizations of the history of Madison as a site of protest activity before transitioning away from Occupy to the specific cause of homeless advocacy. Additionally, journalists indicate that specific actions taken by the protesters and the direction of Occupy Madison helped make their job of telling the story about Occupy much easier. Further exploration of these themes is provided below.

#### **News Coverage**

**A slow build.** Although some of the coverage in Madison newspapers showed hints of the protest paradigm, a different narrative emerged compared to coverage of Occupy Philly. Early coverage in both Madison newspapers was positive and worked to connect the local group to the larger OWS movement. For example, a lengthy piece by J. Nichols (October 12, 2011) likened the Occupy protesters to the founding fathers and characterized them as “the most patriotic thing to come out of the precincts around Wall Street in 222 years.” Some of this coverage was also self-referential as far as acknowledging Madison’s history of protest activity. “When news broke that a group of protesters was camping out by Wall Street, you knew it was only a matter of time before Madison got in on that action” (Barbour & Spicuzza, October 8, 2011). Note the use of positive labels in this piece, such as patriotic, founding fathers, etc.

Additionally, this early coverage also gave ample space for the protesters to carve out their goals and to discuss their reasons for protesting. An article by Worland (2011) provides an excellent example of the use of sympathetic framing, as demonstrated by two key quotes. First is a quote from a protester: “David Williams of Madison, a retired librarian, said, ‘I think this is the beginning of a whole movement to tax the big corporations and create an economy where people can make something useful’” (Worland, 2011). Second is a paragraph about halfway through the article: “Carrying American flags and signs with slogans such as ‘I am not a corporation’ and ‘Give it back,’ participants focused on the logistics of occupying the park through the weekend - containing trash, debating whether to rent portable toilets, and taking donations for pizza

- and voted to convene meetings at noon and 5 p.m. today to discuss next steps” (Worland, 2011). Somewhat counter to the expectations of the protest paradigm, this reveals the use of sympathetic frames, positive labels, and quotes from protesters instead of from official sources.

To understand the type of coverage in Madison, it is important to discuss the cultural context within which Occupy Madison was situated. Even before Occupy Madison began, the city of Madison was at the center of a massive and lengthy protest in opposition to policies enacted by Governor Scott Walker. This was offered as a reason why the number of protesters was not as consistently high as some would have expected. Discussing the number of protesters is often used as a mechanism to delegitimize protesters either by emphasizing low numbers as an indication of failure or by undercounting. The lack of strong numbers as far as participants became a recurring theme. Finklemeier (December 28, 2011) details the lack of student protesters, in particular, while also referencing back to Madison’s protest roots: “But in Madison, despite its reputation as a hotbed of student activism—notoriety that dates to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the city served as an epicenter for those protesting the Vietnam War—college students are slow to jump on the Occupy bandwagon.” This dichotomy whereby the movement is broadly referred to as patriotic and important to the United States but local protesters are mildly derided for not turning out in large enough numbers is likely unique to Madison. It also runs somewhat counter to the expectations under the protest paradigm - the protesters are being critiqued for not being extreme enough.

**A place to protest.** Madison’s reputation as a center of protest and progressive politics became a central theme in the coverage. Specifically, as the encampment continued to persist through the end of the year and even into April 2012, a number of articles questioned why a town so steeped in progressive traditions had such difficulty in gathering support for not only the movement, but also in dealing with the way the movement evolved to focus on homelessness. For instance, an article by Rickert (2012) hammers at this perceived hypocrisy:

“But for allegedly progressive Madison, the choices are: Find Occupy Madison another site where its inhabitants can have some control over their destiny while serving as a public reminder of American Society’s widening inequality; or let Occupy’s homeless and its message return to being comfortable out of sight and out of mind, its little patch of city-owned land converted into some hip, new private development.”

As such, one line of news coverage focused on internal conflict with residents squaring their progressive leanings with the realities of having a homeless encampment in their backyard (so to speak). Another line of coverage focused on the specific conflicts that Mayor Paul Soglin, a noted activist from the Vietnam War era, had with the protesters and his desire to remove the encampment. It is interesting to note that in both instances the protesters are being critiqued through disparaging labels and frames for not being extreme enough.

The lack of leadership and organizational structure of the broader movement also became a theme in coverage during the early phases and into November of 2011. The M. Nichols piece from October 26, 2011 emphasized this with the title “Occupy Madison needs leaders, not slogans.” Within the article, Nichols suggests the implications of the lack of clear leaders: “They (the lack of leaders) are also exhibit No. 1 in why the scattershot, uber-populist movement that has grown shoots everywhere from Green Bay to Milwaukee to Appleton is unlikely to ever amount to much more than sloganizing.” This particular passage is more emblematic of the protest paradigm as it hits on the perceived failure of the group and frames them as disorganized and more event-centered than goal-centered. However, throughout both of these early phases of coverage, the

protesters were still given adequate space to tell their story and journalists tended to use quotes from protesters instead of governmental sources.

**Transitioning the cause.** Generally, though, news coverage in both Madison newspapers was detailed and focused on the hurdles the protesters faced. As Occupy Madison transitioned to more of a homeless advocacy cause, the media coverage addressed legal hurdles, zoning issues, and how the group dealt with being relocated on two separate occasions, again exemplifying more sympathetic frames and positive labels. In this sense, this particular OWS encampment was able to carve out its own agenda and have a clear directive. This clear direction likely made it easier for reporters to cover the group, thus resulting in more sympathetic and detailed coverage. As time passed, the protesters that remained at the encampment were largely focused on a particular cause, reducing the confusion as to what the Occupy movement was all about. In this case it had a clear identity and, as such, was able to continue on long after other OWS encampments had closed up shop.

Regarding RQ1a and RQ1b, the coverage of Occupy Madison is reflective of the unique circumstances not only of the movement, but the local context. In general, Occupy Madison was covered with sympathetic frames and positive labels, and the protesters, rather than official sources, were more likely to be used as sources for quotes. As such, while the coverage was, at times, reflective of the patterns of the protest paradigm, it was often positive in nature and even critical of protesters for not being extreme enough. Early in the process of the movement, the coverage tended to better fit the expectations of the protest paradigm. As Occupy Madison was still under the broader label of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the protesters were subject to many of the same criticisms as is generally found in news coverage of protest. This included an emphasis on a lack of leadership and clear message, and even suggestions that the movement would prove to be a failure culminating in the “slow build” theme. However, as the movement evolved and the cause transitioned to homeless advocacy, the coverage painted the group in a fairly positive light, provided details about legal hurdles the group faced, and used news coverage of the movement as a venue to discuss homeless issues in the city. Madison’s history of protest became a recurring theme of “a place to protest” and was, at times, used to disparage the current Occupy Madison movement when it did not appear to meet expectations early on.

However, it is highly likely that the extensive history with protest that Madison has made it considerably more likely that the movement would - and *could* - evolve into a focused cause that could survive the broader disintegration of the OWS movement. Ultimately, then, coverage of Occupy Madison bucked the typical trend whereby once coverage goes negative it tends to continue to do so. A combination of highly organized protesters in a supportive culture likely allowed Occupy Madison to shift the coverage pattern in their favor and demonstrate an instance where protester actions can limit the extent to which the protest paradigm is applied.

### ***The Journalist’s Perspective***

The perspective of both Madison journalists hits on two central themes - developing sources and the ability of Occupy Madison to transition to a more specific focus. Regarding sources, both journalists noted a particular source that was incredibly valuable in communicating with the press and called upon her previous political experience as important to this. As Madison C indicated: “She had been active in city politics for a long time... she’s sort of been the go to person... although unofficially she acts as a sort of de facto spokesperson for the organization. When you want to get an Occupy perspective, she is usually your first stop.” Both journalists’ discussions of this person and her impact pointed to the broader theme that Occupy Madison had a strong infrastructure of experienced protesters with ties to traditional political outlets. As

Madison D indicated: “You also have people in official positions, formally in official positions, or close to power who want to drop you information... or if you know them, you can go to them and they might be sympathetic to your point of view.”

Overall, the relationship between Madison journalists and the protesters developed into one that was generally positive with the members of Occupy Madison coming to trust the journalists. As Madison C indicated: “I don’t think [there was a lack of trust]... By the time I got to it, the Occupy movement was a lot more. It didn’t have some of the distrust of the media that was more prevalent earlier... They had some trust in me to tell their story fairly.”

To some extent the trust and sense of fairness from the protesters might be reflective of broader characteristics of the Madison community. As Madison D discussed: “Reporters give this impression that they are objective, and they are in the way they go about their work... But they also need to come up with story ideas and they have to come from somewhere... A lot of times it is because you [the journalist] think[s] it is important.” This suggests on some level that while journalists may work to present stories in a fair way, they will focus on issues that are of particular importance to them. Madison D expanded further on this idea: “I was interested in the Occupy movement just from the standpoint of its whole anti-corporate social justice motivation. I have been interested in that idea... This is sort of a new line on that.” As such, the relevance of the issue to the journalistic community may have made it easier to focus on the particular success of Occupy Madison in becoming a homeless advocacy group, particularly considering Madison’s history with homelessness. This point echoes findings from McCluskey’s (2008) observation that environmental beat reporters treated environmental issues more favorably.

Having more defined leadership (even if those leaders were unofficial) allowed the journalists both more consistent access, but also a more focused message. This leadership, in part, also appeared to play a key role in the evolution of the movement to focus on homelessness. Madison D spoke directly to this: “It turned into an interesting success story. Some of the real boots-on-the-ground lefties here...took the reins and turned Occupy into a corporation—nonprofit, obviously—and advocated on behalf of the homeless...helped to get a couple of winter time warming centers set up.” This observation directly draws on the value of leadership, but also speaks to the history of activism that is central to the identity of Madison.

This point was also echoed by Madison C: “The local Occupy chapter benefited from some of the earlier protests that occurred here. A lot of carryover of momentum from the protests at the State Capitol in Madison” “As the time went on...it did become more focused on the needs of homeless residents...Now, when we write about Occupy Madison... the go-to way to refer to it is that it started as a local outpost of a national protest, but has morphed into an advocacy group for the homeless.” This recasting of the identity of the movement became a central theme in news coverage and also helped provide a means through which to discuss the group’s success while the broader national movement was in decline. Madison D further expanded on this idea: “This was also the time that there was a lot going on with the protests at the capitol in Madison... there were a lot of intersections between those two groups - at least at first. Occupy people were anti-Governor Walker people and vice versa...Within weeks, the majority of Occupy people turned into a homeless advocacy movement and became less of an Occupy movement.”

Regarding RQ2, it is clear that the Madison journalists did not face many of the broader issues that plagued the OWS movement. Specifically, they had generally good access to competent spokespeople and were tasked with covering a group that was rife with seasoned protesters who were media savvy and also had connections to mainstream politics. This experience was markedly different than covering Occupy Philly, where disorganization was more the norm and the group lacked a focused message as time wore on.

## Discussion

Two case studies were conducted to provide a closer look at the protest paradigm by considering coverage patterns in newspapers and conducting interviews with journalists for two Occupy Wall Street sites. News coverage of Occupy Philly demonstrated three central themes that followed the trajectory of starting with positive stories focused on “regular” people to an eventual decline into highly critical reporting. Coverage of Occupy Madison followed the opposite pattern by starting off critical of the slow start to OWS protests, but eventually transitioned into positive coverage of the newly focused cause of homeless advocacy. Interviews with the journalists shed light on these patterns by revealing struggles with messaging from OWS protesters, disorganization, and focus in the case of Occupy Philly and highly-organized and focused leaders making the task easier in the case of Occupy Madison.

The findings indicate that unique characteristics of the specific Occupy sites had an impact on coverage patterns. Specifically, the more organized and goal-focused Occupy Madison site received more favorable and long-running coverage than did the relatively less organized Occupy Philly site. Although a number of factors likely played a part in the success or failure of any Occupy site, it is likely that Madison’s history with protest was a driving factor both in *who* was on site as protesters and the general reaction of the community. Ultimately, insights from the interviews with journalists suggested the importance of clear messaging and having defined spokespeople. Occupy Philly coverage focused on discord and lack of success, in part because of the local movement’s inability to deliver a clear narrative to local media, whereas Occupy Madison activists gave journalists a compelling narrative that they were eager to support.

The distinct coverage patterns of the two sites suggest an interesting paradox for the OWS movement. That is, one of the central tenets of the movement was to allow goals to develop organically and to eschew a clearly defined leadership structure. However, part of what helped make the Occupy Madison movement successful and sustainable was the development of a clear goal and leaders who were able to help direct that vision and articulate it clearly to the media. This organic model of organizing did not work as well at the Occupy Philly site. It is likely that the OWS model is more likely to succeed at sites like Madison that have more of a built-in infrastructure of protest. However, further exploration of individual Occupy sites beyond the two explored in this paper would provide more insights on this issue.

It is important to note that the extensive differences between the two Occupy sites make direct comparisons difficult. Yet, each site serves as an example of the different ways that the protest paradigm can be implemented and the extent to which it permeates coverage of that site. In the first set of research questions, the basic premises of the protest paradigm (the use of disparaging labels, critical frames, and official sources as the level of threat increased) were applied to coverage of both Occupy locations. However, in the case of Occupy Madison, coverage broke away from this general pattern as the movement evolved into one that was more explicitly focused on advocacy for the issue of homelessness, a cause that is decidedly less threatening to the status quo than the governmental overhaul proposed by the broader OWS movement. As such, while many other encampments across the United States dissolved by November 2011, Occupy Madison continued on at its original location through April 2012 and then reformed in two separate locations at later dates. As of this writing, the movement has honed its specific goal into providing “tiny houses” for homeless people.

The distinct patterns in coverage are likely a result of two primary factors. First, Madison has a notable history of protest activity. This means there is a ready base of protesters who are politically active and a number of journalists used to dealing with protest activity. In short,

tolerance for protest and extremity in goals may be higher than in locations less used to protest activity. In Philadelphia, there has not been nearly the number of protests in recent years (nor is there much recent notable history on the same level as Madison). As a result, there is a limited core of people with protest experience and also a sense of uniqueness from a news standpoint when protest activity does occur. Second, Occupy Madison was able to evolve its message into a specific cause. As such, when numbers declined and general interest in OWS waned, the Occupy Madison protesters still had a cause they could focus on that enabled them to continue to receive coverage and have a central goal that could easily translate to news coverage.

Research Question 2 was concerned with understanding the journalistic experience in covering these two Occupy sites - it is clear that the journalists at the two sites had different experiences and each faced unique challenges. The primary challenge for Philadelphia journalists was the difficulty in obtaining a clear narrative from protesters at the Occupy Philly site. Further, the lack of defined leadership and clearly articulated goals made it difficult to distinguish Occupy Philly from the larger OWS movement and gave more latitude to the journalists in developing the narrative. Further, a recurring theme was conflict between local government and the protesters, particularly over construction that was slated to begin on a new project. This provided an easy opportunity for local media to cover discord between protesters and official sources. In the case of Occupy Madison, however, journalists were dealing with more seasoned protesters and covering a movement that developed a clear identity distinguished from the larger OWS movement. This suggests that characteristics of the protest groups themselves can play an important role in how they are covered. Although having clearly articulated, relevant goals and prepared spokespeople can help, they are still no guarantee that coverage will be positive.

It is also important to note that journalists working in these two cities likely understand what their audiences want out of news coverage. As previously discussed, activism is central to the identity of Madison and this likely gives journalists more freedom to cover protesters more in depth. Because activism is less central to the identity of the city of Philadelphia, there may simply be less room (or tolerance) for extended political activity and detailed, long-running news coverage of activism. Further research should work to tease out these more nuanced distinctions in journalists working in different communities. Clearly, though, it is important to consider local-level journalistic factors, such as community perceptions or attitudes toward protest when assessing future coverage of protest events.

Although the findings of these two case studies provide valuable insights to the study of news coverage of protest and journalistic practices, they are affected by some limitations, two of which need to be mentioned. First, only two Occupy sites were considered in this study. Hundreds of locations—and hundreds of local newspapers—exist across the United States and the world. As such, there is considerable room for future research to conduct a broader analysis of Occupy sites across the country, considering additional concepts such as city size, history of protest at the location, as well as regional and cultural differences. Second, a limited number of journalists were interviewed for this study. It would be valuable for future research to interview more journalists using not only qualitative approaches, but also quantitative approaches to provide a broader sense of journalistic practices and attitudes toward reporting on protesters.

Ultimately, however, this study provides further verification that the patterns identified in the protest paradigm pertain to news treatment of OWS. In some ways, this suggests that despite its novel approach to organizing, the OWS movement is not unique in its outcomes, in that numerous protests have faced similarly critical coverage from news media. However, based on the interviews with journalists, it is clear that characteristics specific to the OWS movement presented unique challenges for local journalists who were often initially sympathetic toward the

movement, but became frustrated with a lack of vision and muddled communication. Further, it is worth noting that the successful movement that emerged in Madison did so by eschewing some of the typical characteristics of the broader OWS movement.

The findings provide a clear sense of how valuable it is to support local journalism. As resources dwindle and news organizations continue to cope with challenges to revenue in an evolving marketplace, it is essential that journalists are given adequate resources to do their jobs. Sufficient time and support can be the difference between thorough reporting that uses a diverse array of sources and quick stories that utilize the same small pool of sources over and over again. If journalists don't have time to dig deep, they will likely grasp onto easier stories to tell that involve visual and other surface-level characteristics.

Beyond the role that characteristics unique to OWS may have played, findings based on the two case studies suggest that key differences at the local level can have a dramatic impact on how protests are covered and, ultimately, whether a protest is successful or not. As such, future protesters should consider contextual factors such as location and a community's history with protest when determining an appropriate strategy. They should also take an active role in working with journalists by providing clear information about goals. This is particularly important in communities where the culture of protest is not embedded in either the citizenry or journalists. Further, even if a group does not want to have specific formal leaders, they should identify spokespeople to present the group's message, at the very least providing training to participants so individual protesters are equipped to deal with the media. Making journalists work harder to find a narrative leaves the control for the narrative in the hands of the journalists.

Ultimately, the two case studies further our understanding of how and why the protest paradigm is implemented, suggesting a more nuanced model for understanding news coverage of protest that future research should employ. It is not as simple as just considering the goals and tactics of the protesters. Although these characteristics matter, they are only one piece of a puzzle that includes the journalists who cover them and the community in which they protest. In the case of Occupy Wall Street, the movement started with great fanfare and often involved massive protests that provided great fodder for news media. However, in pushing a unique organizational structure and broad range of goals, OWS failed to account for how the media would respond. The resulting loss of momentum and fading away of the movement demonstrate that it takes more than just showing up and protesting to share your message. You also need an interesting, clearly focused, and easy story to tell.

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