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Conscientious dissident or radical eccentric?

Negotiation of mediated protest images in New Zealand

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Abstract

It is suggested that media contribute to the adoption of norms and behavioral expectations by showing symbolic rewards and punishments for particular attitudes and behaviors. Much research has found repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and participate in political protest. Yet, little research has examined how individuals negotiate and assimilate these representations into their personal view of protest and civic participation. This research examines how focus group participants responded to images that have been suggested by previous scholars to be “positive” and “negative” images of protest.

Introduction

It is suggested that media contribute to the adoption of norms and behavioral expectations by showing symbolic rewards and punishments for particular attitudes and behaviors. This finding has additional significance to social movements who are in a constant struggle for meaning within mainstream media. Media have been shown to be absolutely instrumental to the growth and survival of social movements. Without media coverage, many members of the public would not even be aware of a movement's existence. Research has shown that the public receives their information concerning social groups primarily from the media and that relatively few in our society form their opinions of social movements through personal contact. Therefore, the meanings constructed by the media are of paramount importance for social movements and for society in general, which receive these mediated messages and then build their own related expectations and norms.

However, previous research has found that the media reflect the elite interests of the political, cultural and social power structure. Much research has found repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and participate in political protest. Yet, little research has examined how individuals negotiate and assimilate these representations into their personal view of protest and civic participation.

This research examines how predominant media frames of protest images influence audience perceptions of protesters. This is an important, given that frames have been found to bestow a powerful singular identity that often translates to transformations in public opinion. Utilizing images, rather than text, is particularly important as visual imagery is fundamental in reproducing informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality. While largely overlooked in mass communication research, visual images are central to how individuals represent, make meaning, and communicate with the rest of the world.

Role of Media in Social Movements

News has become a political resource for social movements — an essential political resource. “The modern mass media have become central to the life and death of social movements” (Kielbowicz & Sherer, 1986). News provides information to others, which can play a fundamental structural role in their

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decision-making (Gandy Jr., 1982). News is also an “authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy” (Barker-Plummer, 1995, p. 3). Thus, news offers a type of membership of knowledge that participators engage in.

Gitlin writes that, “of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness—by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 2). Media have evolved into a highly skilled system of networks that distribute ideology throughout the masses. Social movements must understand media structures and work within these confines if they hope to disseminate their beliefs.

As Olson noted, social movements are already fighting the almost insurmountable task of presenting movement initiation in an appealing way for the potential recruit (Olson, 1965). Many individuals rationalize their lack of involvement through what is called the logic of collective action. Potential recruits often reason that one person could not possibly make a difference. Believing that others will solve an issue, the logic of collective action has the potential to crush a movement before it even begins. Thus, the very nature of a social movement’s existence is inherently fragile. Unfavorable media coverage can halt the growth of a movement — effectively slowing the process of social change. Therefore, it is increasingly important that media serve to create public awareness, confer status upon a movement, recruit new members and offer psychological support to members of the movement.

Without media coverage, many members of the public would not even be aware of a movement’s existence. The public receives their information concerning social groups primarily from the media. Relatively few in our society form their opinions of social movements through personal contact. Gitlin states that the media image, “tends to become ‘the movement’ for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 3). In addition, media link movements with other political and social members of the public. Trade unions, political parties and governments can gain access to information concerning social movements through the media (van Zoonen, 1992).

In media-saturated societies, “voice in the news is a key part of making one’s ‘account count’ in the public sphere” (Barker-Plummer, 1995, p. 307). News serves as a symbolic form of power for a social movement because with it, the movement has the possibility for achieving the social change they are

striving for. The media have such strong power that if a movement is overlooked through the media, the possibility of them remaining a viable force for change drops considerably. Gitlin states, “mass media define the public significance of movement events or, by blanking them out, actively deprive them of larger significance” (1980, p. 3). Through omission, media can effectively bar a social movement from having any cultural significance.

Media are also so essentially important to social movements because it is where they can influence potential recruits into their movement. Potential recruits often learn of a social movement through media coverage. Favorable coverage can confer legitimization upon the movement and attract new members while unfavorable media coverage can discourage movement participation.

Molotch (1979) notes that media can provide psychological support to already active movement members. Anything difficult takes an enormous amount of tenacity and strength — something that needs to be reaffirmed occasionally to upkeep. Thus, media can serve as a mental boost to members who are beginning to doubt their effectiveness within the movement. Therefore, social movements find themselves in a perplexing position. On one hand they desperately need media to disseminate their meanings to a larger audience but on the other hand they have minimal control on the quality or quantity of reported information. They must face this dichotomy with a full awareness of the benefits and the shortcomings media coverage can bring.

History Between Media and Social Movements

Researchers have long argued that the media reflect the elite interests of the political, cultural and social power structure (Altschull, 1984; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tichenor et al., 1973). The reasons for this elitist coverage have been attributed to several underlying causes. Possible influences on content are the power of journalism practices and norms (Kenix, 2005); organizational demands (Bagdikian, 2000); individual journalists; economic pressures (Schoenbach & Bergen, 1998); and a pervasive hegemonic ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Hertog & McLeod, 1995; P. J. Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tichenor et al., 1973). Hegemonic forces have been labeled as a principal cause of coverage that favors elites. Gitlin (1980) credits Gramsci for defining hegemony as, “a ruling class’s (or alliance’s) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of

ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order” (p. 253). Thus, the ideas and values of the status quo eventually become the ideas and values of the masses through a consistent penetration of ideology through the media. The societal purpose of this ideology is to “inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).”

From his study of the Student’s for a Democratic Society, Gitlin concluded that the further an issue is from the elite group’s core interests and values, the more likely it will be overlooked by the media (1980). Some research argues that this oversight is generally a subconscious process on the part of the journalist (P. J. Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), while others (Entman & Rojecki, 1993) have suggested that in regards to protesters, it is the hegemonic processes within journalism’s reliance on elite sources that possess an “underlying professional ideology ambivalent toward public participation” (p. 155). Ryan et. al. (1998) go on to succinctly suggest that, “for journalists, news means covering what the powerful do, not what power does (p. 19).”

There are repeated cases of slanting, trivialization and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and form a political movement to combat injustice. Negative media frames have been discovered in the anti-nuclear movement (Entman & Rojecki, 1993), the women’s movement (Barker-Plummer, 1995), the gay and lesbian movement (Jenness, 1995) the National Environmental Policy Act faced a media blackout (Schoenfeld, 1979). In fact, mass communication scholarship has provided innumerable examples concluding that mass media “deligitimize” or “marginalize” protest groups that challenge mainstream society (Cohen, 1980; D. M. McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Pamela J. Shoemaker, 1984).

Typically, coverage may emphasize lawlessness or police confrontations; focus on the small or the relatively decreased size of the protest (Swank, 1997); question the mental ability of demonstrators (Hackett & Zhao, 1994); or critique the physical appearance of protesters, such as piercings, clothing, tattoos, with an emphasis on physical oddities (D. McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Coverage may also focus on the ‘show’ of a protest, centering on the carnivalesque atmosphere (D. McLeod & Hertog, 1999) and utilizing a “romper room” framing device (D. McLeod & Hertog, 1999) that emphasizes immature behavior

on the part of protesters. Other research (McFarlane & Hay, 2003) has suggested that news coverage of protest also relies on an “idiot at large” frame that suggests protesters simply do not understand the complexity of the debate at hand . News coverage has also been found to rely heavily on official sources, such as police, governmental officials, business leaders, etc. (Ryan *et al.*, 2001) that generally reiterate acceptable behaviors and social norms during protest (McFarlane & Hay, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2001). The weight of this research has led research to label such coverage a “protest paradigm” (Chan & Lee, 1984), that, in turn, leads to more coverage supporting the mainstream status quo.

As this review illustrates, the overwhelming majority of studies concerning the media and social movements has centered on how the media trivializes protest in its coverage. However, very little research has examined how individuals negotiate and assimilate these representations into their personal view of protest and civic participation. Three exceptions that have looked at effects of protest news coverage have been largely in experimental settings. Shoemaker (1982) was first to argue that the representation of protest groups by newspapers had a demonstrable effect on how individuals perceived the legitimacy of those groups. In a related experiment, McLeod (1995) found that when news stories favored those opposing the protestors, participants were more critical of protest actions.

Another notable exception is the quantitative research done by McLeod and Detenber (1999), which examined audience response to television news coverage of protest. Their study serves as a foundation for the framework of this research. Through their quantitative experiments, they found that television shows that were supportive of the status quo, produced an increased level of cynicism in the viewer. This study hopes to build upon the work of McLeod and Detenber (1999) to further elucidate a more contextual, qualitative understanding of how New Zealand audiences respond to images of protest, rather than text, and how they subsequently negotiate conceptions of protest and their own level of political engagement.

Framing Protest Images

Entman (1993) writes that journalists “select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).” News, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings.

Deleted: These interlocking theoretical perspectives offer substantial insight as to the consequences that negative and positive media frames can have on the public’s interpretation of an issue, person, idea or event. Indeed, how media frames an issue is imperative to each theoretical position.

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which are transmitted through media frames. Indeed, frames are integral to understanding how issues of relevance and importance are constructed in the media.

Frames are actually “the imprint of power,” (Entman, 1991, p. 7) in that they bestow a singular identity that often translates to transformations in public opinion. Hertog and McLeod (1995) concur with

Entman when they state that “the frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant” (Hertog & McLeod, 1995, p. 4). The frames of a story influence how the public thinks of an issue through definitions of the issue itself, stating who is the case of the issue and what should be done.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) purport that frames provide an essential “part of the process by which individuals construct meaning” (p. 2). This assertion is supported by a large body of research, which suggests that media frames effect how the public perceives reality (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Visual imagery reproduces informational cues that individuals use to construct their perception of social reality (Messaris, 1994). This reliance on available visual information to construct reality, calls for a thorough examination of imagery used in mediated contexts. Gattegno (1969) noted that sight itself is simultaneous, comprehensive and synthetic in its analysis. Indeed, visual imagery instantaneously affects how we perceive the message and the messenger. Visual images are central to how we “represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 1). This is fundamentally important in a culture that has become increasingly visual (Fetveit, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

Pictures are emotional representations of reality that convey important basic information about gender, age, and ethnic groupings (Blackwood, 1983). Research has demonstrated that visual images can influence public knowledge (Iyengar, 1991) and enhance viewers' recall of news stories (Graber, 1990), suggesting that visual imagery plays an important role in helping news consumers make sense of the world around them (Matthews & Reuss, 1985). A clear benefit of visual communication is its ability to transcend textual limitations and convey emotions in addition to factual evidence (Lester, 2003). Because news photos are often scanned first (Miller, 1975) and can contain highly vivid images that can form long-lasting impressions on memory (Lester, 2003), it is important to examine the content of news photographs to determine how protesters are represented in visual imagery.

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Gamson et al. (1992) have described the social construction of reality as an “invisible” process that involves using media-generated images to form or construct meaning about political and social issues. They emphasize the production of images rather than facts or information because visual imagery provides a more subtle form of meaning that is embedded in a larger system or frame (Gamson et al., 1992). News has become an “authoritative version of reality, a way of knowing associated with high levels of cultural legitimacy” (Barker-Plummer, 1995, p. 3). The news offers a type of membership of knowledge within which participants engage, and news photographs are an important component of that participatory process (Miller, 1975).

Research has moved away from the mere presence of evidential visual imagery into the contextualization of photographs within their own ideological position and the larger story-level schematic. For example, Campbell (1991) suggested that camera angles provide varying levels of credibility for the subject and source. Other researchers have explored visual stereotyping of images focusing on physical appearance and style of dress (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Entman, 1992; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Signorielli et al., 1994), illustrating the shift to more subtle forms of meaning construction in the production of images.

Devitt (1998) suggested that it is not the sources that dictate visual coverage, but the editorial selection process that creates visual imagery that accompanies a news story. Visual framing, a specific type of frame, refers to the salient imagery frameworks used to construct meaning. Visual frames can activate certain constructs at the expense of others, thereby directly influencing what enters the minds of news consumers. A photographer sent on assignment gathers tens, if not hundreds, of images that must be examined individually for inclusion in the news product. Rarely is this selection instantaneous. Rather, it is more often a deductive process undertaken by the photographer, journalist and editor.

This purposeful attention to photography has led many editors to attempt to balance visual with textual coverage (Moriarty & Popovich, 1991), suggesting that cultural norms and newsroom practices enter the decision-making process of photo decisions (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). Editors and reporters purposefully select photographs for informational inclusion, but researchers generally overlook these same photographs in favor of purely textual data. This study aims to help fill in this gap in the research by examining how audiences negotiate protest images. However, the distinction between conveying images

and conveying factual information is not very useful unless the images are interpreted within some larger system or frame (Gamson et al., 1992).

As journalists, editors and reporters select (or frame) the news, they are also emphasizing certain aspects of a story, which then cues corresponding specific thoughts within the audience (Iyengar, 1991). The audience then applies these specific thoughts, conjured up from media frames associated with a particular story, when considering the broader issues at hand (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). This process, called the “accessibility bias” (Iyengar, 1990) or the “availability heuristic” (Shrum & O’Guinn, 1993), enables for automatic, subconscious judgments to be made.

Measuring these automatic, subconscious judgments has largely been in experimental settings. Episodic frames have been shown to have a different impact than thematic frames on how audience members assign responsibility of a social problem (Iyengar, 1991). Readers’ thoughts on specific issues has been shown to vacillate depending on whether the media utilizes a human interest frame, a conflict frame or a personal consequences frame (Price *et al.*, 1997).

McLeod and Detenber (1999) convincingly argue on behalf of Chan & Lee (1984) that common characteristics of news coverage have been codified into the concept of a “protest paradigm.” This protest paradigm results in media coverage that frames protestors as violent (Cohen, 1980; D. M. McLeod & Hertog, 1992); as objects of discussion originating from official sources (Soley, 1992); as the subject of often negative public opinion (D. M. McLeod & Hertog, 1992). These frames within the protest paradigm form an “implicit model that journalists apply to the coverage of protests (D. McLeod & Detenber, 1999, p. 6).” The more radical the group and the more the group challenges the status quo, the more these framing techniques are employed by the media (Carragee, 1991). Given that research has found the utilization of such marginalizing frames throughout media coverage of protest, the most important next step is examining the effects of these frames on audiences.

Research Questions

Based upon previous research concerning the representation of protest in the media, this study proposes the following research questions:

R1: If protestors are negatively framed in images, will respondents be more or less critical of protestors?

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R2: If protesters are positively framed in images, will respondents be more or less critical of protesters?

R3: Do viewing images of protesters affect general perceptions of protest and the participants' own conception of political participation?

Methodology

At this stage, two focus groups were held in New Zealand. One took place in Auckland at The University of Auckland and the other in Christchurch at the University of Canterbury. A third upcoming focus group meeting is to take place in Wellington. Focus groups were used given that this is a preliminary study meant to explore perceptions rather than to describe or explain in any definitive sense. Using theoretical saturation as a goal, focus group meetings will continue to be added until little new information is obtained (Krueger, 1988).

The Auckland focus group meeting had three participants, while the Christchurch meeting had eight. These small numbers clearly warrant larger study. That being said, the focus groups were extremely lively and discussion never appeared to wane during the sessions due to the passionate response participants appeared to have toward representations of protest.

The cities of Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch were selected because they are dispersed geographically across the country and they are the three largest cities ("New Zealand: Largest cities and towns and statistics of their population", 2007) in New Zealand with three of the country's major universities. Given the relatively small population of New Zealand, cities were used in the hopes of attracting a larger pool of participants from a wider demographic and economic dispersion. The author served as the moderator and one assistant was present. An email invitation was sent out to all Communication students at each respective university.

In keeping with recent focus group research (Goodman, 2002), individual statements were coded according to a four-stage constant comparison method, (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each statement from participants was coded into as many categories as possible (Krueger, 1988; Lindlof, 1995). Following the four-stage comparison method, statements were repeatedly compared with the attributes of each category to integrate categories as much as possible. This process allowed for further unification and the ability to "make some related theoretical sense of each comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. p. 109).

Focus group interviews followed a loose structure that was often dictated by the direction of discussion. In employing a qualitative methodology, it was possible to obtain open-ended responses that allowed participants to articulate their own perceptions of protest, which could then be compared to researchers' conceptualizations. Given that the results reported here are from meetings that took place over four months, and that consciousness of such issues is a clearly continually changing, conclusions should be viewed as a representation of one particular moment in time.

Images were pooled into categories derived from previous research concerning the representation of protest in mainstream media. The categories were:

Positive: Image that frames a large group of protesters peacefully gathered and apparently supporting a common theme

Immature: Image that frames an individual or group in a childish costume or an infantile posture

Carnival: Image that frames protesters in action in either a dress, costume or acting out a character

Conflict: Image that frames two clearly separate groups in opposition (demonstrated by dress or posture) with one group representing the mainstream, status quo.

Marginalized in number: Image that frames an individual or group in very few numbers with few onlookers around.

Violence: Image that frames individuals in physical conflict with another or holding a weapon of assault

Idiot/Mentally Unstable: Image that frames an individual or group ideologically isolated in their position outside the mainstream acting in ways that are managed by others in the mainstream or status quo.

Physical Oddities: Image that frames an individual or group with physical traits not commonly seen in the mainstream (tattoos, piercings, long beards, etc.)

Two notes should be made at this stage. The first is that these categories are not mutually exclusive. An argument can clearly be made that an image could be categorized as both marginalized in number and idiot/mentally unstable or any other possible combination. This research attempts to select the most dominant frame of the image, and then pool those images accordingly, to share with focus group participants. The second important caveat is that some of the images inevitably had some written messages on them that exposed the purpose of the protest featured in that image. Participants were asked to try and evaluate the image outside of the stated objective of the protest.

Results

Immature

Participants were shown an image of a man wearing a Santa Claus outfit; another group of people appearing to reenact a scene from Frosty the Snowman; a third image of man in a child's pirate outfit and a fourth showing a group of individuals dressed as cheerleaders and posing in the middle of a cheer (Figure 1). All were images of people protesting through the framework of "immaturity," as defined earlier. Participants were supportive of these images principally for the lack of anger demonstrated on the faces of the protesters and the inventiveness of the costumes. While one participant in Auckland said that it all "seemed a bit overly dramatic" others made comments like "I like this," or "its fun." One participant went so far as to say "I'd be far more inclined to follow the guy in a pirate hat then some somber, angry protester."

One participant attempted to reason through her support by saying that "on face value, it's very easy to be dismissive, but it is possible they are doing something quite inventive or intriguing. There could be much more to it then meets the eye." At this, many participants responded in the affirmative and focused on the level of cheerfulness portrayed. "Its all about a lack of anger. It all seems very reasonable in its own way." Another said, "I like this. They look friendly and happy." In Christchurch, a respondent said, "Really. Who would you rather spend your time with? These guys seem great."

Carnival

Participants were shown an image of a man in a loincloth with fruit in his hair; a group of people wrapped in red body suits and acting out the death of seals; a woman dressed as the statue of liberty holding an umbrella; protesters with dressed in large caricatures of world leaders (Figure 2); and a group of people dressed in money placards. Comments on this group of images were overwhelmingly supportive of the protesters. Rather than being critical of what has been traditionally labeled as "trivializing representation" in scholarly literature, participants found these images to be very effective.

In Auckland, one participant remarked that the images were "presenting a much more sophisticated visual display." Another in Christchurch said that, "you get the idea that the people behind

these have put a lot of thought into it.” On a direct and personal level, respondents said that they “loved the satirical bent” and many felt that the images were “funny.”

When asked if these images trivialized the cause at hand, respondents countered with almost uniformity that it actually enhanced the political message. The only exception was one participant who recently arrived in New Zealand from China. This participant found images within the “carnival” frame to be “disorganized” and she confessed she would be less likely to support such a group. “In China,” she said, “we just don’t make fun of our leaders like this. Not in this way.”

Conversely, all of the other participants said they would be more likely to support such a group because they “don’t look quite as intense,” or they “look a lot more relaxed,” or that they simply “look like a better use of my time.” Three participants separately contrasted these images against other images of “mass” protests that they were shown earlier and found the “carnival” images to be much more appealing and much more worthy of their support. “I’d be much more likely to support these people earlier on, rather than the mass (protest).” Asked why that was the case, that particular respondent said that “It looks more professional. It looks more serious. It doesn’t look flippant and trivial like the other ones (The pictures of mass protesters) did.” Others in the focus group nodded their heads in agreement making comments such as “it adds to it” or “it definitely enhances their message.”

To explain this participation further, one Auckland participant said “I’d be a bit more relaxed in myself if I looked around and saw people dressed up and what have you. They’re willing to be there and protest, but they are not too intense about it. There is always the possibility of authoritative interaction. So, it looks like they are not going to get themselves into any major trouble.”

At this point, the moderator asked whether this is the kind of protest that could actually create change. All but the one Chinese participant said that they felt such a protest movement would be effective in gaining attention. With a clear understanding of the power of media, one respondent said, “these images create a better media story. And, that helps the movement.” To that, another countered “these images are very effective in creating awareness. But, actually, I’m not quite sure how effective (these images) are in creating change.”

Conflict

Images of conflict included an image of police officers facing a row of protesters (Figure 3); two lone protesters staring at a long row of police officers; one solitary man showing the peace sign with both of his hands and walking away from a group of police in riot gear; and an image of a single police officer holding his hands out in front of a crowd, presumably to urge them to step back. Discussion about these images was more evenly split, but with more emphasis on critiquing the protesters position rather than empathizing with them.

One respondent stated bluntly that these images represented “the lunatic fringe.” Asked why, she responded that “if the authorities deem it necessary to get the riot police out, then it is definitely a bit more fringe from the mainstream.” To that, another replied that “you need to be a bit weary of these people.” However, as time went on, some of the harsher critiques of the protesters shifted to a bit more empathy. As one respondent said later on during the session, “but, then you look at this one and there are women and children, and old women, and you think ‘hang on a minute.’” This frame offered the most discussion and contentiousness among the participants. To illustrate, one discussion between two participants:

Participant 1: “The body image in the male officer is very dominant and aggressive, which casts the protesters in the moral high ground.”

Participant 2: “I would have said the opposite thing. He looks to be in charge, which makes me think ‘he’s right. They’re wrong.’”

Participant 1: “How could you think that? (The protesters) are just expressing themselves.”

Participant 2: “Whatever the police are doing, should be right. I instantly think that.”

When asked if their thoughts change when there are more police than protesters within an image, more critique was given to the protesters. One respondent argued “when protesters are in conflict with the police, they don’t look as professional.” However, this same respondent said that the image of a protester walking away from the police showed that the protester was “either really defiant or really cowardly. He doesn’t appear to be open-minded. He looks like he is walking away.” One Auckland participant said, in reference to that same picture, “there is also the possibility that this man is using this event as a photo opportunity. For his own ends.”

Another example of the contested meanings within these conflict images came from the focus group in Christchurch. One participant said that “the police look very sinister...that implied threat of violence.” To that, another replied that “if there are two guys with banners and you need that many police to take them on, then it makes me side more with the police...I find it easier to put myself in the shoes of

the police officer than the protester.” A participant quickly asserted that “police are prepared for conflict. It doesn’t really matter what you say. If you just step out of line one little bit...”

Marginalized in Numbers

Two images were shown to focus group participants in the “marginalized in numbers” category. The first was of a relatively small group of protesters carrying signs on a quiet city sidewalk (Figure 4) and the second was of a solitary man holding up two signs on an empty street. The solitary man was uniformly seen less positive than the group on the corner. One respondent said “the guy on his own seems like a lunatic.” However, put in context against the individual protester, respondents talked of this image as if there were “a lot” of people there.

When asked if numbers help the credibility of their cause, respondents said yes, but that it depends on the issue. Every single focus group participant saw solitary protest as weak. Participants were highly critical of protests that did not involve a lot of people. As one respondent said, “the smaller the group, the more lunatic they are.” Another stated that “if you are one person that really wants to get your point across, I wouldn’t think that protest would be the best way, the best vehicle. There are other ways to get your point across more effectively.”

Violence

Images of violence ranged from a man in open physical aggression with a police officer (Figure 5); a protester on the floor with police hitting him with a baton; a masked man holding a machine gun; and masked men throwing items. Initial responses were very critical. “This to me, is where it has gone too far. Once, it’s like, the democracy, the process, has been exhausted and now the protesters have actually gotten to a point where nothings happened, nothings changed, and they’ve moved on to the next stage of violent conflict...this is beyond what I would support.” Another participant said “I instantly lose respect for this. This looks like a cliché anarchist revolutionary.”

Like the “conflict” images, responses changed as more time was spent examining the photographs. Participants started to report that they felt a lot of empathy for these protesters. “It makes me think, what on earth has gone so wrong that it has come to this. What is driving this protester?”

Another said, “you’ve gotta feel bad for these people that nobody has listened and that it has come to this.” To that, another replied that “this is just another example of the police keeping good people down.” However, that empathy shifted to despondency. As one participant summed up, “I feel sorry for them. They might have to lose their lives. But nothing will change. The dominant power will not change. They will just lose their lives for nothing.”

Idiot/Mentally Unstable

Participants were shown an image of a woman being carried away by two police (Figure 6); another woman being escorted away from a protest area with a vacant look upon her face; a third image of a man standing alone staring off into space and wearing a costume of some sort; and a fourth image of a man laughing while being escorted away from police. These images were viewed with a high level of criticism. As one respondent said, “these don’t look like serious issues. I wouldn’t necessarily want to sit and talk with them.” To contextualize their answer, one Auckland respondent said that “this looks like a one-off issue. Not like they are trying to change the world.” In Christchurch, another said that these individuals look as if they have “done something wrong.” As another respondent said, “these guys don’t look very professional. Not professional enough for me to connect with it.”

Physical Oddity

Three “physical oddity” images were shown to participants. One was a fully tattooed man; a second had a group of men with very long beards protesting; and a third was an image of a man with a Mohawk haircut (Figure 7). Respondents found it very difficult to empathize with these individuals. “They represent extreme, marginalized views that mainstream society have too many preconceived conceptions about.” Across the two focus groups, all agreed that these were not people worthy of support. Some sample responses: “I’d be skeptical of all of them;” “they just don’t fit within our social norms;” “they fit quite nicely as a stereotype;” and “I couldn’t support them.” Asked if it would matter if it was a cause that they deeply supported, all respondents said the cause would not be enough to warrant a liaison with those pictured.

Positive

Participants were shown several images of “positive” protest portrayals defined as images that frame a large group of protesters peacefully gathered and apparently supporting a common theme. One image was of thousands of protesters marching peacefully down a street (Figure 8); one image showed a close-up of roughly 50 protesters marching with placards; another image showed two jubilant men in the forefront of thousands of protesters celebrating with signs; and a final image showed about 50 individuals locked arm in arm appearing to be chanting a slogan or song. Response was overwhelmingly negative.

Initial responses from both focus groups were highly critical. One participant said this was “not reflective of normal society.” In another location, a respondent argued “when I look at this protest, I think that this is one small subset of society that has a different perspective than most people do.” To rationalize this position, another protester said “it looks to be quite dominated by young people. You see a few older people in some of the shots but it seems to fit within stereotypes of protest.” This comment was in reference to an image where the faces of protesters were clearly indistinguishable.

When questioned further, many focused their criticism on the seriousness of those pictured. “Everybody looks grumpy,” said one participant. But, then another answered, “they don’t look like they are taking it very seriously. I would not support them.” When pushed to choose if there was any image among those offered that could be seen as positive, one respondent said “I guess I’d be more likely to support the march. They’re moving. The others (of a smaller group of individuals locked arm in arm) support some sort of fanaticism.”

Overall Perspectives on Protest

Just under half of the students had participated in a protest before. Of the 11 participants, five had participated once in a protest prior to this meeting. Those who had not participated in at least one protest, were asked if they could ever see themselves participating in one in the future. Without exception, all said that they could not envision themselves participating in any protest, regardless of the cause.

When asked about their conceptions of protesters before images were shown, focus group participants were decidedly negative. One participant said that protesters were “anachronistic,” suggesting that their purpose in society had passed with the politically turbulent sixties. Another, in a

different location, said that “the whole tie-dyed, pot smoking antics of people...it just outweighs what the protest is all about.” From here, discussion went on to examining stereotypes of protesters. None were seen to be positive. Rather, protesters were seen as “crazy people marching around with signs,” or “bearded, sandal-wearing hippie with alternative lifestyle ideas.” After the focus group, every individual said that their ideas of protesters had not changed and that they would be unlikely to participate in protest in the future.

Discussion

The results of these small focus group meetings suggest that further study is warranted. Much of the previous research has found that mainstream media often marginalize protesters through specific framing techniques. However, participants did not see all of these techniques as negative. Indeed, participants found that the “immature,” and “carnival” frames were generally positive. By appealing to the participants’ sense of fun, these protest images actually engendered a certain level of empathy and support from those questioned in this study. This suggests that “immature” and “carnival” frames may not be trivializing at all. Rather, they may be quite helpful to the protesters’ cause. Participants in this study transferred their positive perceptions of the protesters costumes and antics to the cause itself. They were much more likely to be supportive of their cause if they felt positively about the person, and engendering positivity about that person depended largely on affective, emotional responses to a sense of playful fun. Such a reversal of previous scholarly research warrants further attention.

Other, traditionally, marginalizing portrayals of protest were indeed met with conflicting opinions from the participants. Images of protesters in conflict with police led many to question the intent and purpose of the protesters. However, others questioned the force of police in response to protest activities. Images of violence were met with similar contradiction and debate with some empathizing with protesters who were left with no other action but violence while others maintained that this showed an unruly crowd that did not respect authority. Overall, participants were wary of conflict but empathetic toward acts of violence. However, as this study made clear, this sample did not immediately see these images as trivializing or marginalizing. Rather, there was a clear process of internal and external negotiation that these participants went through to elucidate their own feelings.

Still other traditionally marginalized portrayals of protest were found to engender more criticism of the protesters. Participants viewed protest images of “marginalized in numbers,” “physical oddities,” or “idiot/mentally unstable” as decidedly negative by participants. Interestingly enough, all the images in these categories were of individual people. Perhaps it is the marginalization of numbers that is having the greatest influence on perception. It may be the fear of being an outlier in society that might be driving such negative perceptions rather than the behavior of those photographed. Respondents did seem to demonstrate encouragement from visible camaraderie in the photos but not supportive of a complete homogeneity - as evidenced by the reaction to the “positive” mass protest images. Further study would help explain these findings.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the “positive” images of protest garnered some of the most heightened opposition and criticism. In relation to the second research question, this research found that if protesters are framed “positively” in protest images, respondents were actually more critical of protesters. However, the reasons for this finding tied in directly with perceptions of the “immature” and “carnival” frames. The positive response to these frames was due to a sense of humor and fun while the negative response to the “positive” frames was due to a lack of the very same thing. This suggests that further study should be taken examining humor and a sense of fun in protest images as well as audience conceptions of homogeneity. Perhaps, the negative responses seen here were the result of apprehension toward the sheer massiveness of this protest. Only further study will help clarify this contradiction in the research.

In relation to the final research question, this research found that participants did not change their general perception of protest or their own conception of political participation after viewing protest images. This suggests that preconceived notions of protest are very stable and difficult to shift after exposure to only a small number of photographs. Only future study could demonstrate if a larger sample size might result in any shifts in the conceptualization of protest or political participation.

Figure 1: Image of Immature Frame



Figure 2: Image of Carnival Frame



Figure 3: Image of Conflict Frame



Figure 4: Image of Marginalized in Numbers Frame



Figure 5: Image of Violence Frame



Figure 6: Image of Idiot/Mentally Unstable Frame



Figure 7: Image of Physical Oddity Frame



Figure 8: Image of Positive Frame



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