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Protesters at the news gates: An experimental study of journalists' news judgment of protest events

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Abstract: Media attention is a key political resource for protesters. This implies that journalists are a crucial audience to which protesters seek to appeal. We study to what extent features of protest, of journalists, and of news organizations affect journalists' news judgment. We exposed 78 Spanish journalists to vignettes of asylum seeker protests. Four features were systematically manipulated: protesters' worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC). The experiments scrutinize the extent to which journalists consider a protest newsworthy (*presence*) and the likelihood that a protest is featured on a newspaper's front page (*prominence*). Our results show that in terms of media presence, high turnout is key. Highly unified protesters, in contrast, are considered less newsworthy. Regarding prominence, strongly committed demonstrators more easily make it to the frontpage. Individual characteristics of journalists have no direct effect on news judgment. Journalists' editorial status and ideological (outlet) placement only moderate the effect of some of the protest features, although in terms of front-page placement a more potent adversary versus ally effect is distinguished.

Keywords: media attention, protest, media selection, media description, experiment

1 Introduction

Media attention is a critical resource for protesters seeking social change (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans, 2004). Being the master forum of public discourse, it is primarily via mass media that protesters connect with wider audiences, from general citizens over civil society organizations to political elites (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht, 2002; Gamson, 2004). Often, protesters

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need to reach out to these audiences in order to have impact (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su, 2010; Lipsky, 1968). As such, media attention acts as a crucial catalyst—or hurdle—for movements seeking wanted outcomes (Smidt, 2012; Vliegthart et al., 2016).

Given the importance of media for activists, it comes as no surprise that the relationship between both has triggered considerable scrutiny. Scholars have addressed puzzles of media *selection* of protest, investigating which protests are more likely to attract journalists' attention (Amenta et al., 2017; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith, 1996; Wouters, 2013). Questions of media *description*—how protest is framed—have been tackled as well, most notoriously in a tradition of “protest paradigm” studies (Boyle et al., 2004; McLeod and Hertog, 1998; Valentim and Baumgarten, 2019; Weaver and Scacco, 2012).

With this paper, we seek to contribute to the literature on media *selection* of protest. We do so by taking an innovative approach. Whereas past studies have primarily scrutinized media selection by means of content analyses, we leverage experiments with journalists (for a similar approach, see Helfer and Van Aelst, 2016; Vos, 2016). As journalists are the crucial gatekeepers in the news selection process, we believe it makes sense to tackle their news judgment directly by means of an experimental design.

This novel approach nicely complements more traditional selection studies. First, as experiments come with full researcher control, they allow for a cleaner and more systematic focus on how specific features of protest affect journalists' news judgment. Second, experiments allow one to look beyond event characteristics, and consider to what extent personal background features of journalists affect news selection. This focus helps in the assessing of whether news judgment is a strongly professionalized, shared, and standardized procedure, with journalists—irrespective of their personal preferences and features—making similar gatekeeping decisions, or rather, whether the individual viewpoints and positions of journalists are consequential and influence what they consider newsworthy. Given the debate on the individual leeway of journalists in terms of selecting and framing the news (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996) and the discussion on whether news factors are general phenomena or not (Boukes and Vliegthart, 2020), we believe there is value in such an approach.

In this paper, we study how (1) features of protest, (2) positions and predispositions of journalists, and (3) characteristics of the outlet they are working for affect journalists' news judgement. To do so, we leverage two experiments, embedded in the same survey. Both experiments presented journalists with manipulated descriptions of asylum-seeker protests, a contentious and politicized issue (Van der Brug et al., 2015). The asylum protests systematically varied on a number of features—for instance, an event's turnout or disruptiveness. The

first experiment tackled a first selection hurdle which protests face: eliciting the interest of journalists, influencing their judgment that the event ‘deserves’ media attention (*presence*). The second experiment scrutinized a subsequent step: Once considered newsworthy, which factors influence how prominent the protest story will be presented (*prominence*)?

We leverage these experiments on a sample of Spanish journalists. In Spain, asylum applications have risen to the highest level in the EU, and both citizens and parties take clear positions on the subject, testifying to its highly politicized nature (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pasetti, 2019). In terms of media landscape, Spain is a textbook example of the polarized-pluralist media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), characterized by a high degree of press-political parallelism, strongly partisan media, and low(er) journalistic professionalization (Van Dalen, 2012; Baumgartner and Chaques Bonafont, 2015). In such a system, it is more likely that the personal positions of journalists—who work for a congruent partisan medium and write for a select partisan audience—affect their news decision-making. This context of a politicized issue in a partisan media environment makes our study a ‘most likely’ case to find effects of journalists’ and newsroom features.

Our results show distinct selection patterns across types of news judgement. In terms of media *presence*, protest size is key. Additionally, also the unity of protesters influences media presence: If protesters are not on the same page, journalists are more likely to consider them newsworthy. In terms of *prominence*, more committed protest—which is staged frequently—is more likely to end up on a newspaper’s front page. Individual characteristics of journalists have no direct effect on news judgment. Journalists’ editorial status and ideological (outlet) placement only slightly moderate the effect of some of the protest features, although in terms of front-page placement a more potent adversary versus ally effect is distinguished. As such, our findings suggest that news *selection* of protest events, even in polarized-pluralist Spain, is primarily the outcome of a professionalized and standardized procedure in which event features, in particular—and hence shared news factors—play a prominent role. We elaborate on this interpretation in our discussion.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we briefly sketch the relationship between protesters and mass media. Next, based on the Hierarchy of Influences model, gatekeeping, and news value theory (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2013; Staab, 1990) we introduce the determinants this study will focus on: the news value level (emphasizing the impact of *event features* on news selection), the individual journalist level (emphasizing *characteristics* of journalists), and the news organization level (emphasizing *newsroom* features). We wrap up our theoretical section by introducing the two different aspects of selection we

are interested in: presence and prominence. In the data and methods section, we elaborate on the recruitment of journalists and the different design of our experiments. We conclude by connecting our findings to normative perspectives on the activist-journalist relationship.

Media selection and protest

Media attention is an important resource for protest groups. There is large scholarly consensus, however, that courting the media spotlight is an uphill struggle for protesters (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans, 2004). Media attention is scarce, making the fight over access highly competitive. Given that protest organizations are by definition resource-poor, their leverage over media access is considered limited compared to that of more institutionalized actors, who have a more inherent news value as well as more resources at their disposal (Tresh, 2009). Staging protest is therefore considered a key route for movement organizations seeking to diffuse their claims.

Extant research shows that media selection of protest is far from random. Often, these studies explicitly or implicitly refer to the seminal Hierarchy of Influences model (HoI) and theories of gatekeeping and news values when seeking to account for protest selection (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2013; Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015).

According to the HoI model, news content is the output of journalistic decision-making processes influenced by factors situated at various nested hierarchical levels, ranging from the most micro level of the individual journalist herself, over the routines that shape a journalist's work, the features of the news organization she or he is embedded in, to the more macro levels of extra media pressure and the social system itself.

Within this nested model, journalists act as “gatekeepers”: Of the endless stream of stories and events, only a few are selected and constructed into news (White, 1950). Important in this selection process is the concept of “news factors” (Staab, 1990). News factors refer to the qualities of events that make them newsworthy (Eilders, 2006), for instance, the eliteness, negativity, controversy, or continuity of an event (Eilders, 2006; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, 2017).

Whereas extant taxonomies of news factors lead one to suspect that news factors are universal drivers of news coverage, content analysis studies show that the presence of news factors vary across types of news outlets (Allern, 2017; Boukes and Vliegthart, 2020). Similarly, surveys show how journalists who

work for different media types tend to assess the importance of different news factors differently (Strömbäck et al., 2012; Skovsgaard, 2014).

In sum, research shows that many different factors are at play in the process from event to reported news fact, and that news factors are likely to be molded by the different levels of the HoI model. Together, these forces determine the news value of an event and ultimately whether (and also how) an event is covered. In this paper, we study how features of protest (related to news factors) and features of journalists and the news organization they are embedded in (the inner levels of the HoI model) together shape news selection of protest.

The news factor level: Focus on protest features

News factors are considered a core element situated at the news routine level in the HoI model. With news routines, Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 105) refer to “those patterned, routinized, repeated practices that media workers use to do their job”. Next to shared practices such as source protection, beat, and deadline work, also a shared understanding of what constitutes news is considered part of the news routines level. It is in this regard that *news factors* are key influencers of journalists’ gatekeeping tasks (Joye et al., 2016). The more an event displays such ‘factors’, the higher its news value and the more likely the event will make the news.

Extant research on news selection of protest has especially focused on news factors in order to explain protests’ differential newsworthiness. For instance, scholars have considered whether the turnout of a demonstration (indicating the news value of “relevance”) or the disruptive character of a protest (indicating the news value “deviance”) affect news selection (Oliver and Maney, 2000; Wouters, 2013). We expand the number of protest event features which scholars take into account by relying on the work of the prominent movement scholar Charles Tilly (1999, 2004, 2006). Tilly considered four features of protest events as crucial elements used by observers to make up their minds about protest. These features can be summarized by the acronym “WUNC” (also see Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark, 2018; Laschever, 2017; Wouters, 2019; Wouters and Walgrave, 2017). WUNC stands for worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Protesters that create the impression that they are deserving (worthiness), that they share the same goal (unity), that they are with many (numbers), and that they care deeply about the issue (commitment) have a greater likelihood of creating wanted outcomes. Therefore, Tilly argues, protesters seek to maximize their coming across as WUNC.

Recent studies show how WUNCness affects the opinion formation and decision-making of general citizens (Wouters, 2019) and political elites (Andrews and Gaby, 2015; Wouters and Walgrave, 2017). A key question, however, remains how *journalists* react to WUNC features. As journalists are the crucial intermediaries that connect protesters to these other audiences, their assessment of WUNCness is crucial. The WUNC elements can easily be thought of as news factors—after all, they are features of an event—but the extent to which their maximization helps or hinders the newsworthiness of protest remains to be examined. Here, we interpret the four protest features from a news value perspective. We will show that there is a clear tension between protesters seeking to maximize WUNC and the attractiveness of such protests for journalists.

We start with the *worthiness* factor. If spectacle, drama, and deviance are considered key news factors boosting an event's news value (Wolfsfeld, 1997), then displaying “worthiness”—that is, demonstrating peacefully rather than disruptively—is unlikely to be helpful for protesters seeking media attention. Rather, we expect the opposite to hold: Unworthy behavior attracts the interest of journalists (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff, 2017). So, when it comes to displaying worthiness, a clear mismatch appears between appealing to journalists and other relevant audiences.

H1: Protest that broadcasts “worthiness” is less likely to be considered newsworthy by journalists.

The same holds for displaying *unity*. Demonstrators who disagree amongst themselves are probably considered more newsworthy by journalists as they broadcast conflict, a key news factor (Eilders, 2006). Moreover, demonstrators who are not on the same page also play into the “unexpectedness” news factor (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Ideally, protesters share the same concerns and act as one. If protest violates this ideal image, journalists are more likely to consider the event as news. Again, quarrelling protesters can hardly be considered effective in persuading citizens or politicians of the movement's stance (Fassiotto and Soule, 2017; Wouters, 2019). So, whereas the absence of unity, in particular, might get protest into the news, disagreeing protesters subsequently harm rather than help a movement in the public sphere.

H2: Protest that broadcasts “unity” is less likely to be considered newsworthy by journalists.

Committed demonstrators—displayed by frequent and persistent protest—are expected to result in higher newsworthiness. Persistent protest signals continuity and relevance, key news factors (Boukes, Jones, and Vliegthart, 2020). Moreo-

ver, given that it is hard to mobilize crowds (Klandermans, 1997), especially frequently (Downton and Wehr, 1997), the fact that the protest succeeds in doing so persistently might be seen as a news factor as “unexpectedness”. Although probably after some time a saturation effect might occur (the persistent protest loses its novel character), we expect that, in general, displays of commitment make protest harder to ignore for journalists. In sum, for the commitment factor, the media and protest logic are expected to be in tune.

H3: Protest that broadcasts “commitment” is more likely to be considered newsworthy by journalists.

In terms of *numerical* strength, finally, we expect journalist and protester purposes to match as well. Both journalists and protesters have an interest in “broadcasting” (the) large(ness of) demonstrations. Indeed, for journalists, demonstration size straightforwardly signals the significance of a demonstration; it demonstrates the relevance and even legitimacy of the protest (Wouters and Van Camp, 2017). As the underlying grievance seems to be shared widely, large demonstrations play into the news factors of influence and relevance (Boukes and Vliegenthart, 2020). In fact, from extant selection studies, demonstration turnout comes forward as the only consistent factor influencing a protest’s newsworthiness (McCarthy et al., 1996; Oliver and Maney, 2000; Wouters, 2013). In line with these findings, we expect that:

H4: Protest that broadcasts “numbers” is more likely to be considered newsworthy by journalists.

In sum, our news factor approach makes manifest a clear tension—or even a mismatch—between what journalists seek for in terms of newsworthiness and the image that protesters aim to broadcast to win support from relevant audiences. Whereas high degrees of worthiness and unity are expected to harm an event’s newsworthiness, large numbers and commitment are expected to boost it.

The individual journalist level: Focus on beliefs and position

News selection of protest can also be influenced by factors situated at the level of the individual journalist (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2013). The subjective beliefs a journalist holds might guide the journalist “where to look” and “whether and how to approach” a potential news story. As such, beliefs might have implications for their news judgment (Donsbach, 2004; Shultziner and Shoshan, 2018). As put by Vos (2016, p. 743), journalists’ predispositions can lead to “selective

attention, selective perception, and selective retention of information”, all mechanisms that can potentially affect journalists’ gatekeeping decisions—whether intentionally or not. Extant research, for instance, has looked into how partisan preferences of journalists influence news selection (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996; Vos, 2016; Helfer and Van Aelst, 2016). Additionally, the effect on news selection of more precise issue-positions of journalists has been studied, for instance, by Kepplinger, Brosius, and Staab (1991) in their work on “instrumental actualization” (see also Jost and Koehler, 2018).

Compared to the impact of news factors, however, far less research has been conducted into the effect of journalists’ predispositions. Moreover, the results of these studies are also far less consistent. Whereas some studies do find significant effects of individual level variables (Kepplinger et al., 1991; Jost and Koehler, 2018; Patterson and Donsbach, 1996) and consider this logical given that journalists are “humans too” and face similar information-processing barriers as “normal” people, other studies do not find such effects (Helfer and Van Aelst, 2015; Vos, 2013, 2016) and believe this to be logical, too, given the professional socialization of journalists and their adherence to shared standards of newsworthiness. In this paper, we contribute to that debate. We ask whether a journalist’s general ideological positioning, the salience a journalist attaches to the demonstration’s issue, and the position a journalist holds on that issue affect news selection. Besides assessing the direct impact of such beliefs on news judgement, we test whether these beliefs condition the effects of the WUNC features presented above. Do WUNC features affect news judgement differently depending on certain beliefs of journalists? Since news factors are perceived by journalists (Eilders, 2006; Staab, 1990), predispositions might color the assessment of news factors and subsequently influence their news judgement. As findings of extant research go in different directions, we question:

RQ1: To what extent and how do subjective beliefs of individual journalists affect their news judgement?

A different relevant individual-level journalist feature is the position in the newsroom which a journalist has. Not all journalists perform the same job, and like any organization newsrooms have a certain hierarchy (Breed, 1955). In particular, the difference between rank-and-file journalists and editors matters in that regard (Cottle, 2007). In the end, usually editors call the shots regarding what gets selected and what not. More than ‘ordinary’ journalists, who feel pride in delivering the pieces they write, editors are expected to think and feel responsible for the entire newspaper, the mix of stories the paper publishes and its broader appeal. Given these different newsroom positions, we believe it is plausible that

editors, who select news on a daily base, make different news selection decisions compared to rank-and-file journalists.

H5: Editors make different news selection decisions compared to rank-and-file journalists.

News organization level: Focus on partisan press

The news organization a journalist works for might also affect news selection. Studies have shown that traits of media outlets—local or a national newspaper, a commercial or a public broadcaster—influence protest news selection (Barranco and Wisler, 1999; Wouters, 2013). In our case, especially the ideological positioning of a news outlet is of interest, given the issue (politicized) and media system (polarized-pluralist) at hand. A large body of research has emerged around questions of “partisan media bias” (for a review, see Puglisi and Snyder, 2015). Applied to protest, Shultziner and Stukalin (2019) recently showed how differently-leaning newspapers in Israel covered a wave of Occupy-related protests differently in terms of volume (number of articles), article size, and frontpage coverage. In the US context, Weaver and Scacco, 2013) showed how the liberal MSNBC and the conservative Fox News portrayed Tea Party protests differently (see also Rafail and McCarthy, 2018). Here, we assess whether journalists’ perception of the ideological positioning of their news outlet affects their news selection. As journalists get socialized in the newsroom, they learn what is considered “appropriate” news for their outlet and select events accordingly (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Given major political parallelism, a partisan press, and a politicized issue (Baumgartner and Chaques Bonafont, 2015), we expect the ideological placement of news outlets to affect news judgement.

H6: The ideological placement of a journalist’s news outlet affects the journalist’s news judgement.

A matter of presence and prominence

Our experiments, finally, tackle two different types of news judgement: presence and prominence. Whereas some events are “buried” deep inside a newspaper, other events make it to the front page. This difference in visibility is important. Giving front page status to a story clearly signals that the event is (one of) the most important occurrence(s) of the day (Boydston, 2013; Fico and Freedman, 2001).

Journalists therefore carefully consider front-page placement, also because it determines the “face” of the newspaper and its appeal to non-subscribers (Rafail, Walker, and McCarthy, 2015). It can be expected that front-page stories are more widely read and have a higher chance of influencing public discourse and setting the public agenda (Behr and Iyengar, 1985). Given the more limited space of the front page and the symbolic value journalists attach to the front page, the competition between events for front page coverage is also more intense compared to ‘simply’ making it into the news. Boukes et al. (2020), for instance, find that the more news factors are present in a news story, the higher its odds of front-page placement are. We therefore ask:

RQ2: Are the requirements for protest to appear on the front page different compared to a protest event’s simple ‘presence’ in the news?

RQ3: Is the impact of journalists’ and news organization features on news selection less apparent when it comes to front-page selection?

2 Data and methods

Design and participants

In order to study the decision-making process of journalists we ran two experimental studies embedded in an online survey and addressed to a single sample of journalists who responded sequentially to both experiments: Experiment 1 asked how likely journalists were to cover a protest story, thus assessing its likelihood of *presence* in the news. Experiment 2 tapped the decision-making process of front-page placement, addressing the issue of media *prominence*. Although both experiments share several characteristics, they test a different outcome (presence and prominence) and have a different design (see below). We start by presenting the similarities of both experiments: We present information on the recruitment of participants, describe our sample, show our protest stimuli, and list the key independent variables. Both studies presented respondents with all-text vignettes of a simulated demonstration. The vignettes described demonstrators supporting asylum seekers and demanding a more humane asylum policy. Whereas the demands made by the demonstration remained constant across all experimental conditions, the features of the protest event—its WUNCness—varied systematically (Table 1). The mundane realism of our design is high, as the asylum issue was salient in Spain at the time of the study, and demonstrations, large and

small, more or less disruptive, in support of immigration took place (for instance, a wave of protest started in Barcelona on February 18, 2017 and was followed by demonstrations all over the country a week later).

Table 1: Levels of displayed WUNCness in the manipulated descriptions of asylum-seeker protests.

WORTHINESS

1. The demonstration went on with no violent incidents and in a serene atmosphere. Demonstrators marched calmly, and the police followed the demonstration without intervening at any time. No quarrels were reported.
0. The demonstration was interrupted towards the end, when some demonstrators threw objects and had violent clashes with the police. Shop windows were broken, and a group of hooded participants was arrested.

UNITY

1. (...) a single united voice was perceived throughout the route. All participants shared the same, clear message: a more humane asylum policy.
0. (...) different claims were present in the demonstration: Some demanded a more humane asylum policy, while others claimed respect for peace in Syria. Everyone seemed to have a different reason to demonstrate.

NUMBERS

1. About 5,000 people have demonstrated in front of the Delegación de Gobierno in Madrid at noon. (...) The demonstration had a much higher turnout than expected as compared to the usual turnout in this type of events.
0. About 500 people have demonstrated in front of the Delegación de Gobierno in Madrid at noon. (...) The demonstration had a much lower turnout than expected as compared to the usual turnout in this type of events.

COMMITMENT

1. After the demonstration in Madrid ten days ago, this action is already the second in a series of events. Organizers have commented that a follow-up demonstration is scheduled for next week.
 0. It is not clear whether future actions are expected. Staging organizations said that currently no upcoming demonstrations are planned.
-

Participants were targeted at their newspaper or news agency e-mail address and invited to collaborate in a study on the Spanish media carried out by [UNIVERSITY]. A first round of invitations was distributed in June 2017 to 1316 journalists listed in the national presidency listing of media outlets¹. A second round of invi-

¹ Agenda de la Comunicación (2018). Retrieved November 21, 2018 from <http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdeprensa/agendacom/Documents/Agenda2018.pdf>.

tations was sent two months later via e-mail to 50 regional press associations, asking them to forward the invitation to their members. A total of 137 journalists from 73 outlets and news agencies in Spain accessed the online survey that contained our experiments. 49 % of all journalists completed more than 90 % of the questions (with a median time of 9 minutes). Our final sample therefore contains 78 journalists for each of the two experiments.

Our sample is not representative of the journalist market in Spain in terms of gender and age according to the available statistics. Thirty-five percent were women, which is close to the estimation of the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF, 2011), which claims that women represent 40 % of the journalist job market in Spain. The age of the respondents ranged from 27 to 76 years, with a median age of 48.5². However, note that external validity is less of a concern given the purpose of our experimental design. We are especially interested in the effect of randomly assigned stimuli on our news judgement outcome variables (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, and Lupia, 2011). Age and gender are introduced as controls in our models, but we do not have any expectation for these to have any effect on the decisions made by journalists.

Considering the individual background of our participants, most of the journalists have positive feelings toward asylum seekers (mean 81.52 and std. dev 21.76), but only ten percent perceive immigration as the most important problem in the last six months in Spain. A majority of the respondents think of themselves as being progressive when asked for their ideological position on a 0–10 scale³ (mean 2.33 and std. dev. 2.84).

For the news organization features, our sample includes a varied sample with a larger number of center-leaning outlets (mean 4.68 and std. dev. 2.98). More than half of the journalists in our sample are either editors or members of editorial committees (48 out of 78).

We also control for type of news outlet (32 % of them work for print media 24 % for online press, 17 % for news agencies, and the remaining 27 % for other types of outlets or freelance) and scope (74 % of the outlets cover mostly local, regional, or national news [9.3, 18.6, and 47 %, respectively]; the rest covers international news).

² Only 44 respondents (66 % of the sample) reported their gender and age.

³ The wording used is “On a scale of 0 to 10, where ‘0’ means ‘libertarian’ and ‘10’ means ‘conservative’, where would you position yourself”, and a Don't Know option is provided.

3 Results

Experiment 1 – presence

Our first experiment is a rating conjoint design in which participants were asked to read a news story (Figure 1) and were then asked about their likeliness to write a story on the demonstration⁴. Journalists were randomly assigned to read one of sixteen possible vignettes⁵. What do we find?

Demonstration for a more humane asylum policy

IMMIGRANTS Madrid, 27 Feb

About 500 people demonstrated in front of the Delegación de Gobierno in Madrid at noon. They have delivered a manifesto demanding improved treatment of undocumented migrants in light of the continuing refugee crisis. With the slogan “A more humane asylum policy and clear regularization criteria NOW!”, a single united voice was perceived throughout the route. All participants shared the same, clear message: a more humane asylum policy.

The demonstration had a much lower response than expected as compared to the usual turnout for this type of event. The event went on with no violent incidents and in a peaceful atmosphere. Demonstrators marched calmly, and the police followed the demonstration without intervening at any time. No altercations were reported. After the demonstration in Madrid ten days ago, this action is already the second in a series of events. Organizers have commented that a follow-up demonstration is scheduled for next week.

The WUNC attributes in this vignette are present except for numbers.

Figure 1: Example of conjoint vignette (One of sixteen possible combinations).

First, descriptively, the likelihood of writing a story on the demonstration has a multimodal distribution with stronger preferences for writing the story (Figure 2). That is, we see quite some variation in journalists’ news judgment of the protest descriptions ($M = 5.83$; $SD = 2.61$).

Next, four models were estimated to explain the likelihood of writing a protest story, including the event (WUNC) features (model 1), the journalist features (model 2), the newsroom features (model 3), and combinations of all these

⁴ A ten-point scale was used with anchors on 1 – “I would DEFINITELY NOT cover this story” and 10 – “I would DEFINITELY cover this story”.

⁵ We checked that the randomized assignment to treatments produces experimental groups that are well balanced by regressing journalists’ features on event features (Table 14 in the Appendix).

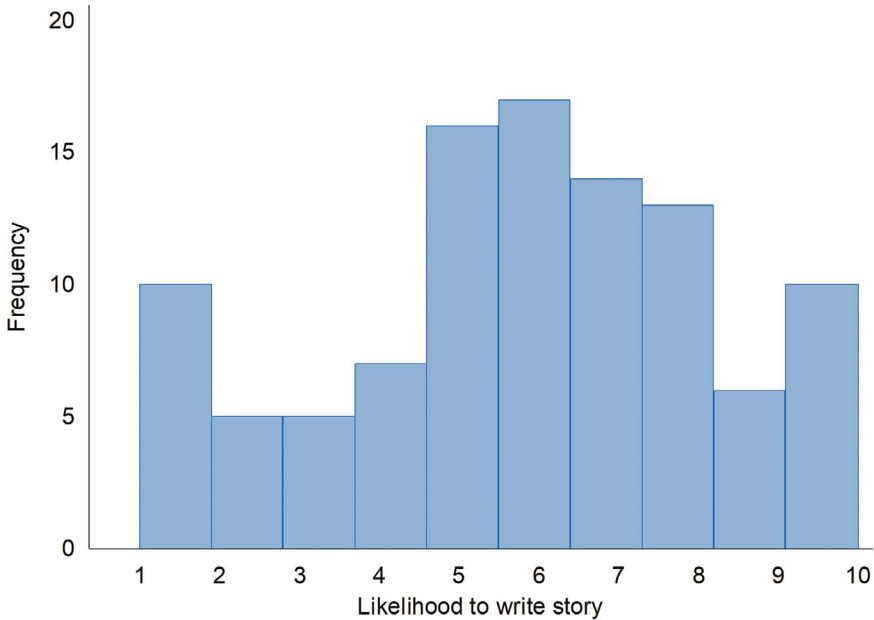


Figure 2: Distribution of the likelihood to write a story.

features (model 4). The results are presented graphically in Figure 3 (Table 2 in the appendix presents the corresponding models in table format)⁶.

Considering the event features, our results show that numbers are consistently and positively related to the decision to write a news story about the protest. Size clearly matters in the eyes of journalists, thus confirming our fourth hypothesis. Furthermore, we find that a unique and clear message by demonstrators (unity) negatively affects the decision to cover a story, although the effect is slightly smaller than that of numbers. As proposed in the second hypothesis, we confirm that displaying unity is less interesting for journalists than protesters who disagree between themselves or that have multiple interpretations and demands to communicate. We elaborate on this finding in the conclusion. No other event features appear to affect journalists' decisions to cover the story, which means we find no support for our first and third hypotheses.

Results in models 2 and 4 (Figure 3 and Table 2) show that journalists' features, other than editorial status, have no significant main effect on the decision

⁶ Models controlling for the type and scope of the outlet were also included in the analyses, but they are not presented here.

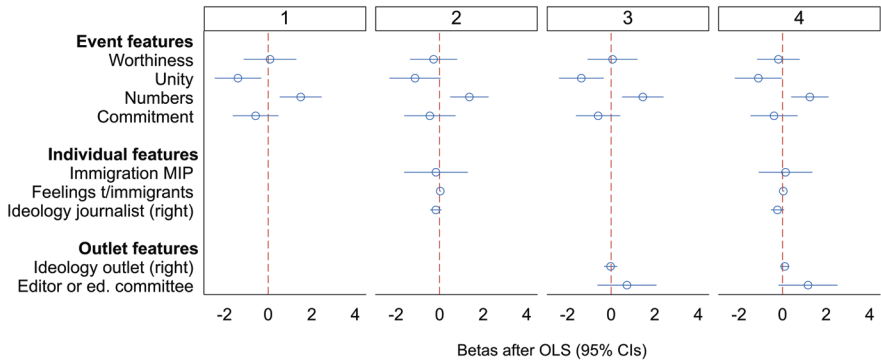


Figure 3: Likelihood to write a story on the protest event based on event, journalists', and outlet features.

to cover a protest story. In regard to our first research question, none of the attitudinal traits of our sample of journalists affects their news judgment directly. Neither journalists' feelings towards immigration nor the salience of the immigration issue makes a difference to their news judgement. The ideology of journalists and outlets is also irrelevant, thus confirming hypothesis five. The only significant factor explaining news selection in the journalist features is editorial status. Editors have a higher likelihood to cover a protest than rank-and-file journalists, which confirms the expected differences (H6).

However, some journalists' and outlet features do moderate the effect of event features: Not all journalists assess the newsworthiness of event features similarly. Tables 3 to 6 show interaction effects between the features of events, journalists, and outlets (note that some of these interaction effects are considered statistically significant at a 10 % level given our small sample size). So, having an editorial position negatively affects the perceived newsworthiness of worthy (peaceful) protests: Editors are more likely to consider disruptive protests newsworthy compared to rank-and-file journalists (Table 3 model 5), although the overall effect is quite small. Feelings towards immigrants also act as a perceptual screen, causing heterogenous effects: Journalists with positive feelings toward immigrants consider protesters newsworthy even if they are less united (Table 4 model 1) or committed (Table 6 model 1). Apparently, journalists who feel closer to immigrants and possibly identify with the demonstrators' demands, even give protesters attention when Charles Tilly (1999) would judge them as "weak". Alternatively, journalists who dislike immigrants appear more likely to present pro-asylum seeker demonstrators when they pose a serious threat: when they have a solid claim (high unity) and demonstrate frequently (high commitment). This logic is

also valid for journalists of conservative outlets, who are more likely to consider united protesters as newsworthy (Table 4 model 4). Interestingly, demonstration turnout has no distinct effects on newsworthiness (Table 5). Regardless of journalists' or outlet features, high turnout positively affects newsworthiness, thus providing support for Hypothesis 4.

Experiment 2 – prominence

Our second study provides a test of journalists' prominence selection of a protest event. To that end, participants were prompted with sets of four competitive front-page news stories that were expected to be in the news the following day and then were asked to select two of them for the front page⁷. One of the four stories was titled "Politics" and contained a manipulated description of an asylum-seeker protest that varied in its levels of displayed WUNCness (identical to study 1 – Table 1). The full-factorial design implies that respondents were randomly presented one of the sixteen possible "Politics" stories made up with the combinations of the WUNC features. The other three stories did not vary and were titled "Economy", "Parliament", and "International" and presented current news stories on regional finances, parliamentary discussions on labor reform, and the implication of Spain in the war in Yemen. Figure 4 presents one of the sixteen unique vignettes, with the manipulated demonstration story in the lower-left corner.

This selection design simulates the second selection hurdle which protest events face: Once considered newsworthy, stories start competing with other selected events for front-page coverage. By manipulating the event features and showing them alongside other likely newsworthy events, we are able to study journalists' decision-making when comparing the protest story with other potentially newsworthy stories.

Our indication of how journalists judge the newsworthiness of the protest is whether they select the "Politics" story. We find that in 50 % of the cases the protest story was chosen to be on the front page with another story. The economy, parliament, and international story were selected with more frequently (54 %, 52 %, and 55 %, respectively), and the protest story was mostly selected together with the international news story (42 % of the times) followed by the parliamentary and economics news story (35 and 23 %, respectively). These descriptive sta-

⁷ The wording used for this question was "All of the following news stories will be in the newspaper tomorrow. Two of them will be on the cover. Imagine that you are the editor-in-chief or that you should advise the editor-in-chief during a meeting. Please click on the two news stories that you would choose for the cover page".

<p>Economy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous Communities (re)start debate on the deficit targets for the budget. • Regional presidents insist on updating the regional financing model. • The Government denies asymmetry between communities. • The deficit target is maintained at 0.6% for all Autonomous Communities. • The Autonomous Communities call for sufficient funding to cover health, education, and public services with quality and equal opportunity. 	<p>Parliament</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Socialist Party and the opposition insist on repealing the 2012 labor reform. • The PP proposes a working group to assess labor market needs and to review the current labor regulations. • The Government asserts that collective bargaining has led to the improvement of the Spanish economy. • The Minister of Economy argues that repealing the labor reform would be detrimental for the economy.
<p>Politics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration in Madrid for a more humane asylum policy, in light of the continuing refugee crisis • About 5000 people participated, which was much more than expected • The event went on with no violent incidents and in a serene atmosphere. • All participants shared the same, clear message: a more humane asylum policy now! • Second demonstration in a row, future events are programmed. 	<p>International</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticism of the role played by Spain in the war in Yemen • Spain has been questioned by several NGOs for selling five corvettes to Saudi Arabia. • Spain supports UN efforts to reach a political agreement. • In the last week, three girls and a teacher were killed by a school bombing in the town of Naham. • The war has left more than 7,350 dead and 39,000 injured in 20 months, according to the WHO

Figure 4: Selection vignette (one of sixteen possible combinations where only the ‘Politics’ story varies).

tistics show that our experiment worked out as intended. The three other stories where roughly equally selected, and, depending on the WUNC characteristics of the protest, the protest story turned out to be a likely competitor for front-page placement.

In the same way as in the first study, the following results show the effects of event (WUNC), journalists’ and outlet features, and their interactions on the selection of the protest story. Figure 5 displays the odd ratios graphically; the full models are reported in Tables 7 to 9.

Regarding our second question, our findings show that the prominence selection decision follows quite a different logic compared to the news judgement decision presented in Experiment 1. Numbers is not a significant event feature explaining front-page selection of the protest story. Rather, the commitment of demonstrations is. The effect of unity also disappears, and no journalists’ or outlet features matter in the selection decision. In brief, frequently demonstrating protesters have what it takes to make it to the front page. If protest is sustained, journalists likely perceive the topic as having higher societal relevance, and front-page placement becomes more likely.

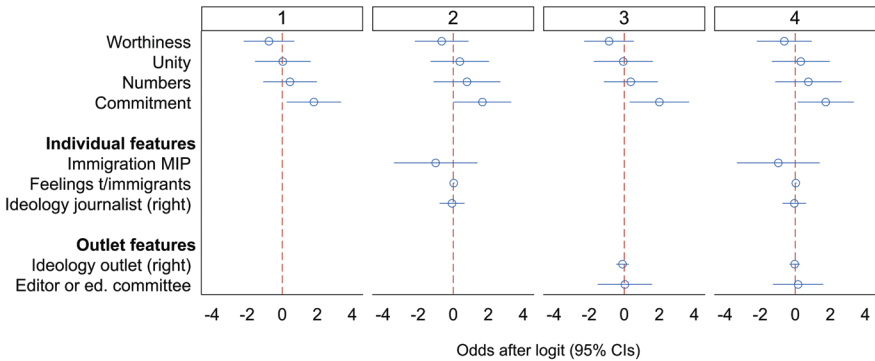


Figure 5: Selection of protest events based on event, journalist, and outlet features.

However, not all journalists judge all protest features equally worthy of front-page coverage. In response to our third question, we find heterogeneous effects across journalists and outlets based on their ideology for different event features (Tables 8–11). More conservative journalists are less likely to place protest stories on the front page when these display more unity, numbers, or commitment (model 3 in Tables 9–11): Here a clear adversary effect seems to be at work. Conversely, more progressive journalists are more likely to place an asylum protest on the front page if it displays a lot of WUNCness. This pattern makes sense with journalists willing to play up or down the positioning of events in their newspaper depending on their personal convictions. In a different manner, however, journalists working for right-leaning outlets tend to judge protest stories as front-page material when these have high turnout—contrasting the aforementioned effect of their own personal opinion. When protest is threatening and challenges the worldview of the core audience of the newspaper, journalists working for conservative outlets are more likely to place the event more prominently in the newspaper.

4 Conclusion and discussion

The aim of the present research was straightforward. We sought to examine how event, journalists' and outlet features affect journalists' news judgment of protest. In order to tackle this objective, we exposed a convenience sample of Spanish journalists to two experiments replicating two distinct selection decisions. In experiment 1, journalists rated to what extent they considered a particular protest description newsworthy. In experiment 2, the very same journalists

were asked to select a protest story out of a number of other news stories competing for front-page coverage. Our experimental approach allowed us to expand on observational studies. By randomizing exposure to systematically manipulated vignettes and by incorporating individual features of journalists in our models, our study proved fertile ground for making causal inferences on how journalists decide which protest events are newsworthy and whether they weigh up event features differently depending on their characteristics and their outlet's features.

In line with extant selection studies, our results show that a demonstration's size is paramount in determining the newsworthiness of protest in terms of its presence. However, we find that numbers do not explain prominence. In order to stand out and reach the front page, protest needs to show commitment. This implies that persistence and following-up on previous events seem to be crucial for protests to stand out in the news. Clearly, front-page coverage and regular 'newsworthiness' appear to be different ballgames.

Further, the unity of the demonstrators is also important for the likely presence of protest in the news. Demonstrators that aired multiple, disparate claims (low unity) were more likely to be considered newsworthy. Whereas Tilly (1999) considered united protesters as having higher odds of success, our experiment showed that this does not seem to hold for appealing to journalists. Rather, journalists prefer protesters who do not have a clear message or master frame on offer. This finding resonates with the "protest paradigm" literature, stating that journalists cover protests in ways that allow them to discredit protesters—be it intentionally or not. That being said, no such direct "discrediting" effects were found in terms of prominence, and perhaps the easiest way to discredit protesters—that is, especially selecting protesters that violate norms by behaving disruptively—is something we cannot confirm. However, editors are more likely to deem disruptive protests more newsworthy than rank-and-file journalists, and this is important considering they have more influence on which stories are selected. The protest paradigm does thus not seem to be an inescapably fixed script for protest coverage after all.

This brings us to the characteristics of journalists and outlets. The fact that our study dealt with a highly salient and politicized issue (asylum) and journalists from polarized-pluralist Spain made it a likely case for these features to matter. Our study, however, shows that individual characteristics of journalists—compared to the strong effect of event features—have a far more modest impact on protest news selection. That is, we do not find direct relationships between journalists' features and news selection. What we do find, however, is that some event features are perceived slightly different by journalists on account of their own and the outlet's ideology. These heterogeneous effects are small and marginally significant. In terms of front-page placement, however, they appear to

indicate a pattern of journalists playing up or down the positioning of events in their newspaper in line with their own ideological convictions; as such acting as an adversary or an ally. This makes sense for the front-page decision as the front page is the face of the newspaper, determines its identity, and seeks to appeal to its (partisan) audience. That being said, our reading of the experimental results is that news selection of protest—even in the case of polarized-pluralist Spain—is primarily the outcome of event features, and that only secondary and more modestly, the individual predispositions of journalists and outlets kick in.

Several limitations regarding this study deserve to be mentioned. First, we relied on a convenience sample of journalists and confronted them with a single, highly salient and politicized issue. This makes it hard for us to assess how far our results would travel beyond our study. Perhaps less salient and prominent issues leave more leeway for the individual predispositions of journalists (or the editorial signature of outlets) to steer news decision-making. Second, the relatively low number of participants and hence the studies' limited statistical power made it impossible for us to analyze interactions between event features. Likely, different combinations of WUNC-features appeal differently to journalists' for news. For instance, greater commitment might compensate for low turnout—like few activists chaining themselves to trees in order to protect them. Low worthiness might boost the news value of high turnout—think of a disruptive few that increase the newsworthiness of a large demonstration. Third, our study focused on the selection of protest events. It might very well be that journalists have a shared understanding of what constitutes news but that in terms of description—which details of an event should be narrated and how—journalists diverge in line with personal and outlet predisposition.

Wrapping up, we believe our study made a fruitful beginning to disentangling how protest news comes about. It did so by means of an experiment with journalists, a strategy rarely adopted in a research domain dominated by content analyses. Future research could take our study as a starting point and address the abovementioned avenues of further analysis. Such research will greatly improve our understanding of the conditions under which media coverage might be more likely for protesters and under which circumstances—if at all—the beliefs and experiences of journalists' color what kind of protest events become news and thus what kind of protest general citizens are confronted with.

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