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Framing the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests: a socio-legal
study of partisan news coverage

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Abstract

The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests brought national attention to the issue of police brutality against black Americans. Across the US, millions of people participated in the protests. This study was conducted with the aim to study news coverage of those events from a socio-legal perspective. The purpose was to better understand the nexus of social movements, news media, and the law through the concept of legal culture as well as discerning how the legal issue of racially biased policing was framed by the news media. 180 news articles from two liberal (CNN and NYT) and one conservative news outlet (Fox News) were coded. The study concluded that the news coverage was highly polarized. The liberal coverage was mostly favorable to BLM, while the conservative coverage was mostly unfavorable. Furthermore, the polarized news coverage contained different descriptive meanings of racially biased policing which reflected different moral priorities of Democrats and Republicans.

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2020, millions of people took to the streets to protest police brutality against black Americans. In the US alone, somewhere between 15 to 26 million people have been estimated to have participated in the protests, which would make them the largest social movement in American history (Buchanan, Bui and Patel, 2020). The protests erupted after video footage shared on social media showed a white police officer pinning down an unarmed black man on a street in Minneapolis, while the latter was pleading for his life until he lost consciousness. Soon after, he was pronounced dead at the hospital. The news of his fate snowballed into the protests which are collectively known under the heading of “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) and his name – George Floyd – has since become synonymous with police brutality and racism.

The emergence of the movement coincided with an increased scrutiny by the news media of black victims of police brutality. In fact, since 2014 the use of force by the police against black suspects has consistently ranked among the top news subjects in the US (Simmons, 2017, p. 640; Zuckerman et al., 2019). BLM itself has also been extensively covered by the news media. Research has documented how much of that coverage tended to disfavor the movement (Coombs et al., 2020; Banks, 2018; Chama, 2019; Lane et al., 2020; Leopold and Bell, 2017). However, other studies have also found evidence of the movement receiving favorable coverage (Elmasry and el-Nawawy, 2017; Simmons, 2017; Zuckerman et al., 2019).

This study will approach the issue of news coverage of the 2020 BLM protests from a socio-legal perspective. It will do so by drawing on a concept which should be familiar to most scholars of sociology of law: the notion of “legal culture”, which Nelken (2004, p. 1) defines broadly to mean “one way of describing relatively stable patterns of legally oriented social behavior and attitudes”. Friedman (1994) makes a compelling case for the conceptualization of

legal culture as a bridge between society and the legal system. He elucidates the way law and society scholars have long been occupied with the bidirectional flow of influence from society to the legal system and back through the legal system to society again. These alternating flows of influence are most meaningfully constituted by the mental make-up (i.e., attitudes, ideas, values, beliefs) of human actors who relate to the law in a socially situated setting: social configurations which direct and orient actors toward the law.

According to Friedman (1994), when a social force reconfigures the landscape of law, it constitutes an *intervening variable*, which does not directly mold the law as much as it changes the conditions for its realization. It is the objective of socio-legal research to identify such variables and build an empirical understanding of them. This explains why socio-legal scholars have taken a keen interest in social movements (e.g., Cummings, 2018; McDougall, 1989; McCann 2006; Edelman, Leachman and McAdam, 2010). While the traditional view was that social movements' relationship to the law was represented by a unidirectional pursuit of social change through legal reforms, Coglianese (2001, p. 86) offers a much more dynamical account which invokes the same bidirectional mechanism related above:

- (1) Social movements can pursue social change by exerting influence on informal norms, public opinion, or by helping to mobilize voters.
- (2) Changes to norms and public opinion can subsequently be channeled into the legal system itself where legal professionals or reformers who implement the law can feel emboldened to effect meaningful change.
- (3) Legal reforms can turn into feedback loops where changes to the law validate the activities and goals of social movements which further increase the probability of legal reform.

Following this line of thought, a social movement can be conceived as an intervening variable which does not directly change the law but instead

reconfigures the social determinants of its realization. Social movements, however, do not arise out of a vacuum. They too are inextricably intertwined with the rest of society. Thus, to better understand the relationship between social movements and the law, other social forces also need to be taken into account. Since protesters may not always be afforded a direct channel to communicate their message to the broader public, an example of a pertinent social force can be observed in how social movements often become dependent on third parties who mediate between protesters and non-protesters (Rohlinger and Earl, 2018).

A case in point is research which has demonstrated that how the news media decides to frame (i.e., accentuate, stress, or weigh differently) a social movement can have an enormous impact on how news consumers perceive it (Shoemaker, 1982; McLeod, 1995; McLeod and Detenber, 1999). This would suggest that news coverage of that sort, much like social movements themselves, can be conceived as both an expression and a driver of legal culture. Prior research has already unveiled multiple links between news coverage and the law. Fox, Van Sickel and Steiger (2007), for example, document how the news media tends to fashion tabloid-style stories about high-profile criminal cases which, they argue, has the potential to corrode public trust in the criminal justice system.

Other examples, which are especially relevant to the present study, can be observed in research which has shown that news coverage of incidents of police brutality can influence public trust in the police (Weitzer, 2002; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004; Dowler and Zawilski, 2007; Graziano and Gauthier, 2018) or in a recent study which found that the news media's increased focus on the race of the victim of such incidents functions as a way of imputing racial biases to the police (Shrikant and Sambaraju, 2021). Where the current state of the academic research falls short is in the dearth of studies which examine the nexus of news coverage, social movements, and the law.

Baranauskas (2022) is an exception. This study discovered a relationship between support of law-and-order policies and news coverage of the 2020 BLM protests. The more likely the news media was to portray protesters as violent, the more likely news consumers were to support law-and-order policies to quell disruptive elements of the protests. However, what is missing from this study is a better understanding of the principal issue that prompted the protests to begin with: racially biased policing. Which leads me to the purpose of the current study.

1.1. Purpose and research question

This study aims to examine news coverage of the 2020 BLM protests for (a) the general purpose of contributing to a better understanding of how a legal culture can be shaped by the news coverage of a social movement, and (b) for the discrete purpose of contributing to a better understanding of how the legal issue of racially biased policing was framed. Given this bifurcated purpose, the following research question has been formulated to guide the study:

How does news coverage of the 2020 BLM protests frame the social movement and its cause to address racially biased policing?

2. Racially biased policing

Policing in the US has a long and fraught history which has been intertwined with the racial subjugation of black Americans. More than a century ago, W.E.B Du Bois (2005, p. 74) noted how after the abolition of slavery blacks had come to look upon the police as a mere substitute for the slavemaster and upon fellow blacks who fell prey to the long claws of the law as victims and martyrs. Similarly, James Baldwin (1966) wrote vividly about the headwind of racial stigma that confronted black people when they encountered the police. He maintained that the unreserved and often indiscriminate dispensation of violence by police was not merely gratuitous but more importantly constitutive of the experience of being black in the US.

The rich history of black resistance to police brutality has left a mark on black Americans' perception of the police. To this day, black racial identity is a reliable predictor of lower levels of trust in the police (Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2017; Rogers et al., 2021; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004) and personal, vicarious, or communal knowledge of police brutality further reinforces the perception that the police treat blacks differently than whites (Muller and Schrage, 2014; Brunson, 2007; Warren, 2010; 2011; Sewell et al., 2016; Harris and Amutah-Onukagha, 2019).

While there are understandable reasons for black Americans distrust of the police, it is not obvious how (a) one should conceptualize differential treatment based on race and (b) verify the existence of it empirically within police departments. This point cannot be overstated. In fact, it reaffirms the pertinence of studying how an American legal culture contends with the ambiguities of this subject and how meanings about it are constructed. In the case of this study, these meanings, I argue, are couched in news coverage of BLM protests, and in order to successfully study them, it is necessary to draw on assumptions about what racial bias is and to what extent there is an empirical foundation for its existence in policing.

This chapter has been included for that very reason. First, I will define what I mean by "race" (2.1) and subsequently provide three different conceptualizations of how bias can be based on it (2.2). Next, I will cover the most recent empirical research on racially biased policing (2.3). I will finish this chapter by addressing a pertinent social variable which can color how racial bias in policing is perceived: political polarization in racial attitudes (2.4). Political biases of Democrats and Republicans assumed a central role in the analysis of the news coverage for this study. The last subsection acts as a background to the link between political identification and racial attitudes in the US.

2.1. What is the meaning of “race”?

As a logical first step, it is necessary to clearly define what is meant by “race”. The definition I will put forth is the one that was incisively rendered in Loury’s (2003) exposition on the persistence of racial inequality in the US. This means that I will, much like Loury, take a social constructivist stance vis-à-vis its conceptualization. This is an ontological position which does not presume the concept to be a referent to a deep biological reality but instead to a social convention: a way of doing things in a particular social context. Loury (2003) describes this more precisely as a dual process of social cognition: one of *classification*, and another of *signification*.

As a mode of classification, “race” is a way of partitioning a landscape of human subjects by sorting them into categories based on clearly discernible phenotypical markers, such as skin color, facial structure, hair, eye shape etc. As a mode of signification, “race” is a way of imbuing these categories with social meaning. To be precise, morphologically variable groups of people come to be associated with distinct expectations which are mediated by the historical and cultural context in which the groups are placed. There is nothing intrinsic about a distinct phenotype, such as skin color, which by itself calls for a human population to be divided into subgroups on such a basis. It is therefore the social meaning that becomes attached to the phenotype which is the source of such a division. This is what Loury (2003, p. 21) refers to as “embodied social signification”.

2.2. Racial bias: a conceptual outline

I have identified three broad perspectives in the academic literature which facilitate a better understanding of how racial classifications and significations are engendered. In this paper, these perspectives will be referred to as: the *prejudicial*, the *rationalist*, and the *systemic*. The first two pertain to interpersonal bias, while the third pertains to institutional bias. Sometimes it will not be obvious which one

of these is referred to in the news coverage. In those cases, it does not mean that news coverage is not addressing the issue of racial bias for it may do so in a more indirect fashion, e.g., by treating the protesters' cause as legitimate or illegitimate. This argument will be elaborated on in later sections.

The prejudicial view of racial bias can be traced back to Allport's (1954) conceptualization of prejudice as a distorted overgeneralization of a social group which is both inflexible and negative in character. This conceptualization of racial bias as a form of prejudice is perfectly represented by Russell-Brown's (1998) notion of the "criminalblackman": a racialized stereotype which suggests that black men are inherently more prone to violent crime than white men. By portraying black men as violent and dangerous, the stereotype fosters an irrational sense of fear which could in theory result in their being subject to differential treatment by the police.

Dixon (2017) documents how prejudice research has over time shifted attention away from explicit negative evaluations of social groups to more elusive expressions of *implicit bias*. These researchers insist that despite the progress that has been made in terms of social attitudes, historically anchored biases against blacks have not dissipated but simply taken on a more subtle and covert presence in society. Biases of this kind can coexist with the last decades' advances in egalitarian norms and legal reforms since most of the people who possess them are unaware of their existence. Several scholars have argued that these biases increase the probability that police officers will resort to violence in interactions with black suspects (e.g., Lee 2013; Jones, 2017; Madoshi, 2016; Hutchinson, 2014).

The rationalist view of racial bias diverges from the prejudicial view in that it attributes the persistence of negative biases against blacks to a much broader and more dynamical component of our "implicit social cognition", i.e., the way subliminal cognitive processes draw on personal experiences to steer social

performance (Greenwald, Banaji, 1995). In the 21st century, cognitive science has become increasingly preoccupied with the study of the many ways our minds keep churning out predictions, which are not subject to conscious introspection, about the world and the people whom we encounter within it (Nosek, Hawkins and Frazier, 2011). This has even led some researchers to label the human mind a “prediction machine” (Clark, 2013, p. 181); a machine that seeks to predict the most favorable behavioral response in any given moment by discerning patterns in the environment which are of relevance to it.

Hinton (2017) has argued that implicit stereotypes should be conceived as “heuristics” (see also, Kahneman 2011) – mental shortcuts – which enable us to make rapid inferences about novel stimuli. These heuristics are sensitive to a wide variety of information which can be culled and subsequently computed by our minds. These computations are related to prior probabilities of similar events which are stored in memory. This would suggest that implicit stereotypes are not rigid and absolute in their configuration but instead malleable and amenable to changing information. This also means that a stereotype is not necessarily imparted by one generation to the next as an unfortunate by-product of socialization but rather dynamically constructed inside individual minds through probabilistic reasoning based either on personal experiences or on those related by others.

The practical consequences are that causal processes behind implicit stereotypes are much more diffused in society: in theory, every individual is capable of constructing personalized stereotypes out of a unique collection of environmental input specific to that person. Similarly, it is unhelpful to view these types of stereotypes as arbitrary falsehoods concocted by nefarious actors, as they are neither contrived consciously nor are they entirely disconnected from social reality. This explains why research into “stereotype accuracy” has found that commonly held stereotypes tend to be correlated with “objective” characteristics

of the social groups which are targeted (Jussim, Crawford and Rubinstein, 2015; Jussim, 2012; Hall and Goh, 2017).

So, while both the prejudicial and rationalist views of racial bias recognize how police officers may enter police-citizen interactions carrying implicit biases against blacks, they differ radically in their identification of their source. The prejudicial view suggests that extant racial biases are derivatives of a society that inculcates people with assumptions – ultimately rooted in America’s history of racism – that stigmatize blacks as a group. The rationalist view, on the other hand, suggests that racial biases are a function of individuals’ social perception which identifies probabilistic relationships between black people as a racial group and specific traits, a relationship that, at least to a degree, corresponds to social reality.

The systemic view of racial bias (or “systemic racism”) overlaps somewhat with the prejudicial view but orients itself away from prejudices of individuals toward broader societal structures that reinforce racial hierarchies. Its proponents are found mainly in fields such as criminology and legal theory wherein it has gained prominence, so much so that critics have referred to it as the “Standard Story” (Pfaff, 2017). Although the literature in this tradition is complex and varies a great deal, two major themes recur with an unquestionable zeal. The first is the claim that the criminal justice system constitutes a racialized system of social control which perpetuates racial inequalities. The second is the claim that this system is legitimized by an ostensibly “race neutral” ideology (see, Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

The first claim, which I will focus on here, can be boiled down to the observation that, in the context of the US, the punitive weight of the criminal justice system, under which the prospects of upward social mobility are highly circumscribed, if not entirely foreclosed, is overwhelmingly borne by blacks. The fate of a wide swath of the black population (mainly young and male) is therefore sealed by the institutions that mete out punishment on behalf of the state. The systemic view of racial bias seeks to provide a genealogical account of the historical conditions that

preceded the evolution of these institutions, which often entails scholars arguing that “race” is constitutively intertwined with them.

Alexander (2010), for instance, opines that highly punitive drug laws, which have historically impacted blacks more than whites, were principally fashioned by Republican politicians, aided and abetted by Democratic colleagues, at the federal level to capitalize on whites’ resentment toward blacks after the success of the civil rights movement. Racialized imagery, linking blacks with drug use and associated social ills, along with widespread indifference to black suffering resulted, according to Alexander, in an explosion of cases where non-violent drug offenders were targeted by the police simply because they were black. Similarly, Wacquant (2002) paints a vivid picture of how “blackness” became discursively fused with criminality: legal reformers seeking the containment of crime in the “black ghetto” – urban slums marred by abject poverty and anti-social behaviors – were able to channel racial animus into the punishment of black delinquency.

Criminal law, judicial procedures, and other organizing principles of the criminal justice system are in this way supposedly in thrall to discursive race-making processes that unduly expand blacks’ legal liability. While most theoretical scholarship along these lines has focused on mass incarceration (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Hunt, 2020; Perkinson, 2010; Wacquant, 2001), police practices are often taken as a constituent of the same racially biased system and thus liable to a similar critique.

All three types of racial bias can be challenging to ascertain in policing. As social norms have evolved, police officers are likely to be less inclined to overtly display racial animus toward black suspects. Without overt indicators of racial prejudice, many incidents of police brutality against blacks will remain ambiguous. Similarly, tools that have been developed to measure implicit bias, such as the “Implicit Association Test” (Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz, 1998), have proven to be unreliable predictors of discriminatory behavior (Gawronski, 2019).

Finally, the systemic notion of racially biased institutions demands much of those who make the argument. It requires a sophisticated analysis of how institutionalized police practices can be traced to the history of racism in the US. The problem, as Clegg and Usmani (2019, pp. 17-18) note, is that agency within these institutions is diffuse: thousands of actors with a plethora of different biases, motivations, interests, and incentives determined how they evolved. It is therefore difficult to make an argument, without being misleading, that reduces or elevates racial bias as a singular force behind the evolution of modern police practices, whether it was a contributing factor or not.

2.3. Empirical research on police brutality

The need for a productive public conversation about racial bias in policing is cemented by research on police brutality. At the time of writing, none of the studies which have been published in recent years have presented any conclusive evidence of pervasive racial discrimination by police. However, there are several studies which have found “indicators” of bias: results which have evidenced the disparate impact policing can have on black and white communities. In this section, I will briefly highlight some of these studies to illustrate the importance of rigorous public debates on the subject. This is also done to identify potential biases more effectively in news coverage about BLM which may undercut such debates.

Overall, only a small minority of people are impacted by police brutality regardless of race. The latest Police-Public Contact Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020)¹ from 2018 shows that about 5% of blacks and 2% of whites who come in contact with the police are subject to threats or nonfatal force (e.g., handcuffing). The Washington Post (2020) database on fatal police shootings, which offers the most complete national account of such incidents (Nature, 2019),

¹ This is a nationally representative survey on contacts between police and citizens conducted on behalf of the Bureau of Justice Statistics. It supplements the National Crime Victimization Survey.

shows that roughly 1000 people are fatally shot every year, and that black people are more than twice as likely to be found among the victims compared to white people. Since the two populations vary across multiple dimensions, many researchers have sought to control for a wide variety of confounds with the intention to tease out racial bias.

Assessing traffic stops, Pierson et al. (2020) found that black drivers were 30% more likely to be stopped by police than white drivers.² This was achieved by comparing traffic stops after dark since that would mask the race of the driver. Another approach would be to see if there is a difference in the outcome of police-civilian encounters when controlling for both officer and civilian race. Two recent studies did exactly that. Hoekstra and Sloan (2022) found that in two undisclosed cities white police officers were five times more likely to discharge their firearms in black-majority neighborhoods relative to black officers; Ba et al. (2021) found that in the city of Chicago white police officers were about 40% more likely to use force in encounters with black civilians relative to black officers.

Those results are somewhat contradicted by Johnson et al. (2019) and Menifield, Shin and Strother (2018) who, after mining data on fatal officer-involved shootings, concluded that black police officers were more likely to shoot black civilians than white police officers³. Johnson et al. (2019) made another significant discovery. By controlling for race-specific homicide rates, they found that as the rates increased for each group, the likelihood that members of that group would be shot by the police increased as well. So, in counties where the black homicide rate was higher than the white, so was the black victimization rate

² Interestingly, this study also found that white drivers were at least 30% more likely to be stopped than Hispanic drivers.

³ It should be noted here that neither study attributes this to greater levels of bias among black police officers. Instead, they suggest that it is because black police officers are more likely to be drawn from populations where there are higher concentrations of blacks already or because black police officers are more likely to be deployed in predominantly black areas. In other words, they are simply more likely to encounter black civilians in their daily patrols, which increases the probability that when they shoot to kill, the person will be black.

in police shootings. While the pattern was reversed in counties where the white homicide rate was higher than the black⁴.

These ostensibly contradictory results may not only be a between-studies phenomenon. Fryer (2019) looked at data from NYC's Stop and Frisk program, he found that black civilians were 8.6% more likely to be subjected to nonfatal force conditional on arrest, but by drawing on data from Houston on officer-involved-shootings, he concluded that black civilians were 27.4% less likely to be shot than white civilians. Wheeler et al. (2017) arrived at a similar conclusion after analyzing data from another city in Texas: Dallas. They also found that black civilians were less likely to be shot than white civilians. Importantly, what set their study apart from previous research was the idea of relating incidents of police shootings to incidents where the officer drew a firearm but decided not to pull the trigger.

These results are corroborated by experimental studies where test subjects are placed in close to real-life simulations of police-civilian interactions. For example, James, James and Vila (2016)⁵ and Peck, Good and Seitz (2021)⁶ have found a pro-black bias in simulations of police shootings: subjects were more hesitant to shoot both armed and unarmed blacks. A study by Nix et al. (2017), however, contradicted those results with non-simulation data from real-life. They used data from the Washington Post database on police shootings and managed to control for whether the person who was shot was attacking the officer(s) or other civilians. Their results indicate that blacks (24%) shot by the police were more likely to not be the attacker compared to whites (17%).

⁴ This would also explain why there is almost a perfect symmetry between the age groups most affected by police shootings and the age groups most inclined toward violent crime, regardless of race (Edwards, Lee and Esposito, 2019, p. 16795).

⁵ This study has been particularly controversial in some academic circles, as some scholars (see, Roussell et al., 2017) have objected to the conceptualization of the study's results as a form of "reverse racism".

⁶ The test subjects in this study were university students, while in James, James, Vila (2016), they were police officers from the Spokane (WA) Police Department.

A critical variable which has so far been ignored is class. Clegg and Usmani (2019) document how the American criminal justice system (including policing) expanded over time to compensate for the lack of social investments made by the state. Thus, the more affordable option to contain crime was to adopt increasingly aggressive policies on policing and incarceration. This would explain the relationship Mesic et al. (2018) discerned between broader “structural” factors and police shootings. For example, they found that racial inequalities, such as in educational attainment, employment, and incarceration, were all correlated with higher rates of police shootings of unarmed blacks.

Finally, Miller et al. (2016) collated nationally representative healthcare data from 2012 on injuries sustained by legal police interventions. Their findings tell us that although blacks were more likely to be stopped/arrested than whites, they were not more likely to sustain injuries in those interactions⁷. This study adds another layer of complexity to this scientific conundrum. What is clear from the current state of the literature is that the issue of racially biased policing remains unsettled.

2.4. Political polarization in racial attitudes

In recent years, much attention has been given to the rise of issue and affective polarization between Republicans and Democrats in the US (Böttcher and Gersbach, 2020; Enders and Lupton, 2021; Baldassari and Park, 2020; Putnam and Garrett, 2021). On the subject of race, about which Democrats tend to hold more progressive views than Republicans, polarization is no exception. Overall, according to Gallup (2019), national attitudes on “race relations” in the US have worsened significantly: black and white respondents who view the relationship between the two groups as either very or somewhat good went from stable

⁷ One of the advantages of this study is that it indirectly helps us to conceptualize “excessive use of force”. Since the application of force is often a prerequisite of making an arrest, it is not obvious when police officers are misusing their mandate by exceeding what would be a warranted application of force. Although this study does not solve this conceptual challenge completely, it does attempt to quantify what could be conceived as the undue effects of excessive use of force (i.e., physical injuries).

majorities in the early 2000s to clear minorities for both whites (43%) and blacks (33%) by 2021. Interestingly, this precipitous decline in the positive perception of race relations began in 2013, the same year the Black Lives Matter movement emerged (Lebron, 2019).

Even though a causal relationship is not obvious, it is likely that a renewed public interest in racial justice provided ample opportunity for political discord to be sown⁸. One major driver behind such discord is likely the polarized outlook on race which can be found among liberals and conservatives. As an example, Pew Research Center (2021) found that Republicans (25%) are far less likely than Democrats (78%) to view more attention given to the history of racism as something positive for society. This could be related to another finding of the same study: Democrats (73%) said that a lot needed to be done to ensure that laws and institutions treat all Americans regardless of their racial background equally, while far fewer Republicans (21%) agreed.

In fact, a large minority of Democrats (40%) believe that laws and institutions are fundamentally biased against blacks and need to be rebuilt, while Republicans (7%) who agreed with that statement were few and far between. An earlier study by Pew Research Center (2019) on the state of “Race in America” is also telling: when asked about racial discrimination, 77% of white Republicans said that seeing discrimination where it does not exist is a bigger problem than not seeing it where it really does exist. For white Democrats, it was the reverse: 78% said that not seeing discrimination where it really does exist is a bigger problem. This also had implications for the way respondents viewed the police: when asked if blacks are treated less fairly than whites by the police, Republicans (43%) were half as likely as Democrats (88%) to express such a concern.

Pew Research Center (Thomas and Horowitz, 2020) also conducted a study of public support for BLM. In September 2020, 16% of white Republicans either

⁸ See also, Stamps and Mastro (2020)

strongly or somewhat supported BLM (down from 37% in June 2020). While support for the movement among white Democrats remained high all summer: 88% said they either strongly or somewhat supported BLM (down from 92% in June 2020). Even though there is a large racial divide when it comes to support for BLM, for whites, party affiliation rather than race was a greater determinant of support for the movement. Among whites in general, support for BLM was 45% in September 2020 (down from 60% in June 2020), and for blacks, support was 87% (up from 86% in June 2020).

As evidenced above, the link between political partisanship and racial attitudes is particularly strong for white Americans. Other studies have provided further support for this link (e.g., Appiah et al., 2022; Fine, Rowan and Simmons, 2019; Engelhardt, 2020). The political polarization in racial attitudes between liberals and conservatives, which seems to be driven mainly by white Americans, is likely to be reflected in the news coverage of BLM. This assumption finds support in Baranauskas (2022) who found that perceptions of the legitimacy of the 2020 BLM protests were correlated with the political orientation of the news outlet which respondents named as their regular source of news: right-leaning news consumers were more likely to view the protesters as violent compared to left-leaning news consumers.

3. Theory

My selection of theory was steered by two related concerns. Given that I had conceptualized news coverage of BLM as a feature of legal culture, it was incumbent upon me to (a) select a theory that enabled me to meaningfully discern patterns in the news coverage which were relevant to the law. Since news coverage is not a fully cohesive or static phenomenon, I also needed a theory that could help me to discern patterns in it which could be meaningfully contrasted with one another. The first theory was selected for those reasons and will be covered in subsection 3.1. Furthermore, I also needed a theory that could (b) help

me to identify the units of text which were analytically relevant to answering my research question. In this sense, the second theory was meant to complement the first. It will be covered in subsection 3.2.

3.1. The protest paradigm

Social movements often enter a strangely symbiotic relationship with the news media in which both feed off each other: protesters need the news media to cover their activities in order to raise awareness of the issues for which they are fighting, while the news media needs the protesters as their activities can be newsworthy and therefore increase ratings. However, the balance of power between protesters and the news media is generally not in the protesters favor (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019; Boyle et al., 2004; Reul et al., 2018). In fact, a prominent strand of the social movement literature has documented a so-called “protest paradigm” (Chan and Lee, 1984): a trend among mainstream media outlets to selectively represent social movements in such a way as to cast them in an almost exclusively negative light.

When coverage of social movements tends toward the protest paradigm it sticks largely to the following formula: (a) the outward presentation of protests receives much more attention than the concrete (moral and political) issues that prompted the protests in the first place; (b) the more disruptive or deviant elements of protests are inflated or exaggerated at the expense of the more peaceful elements; (c) protests that have the temerity to challenge the status quo are those that stand to lose the most in terms of favorable coverage (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod and Hertog, 1992; 1995). Additionally, McLeod (2007, p. 186) explains that the protest paradigm should be conceived as “a routinized template for creating protest stories that has been naturalized through the process of journalistic socialization.”

The protest paradigm, I will argue, can be a window into a legal culture by virtue of it orienting the analysis of news coverage toward questions pertaining to the legitimacy of social movements. The various means through which news outlets disseminate ideas, beliefs, assumptions, norms, and values which are meant to validate or invalidate protesters can be conceptualized as a feature of legal culture, insofar as the connection to the law is made explicit. Although research on the protest paradigm has been very influential, in recent years it has come under fire from several directions as researchers have documented cases in which it seemingly did not apply (e.g., Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Trivundzha and Brlek, 2017; De Cillia and McCurdy, 2020).

This has led some scholars (e.g., Lee, 2014) to propose a revision of the protest paradigm by treating news media coverage of protests as a variable phenomenon. In that way, the delegitimization processes outlined by the protest paradigm are no longer conceived as fixed or inexorable determinants of news coverage but instead as conditional on the broader social context. Some of these conditions pertain directly to the news media organizations themselves, such as *organizational*, *structural*, and *ideological* mechanisms (Smith et al., 2001; Reul et al., 2018, p. 911; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) that fuel the engines of reporting. These mechanisms will be addressed at greater length below.

- (1) Organizational mechanisms: the norms, routines, practices and standardized ways of running a news organization, e.g., journalists, in lieu of more demanding investigative reporting, save time by relying on “habitual” (Boyle et al., 2004) or “standardized” (Amenta et al., 2012) framing devices, which often omit pertinent details of events; there is also evidence that journalists tend to labor under and collectively lionize the rather naive notion that they are always reporting the news in an objective and dispassionate manner: they assume that they are not active participants in story construction but instead simply conduits for objective “facts” or “truths” (Johnson-Cartee, 2004, pp. 76-78).

- (2) Structural mechanisms: the larger structures of power and influence that dictate the goals and interests of news organizations, e.g., the increased commercialization of news can produce consumer-oriented news cycles which crowd out every form of reporting that does not pander to the lowest common denominator: profits determine newsworthiness instead of a standard based on some conception of journalism as a morally significant public service or social good (Smith et al., 2001, p. 1403; McManus, 2009, pp. 218-227); journalism has also been accused (by e.g., Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, 2007) of only being “semi-independent”, since it has become exceedingly entwined with the political elite, often deferring uncritically to public officials’ statements (and invariable spin) without contrasting them with (critical) voices from other sectors of society.
- (3) Ideological mechanisms: the moral, political, or other ideological commitments of journalists, writers, editors, board of directors, and others who run news organizations or participate in their daily operations. Research has found that differences in the coverage of protests can vary along ideological lines, e.g., when protesters assail a given administration, the degree to which the coverage will be favorable can depend on how ideologically aligned a news media organization is with said administration – this holds true on both sides of the political divide between left and right (Kim and Shahin, 2020; Weaver and Scacco, 2013; Shahin and Zheng, 2016; Lee, 2014; Rohlinger, 2007; Di Cicco, 2010).

Prior research of news coverage of BLM protests has, with few exceptions (e.g., Baranauskas, 2022; Banks, 2018), largely failed to control for the ideological orientation of news sources (e.g., Elmasry and el Nawawy, 2017; Leopold and Bell, 2017; Lane et al., 2020). This gap in the literature constitutes an opportunity for further study of the varying degrees different news outlets may conform to the protest paradigm. For example, studies of other social movements than BLM have demonstrated that conservative news outlets are more likely to conform to the

protest paradigm (Di Cicco, 2010; Lee, 2014, Kim and Shahin, 2020). However, other studies (Weaver and Scacco, 2013; Rohlinger, 2007) have shown that when conservative news outlets are ideologically aligned with a protest movement, they are more likely to produce favorable coverage.

In the current study, there is good reason to believe that conservative news outlets will be less ideologically aligned with the protesters than liberal news outlets because of the political polarization in racial attitudes (2.4) and the results of Baranauskas (2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis will be supplementing the research question:

The conservative news coverage of BLM is more likely to conform to the protest paradigm relative to the liberal news coverage which is more likely to diverge from it.

3.2. Framing

If political partisanship is an integral part of news coverage of BLM, reporters are likely to be selective about which aspects of a protest event they choose to make salient. This is a choice about how to communicate to the news consumer what is of importance and how to make sense of it. In psychology, communication research, and political science this choice is often referred to as a form of *framing*. Entman (1993, p. 52) provided the following definition:

To frame is to select some aspects 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.

Pertaining to the media, a frame can refer to words, phrases, images, or other techniques a communicator uses to relay information about an event or an issue to an audience (Chong and Druckman, 2007). A frame is not just a way of spelling out a position on an issue, it is also a way of making meaning out of experience.

Goffman (1974) described how individuals rely on interpretive “frameworks” to confer meaning on what would otherwise be meaningless experience. These frameworks can be either clearly articulated and defined or unarticulated and undefined. That is, people who defer to a framework may do so without fully understanding the underlying logic and rules that organized their experience for them. Moreover, Goffman (1974, pp. 22-24) makes a distinction between “natural” and “social” frameworks. A natural framework refers to a way of interpreting non-agentic phenomena derived from nature, while a social framework refers to agentic processes pertaining to intentions, goals, a will, self-control and so forth; it also includes background assumptions and rules about proper agentic behavior in each social context.

The protest paradigm has often been used by scholars (e.g., Weaver and Scacco, 2013; McLeod and Detenber, 1999) as a label to denote media frames that delegitimize protests. Since protests are agent-driven events, the protest paradigm can be conceived as a social framework through which negative evaluations are made of the intentions and actions of protesters. Entman (1993, p. 52) describes this more clearly by stipulating that,

Frames, then, *define problems* – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes* – identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments* – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies* – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.

By combining the concept of a “frame” with the protest paradigm, I can develop a concept-driven strategy to analyze news articles. How this will be approached practically, I will address in the next section. Below, I will combine Entman’s four framing functions with examples of concrete frames taken from research on the protest paradigm.

- (1) *Define problems*: The news media can center altercations between the police and protesters in coverage of a protest event, thereby constructing a narrative about how protesters are contending with the police rather than a concrete moral or political issue that inspired the protest (McLeod and Hertog, 1992;1999).
- (2) *Diagnose causes*: Protesters can be portrayed by the news media as much more radical than they in fact are, which results in their behaviors being attributed to their putative “radicalism” instead of genuine moral and political concerns (Gitlin, 1980).
- (3) *Make moral judgments*: Protesters can be characterized as “deviant” or “criminal” by news narratives which pit them against the wider public, e.g., references to “public opinion”, the violation of laws or social norms have been shown to serve this purpose (McLeod and Hertog, 1992; 1999).
- (4) *Suggest remedies*: By relying on official records or statements by public officials, the news media can simply defer to the prevailing power centers that bolster the status quo for answers or remedies to an ongoing conflict (McLeod and Hertog, 1992).

Even though news coverage does not have to conform to the protest paradigm, as the fulcrum of the study, it can help to conceptualize the function of news frames including those which are distally related. This is relevant because, at the aggregate level, the very frequency with which certain news frames are produced can have an impact on belief formation. This happens mainly through the prevalence of an “availability bias” (Sunstein, 2003; Kuran and Sunstein, 1999). This can be understood as a heuristic which we recruit subliminally to estimate the probability of an event. That is, when we gauge probabilities, our minds are inclined to draw on examples that can be readily retrieved from memory. So, the easier it is to remember a certain event that happened in the past, the more likely one is to believe something similar will happen again in the future.

This cognitive propensity is compounded by so-called “availability cascades” which can be understood as “social cascades, or simply cascades, through which

expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse.” (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999, p. 685). Thus, the preponderance of specific news frames will likely condition news consumers’ propensity to adopt certain beliefs. For example, if a news consumer is more frequently exposed to news frames which depict protesters as disorderly, even if most of them are not, the likelihood is that the immediate inference which will be drawn about them will be tilted in their disfavor. Of course, the same logic applies if the example was reversed, if only with a different outcome.

4. Method

The methodological choice for this study settled on Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). This method was selected because it afforded me the flexibility to develop an original approach to the analysis of the sampled news articles which could be tailored to the theories and concepts presented in the preceding sections. The subsections for this chapter will follow accordingly. First, a summary of QCA will introduce the reader to the method (4.1). Next, I will explicate the practical aspects of QCA which involves coding (4.2). After that, I will operationalize my theories and present my deductive-inductive coding strategy (4.3). Then, I will elaborate on the inductive component of the coding (4.4). Validity (4.5) and reliability (4.6) concerns will be addressed in the following two subsections before some thoughts on reflexivity (4.7). Subsequently, I will touch upon some of my ethical considerations (4.8). Finally, I will close this chapter by delineating my sampling criteria (4.9).

I decided on this disposition since, in my view, it benefits the reader to first become familiarized with how I have developed my coding strategy before the selection of sampled articles is presented.

4.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

QCA is a method that is used to systematically convey the meaning of sampled material, such as interview transcripts, news articles, audio files and more. While all the sampled material is initially analyzed, only selected parts which are of direct relevance to a research question will be highlighted through summaries of key concepts, themes, or categories whose meanings have been interrogated by the researcher. What makes the qualitative iteration of a content analysis different from its quantitative counterpart is principally in its discernment of not only *manifest* but also *latent* meaning. Some forms of material cannot be readily quantified since the meaning contained within is ambiguous and open for interpretation. QCA enables the researcher to interpret material based on the broader context in which it is found (Schreier, 2012).

Mayring (2010) argues that QCA can be used to fully unveil the meaning of a text by not only describing the meaning itself but also how it is conveyed in its full context. The context is critical to interpret news articles which cover BLM. There can be many subtle ways news coverage can frame protests, many of which may not be readily apparent on the surface. In the previous section, I gave some examples of how the protest paradigm could be framed by using Entman's four frame functions. Consider, for a moment, the "deviant" and "criminal" frame which is meant to be rather subtle. The frame does not directly call the protesters "deviants" or "criminals" but instead relies on the reader inferring as much by suggesting the protesters are an isolated minority who are not supported by the wider public.

If the news media is more sympathetic to the protesters, it is highly unlikely that frames which are similarly unfavorable will be used. A hypothetical alternative would be a frame that celebrates protesters as "virtuous" and "progressive" by suggesting they are assailing an old, corrupt institution in dire need of reform. That is, subtle value judgments about the "moral integrity" of the protesters and

the “sordid venality” of their target can be conceived as favorable news coverage. In practice, of course, it can be challenging to meaningfully tease out latent meaning in this way. Another reason why QCA was selected was for its flexibility: a researcher is given the latitude to design a coding strategy that best fits the needs of the research question. More on this, below.

4.2. Coding – NVivo

In QCA, the practical approach to the analysis of data is *coding*. According to Saldaña (2013, p. 3), “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.” Coding has principally three interwoven analytical functions (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014):

- (1) Data condensation: is a way of highlighting data points through abstractions, simplifications, summarizations, paraphrases, transformations that focus, sharpen, discard, organize, and ultimately help to verify inferences that are drawn from them.
- (2) Data display: is way of presenting information in an organized and compressed way, making it both accessible and intelligible. When done successfully, it can help the researcher identify which parts of the data are relevant to answer the research question.
- (3) Drawing and verifying conclusions: an activity that is performed by the researcher throughout the coding process, which entails discerning patterns, interpreting meanings, seeking explanations, ascertaining causal relationships, while remaining open to emergent ideas and perspectives. This is a continuous and iterative process which is alleviated by the previous steps of data condensation and data displays. The verification of conclusions can be reached during fleeting moments of reflective incisiveness or during much more protracted reflections supported by

detailed written arguments, which can, additionally, be evaluated and commented on by other researchers.

Codes are usually organized in a hierarchical classificatory system called a “coding frame” (Schreier, 2012), or possibly a “protocol” (Altheide and Schneider, 2017), which can be fashioned in a process that is either deductive, inductive, or a combination of both. First, the researcher is forced to make a choice concerning which aspects of the material are of key interest to the research question. These are subsequently sorted into separate *main categories*. Within each main category, a set of *subcategories* can specify instances by which it is represented in the material. The complexity of a coding frame will vary in relation to the research question and the material that is analyzed (Saldaña, 2013; Schreier, 2012)

Schreier (2012, pp. 71-78) stipulates four requirements for coding frames:

(a) Unidimensionality: each category in the coding frame can only represent one aspect of the material. Categories cannot conflate or coalesce; (b) Mutual exclusiveness: subcategories must be mutually exclusive; a code cannot be assigned to more than one subcategory; (c) Exhaustiveness: all the coded material must be analyzed for its meaning. In other words, all codes must be assigned a subcategory; (d) Saturation: all subcategories must contain at least one code. Unused subcategories must be removed from the coding frame.

To increase both the validity and reliability of a coding frame, it is of critical importance that categories are given precise definitions. Definitions are the rules that govern which segments of code are assigned to a category. Categories also need to be assigned a label or a name which provides a concise and intuitive notion of what is referred to with it. This can be done through the use of “indicators” or various rules of thumb that help to identify the codes in the material. It can also be helpful to use concrete examples of codes in the

description of a category if the existing definition is deemed too abstract (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014; Saldaña, 2013; Schreier, 2012, pp. 93-96).

Coding can be done by hand or with the help of a software program designed specifically for that end. I will be using NVivo. This is a software program which is highly customizable. It can mimic hand-based coding, offer searchable databases, help organize your data, and make all the coding readily transferable. NVivo is therefore a useful tool that can alleviate some of the burdens of coding by hand (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). A useful feature is the “annotation” function. Here I can document every thought or reflection that will enter my mind during the coding. In this way, it can act like an “analytic memo”, which is analogous to a research journal (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 41-43). This is useful, since there are so many small “steps” that are taken at different stages in the coding process, the thoughts that went into each decision need to be fully documented to increase both the validity and reliability of the study.

4.3. Operationalization

Each code in my study represents a news media frame, as defined by Entman (1993). The coding was organized in a combined deductive-inductive coding frame. This entails deducing a set of main- or subcategories before the coding commences. These can subsequently be contextualized and expanded through other inductively generated subcategories. Schreier (2012, p. 89) claims that this approach is the most common in the literature. It is useful because a deductive “scaffolding” against which the coding can lean allows more granular codes to arise inductively through a highly purposive process. This alleviates the conceptual burden of the researcher, who can determinedly steer the coding toward the expansion and elaboration of existing research without concerning oneself with developing wholly new theories and concepts bottom-up.

The first main category is “actions of protesters” which encompasses news coverage that frames the behaviors, activities or situations protesters are in. This is because a central feature of the protest paradigm is its emphasis of the violent, unlawful, unruly, and incriminating behaviors of protesters. A subcategory labeled “disruptive” represented the instances of news coverage which conformed to this feature of the protest paradigm. As a counterweight, I included a subcategory labeled “peaceful” which represents instances of coverage where the prudent, lawful, harmless, and exculpatory behaviors of protesters have been made salient. The subcategories are therefore conceived as mutually exclusive.

Another feature of the protest paradigm is that it represents news coverage which downplays the moral and political concerns of protesters. This is either achieved by ascribing “impure” motivations to protesters or by focusing squarely on superficial features of protest events, such as short-term incentives of protesters embroiled in an altercation with police. This can be contrasted with coverage which emphasizes the political aims, demands, reasoning, arguments, and so forth, that are expressed by protesters as motives. The second main category was therefore labeled “motives of protesters” to encompass news coverage which can be assessed on how it represents the mental states of protesters. Two subcategories were included, one labeled “invalid motives”, as an indicator of the protest paradigm, and the other “valid motives” as another counterweight. These are also conceived as mutually exclusive.

A third and final main category was labelled “racial bias in policing” and represents coverage of that issue more specifically. Most research on protest movements has understandably focused on how protesters themselves are represented in news coverage (Amenta et al., 2012). In this study, this traditional approach will not suffice. This is because the purpose of the study is to understand how a specific legal issue is constructed through the news media’s coverage of a social movement. Since the legal issue – racially biased policing – can be framed in parallel to protest events, it would be apt to develop a main category which also

captures those frames. Two mutually exclusive subcategories which either validate or invalidate the protesters' cause will be included. These will be labeled "serious/urgent" and "less serious/nonurgent".

These three main categories and six subcategories were meant to be capacious and flexible, so that the inductive part of the analysis would not be unnecessarily restrictive. As Drisko and Maschi (2016, p. 106) explain, concepts derived from previous research can help guide the inductive parts of the coding, but they can also obscure or preclude concepts and ideas which have not been covered by other researchers in the past. This necessitates a set of guidelines which make the data-driven and inductive part of the study sufficiently focused to not steer away from the deductively generated categories, while remaining open to new ideas and concepts that emerge during the coding. This is particularly important given the fact that previous research into news media coverage of BLM protests has produced contradictory results.

4.4. Inductive: data-driven coding

To solve the inductive predicament referred to above, I have drawn inspiration from two different sources. The first is the notion of "subsumption", which is an inductive strategy that can be used in QCA when the researcher already has decided on a set of main categories. Schreier (2012, pp. 115-117) delineates some instructions for the use of this approach: (a) The material is examined to see if there is a part that seems pertinent to one of your main categories; (b) This part should then be compared to other parts which have already been examined to assess how similar they are; (c) If they are similar, the part can be sorted into one of the existing subcategories; (d) If it is distinct, a new subcategory can be created to accommodate it; (e) It is pertinent to find a balance: too many subcategories can be unwieldy from a data management point of view, while too few may suggest some important data points have been subsumed by inflated subcategories.

To further instruct the inductive analysis, I have used Entman's (1993) four framing functions (i.e., define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, suggest remedies) as useful heuristics. I have already given examples of how the protest paradigm can manifest itself as frames in this way. In my examples, the framing functions were treated as though each was performed in a clear-cut instance of news coverage, but Entman (1993, p. 52) never intended them to be treated in such a sterile way. He stressed that some sentences may perform multiple framing functions, while others may perform none. They should therefore be seen as configurable in a variety of ways which may not be predictable a priori. That is why they are more helpful as basic reminders of what to look for inductively and not suitable as fixed deductive categories.

4.5. Validity

As with any qualitative research method, a major challenge with using QCA is to determine to what extent that which one sets out to study is captured by one's analytical tools. This is a question about the degree to which one's concepts used to define categories of coded material correspond with the content of the codes. This question is particularly relevant when we try to capture latent meaning. While manifest meaning is direct, relies on standardized concepts, and is monosemous (i.e., has one meaning), latent meaning is indirect, relies on non-standardized concepts, and can be both monosemous and polysemous (i.e., have multiple meanings). This means that the same expression of latent meaning may give rise to multiple interpretations (Schreier, 2012, p. 177).

Indeed, QCA anticipates this: it presumes that different interpretations are inevitable, and although it does not offer a tool to resolve interpretive conflicts, it does recommend that to increase internal validity researchers must make the connection between interpretations and analytical concepts explicit to the reader (Drisko and Maschi, 2016, p. 91; Schreier, 2012, pp. 178-179). Another relevant

challenge is how to meaningfully compare different kinds of news coverage. A common theme in the academic literature is to use both a qualitative and a numerical/quantitative approach (e.g., Kim and Shahin, 2020; Weaver and Scacco, 2013; Elmasry and el-Nawawy, 2017).

To strengthen the validity of my argument, I have supplemented the core qualitative segments with a numerical additive. In this study, the numerical approach is treated as straightforward: the variance is determined by counting the number of frames in each set of categories for each news outlet, then calculating the percentage of variance between categories, and finally comparing the percentages between news outlets. The qualitative approach is less straightforward. It is strictly interpretative: the variance is determined by discerning patterns of meaning, ideas, claims, arguments, depictions, expressions, and so forth, that are used by each news outlet.

Since this study has been conceived as a contribution to socio-legal research, it is incumbent upon me to delineate exactly how it is meant to contribute. In the introduction, I invoked the notion of legal culture by linking it to news coverage of social movements. My argument is that the relationship between a social movement and the law can only be understood by fully appreciating the social context in which both can be found. In this sense, the relationship between the two is permeated by a host of social variables. One of these variables is activated by the news media, i.e., news coverage “mediates” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014, pp. 39-56) information about a social movement in such a way as to condition the likely effect it will have on the law.

The challenge of this study was to identify exactly how mediated information about BLM related to the legal issue of racially biased policing. The third main category in the coding frame already addressed one such connection: journalists can use the protests as an opportunity to comment on the legal issue in question. Frames of this kind run parallel to news coverage about protest events but that

does not mean that the coverage of such events is not relevant as well. News coverage of both actions and motives of protesters, I will argue, can be equally important. How the protesters are portrayed will likely have an indirect effect on how the legal issue will be perceived.

For example, if the protesters are perceived as violent and destructive, it undermines the cause for which they are fighting. This is because people are less likely to take a claim seriously if they do not trust, respect, or identify with the ones who are making it. If instead the protesters are framed as peaceful, it becomes easier to sympathize with them and therefore also the legal issue from which their inspiration to protest was derived. Much of the coverage about protest activities can also become a distraction: it can prioritize surface level noise over more substantive protest activities related to the law. Thus, what is left unsaid can be as important as what is said.

This also holds true when the motives of protesters are addressed. The framing of motives does not just tell news consumers about the character and mental states of protesters, but it may also provide them with an opportunity to understand conceptualizations of the law or the arguments for legal reform which protesters are making. If these motives are poorly covered, news consumers may remain ignorant of valuable perspectives on the law. Moreover, the more sympathetic the news coverage is to the motives of the protesters, the more likely news consumers are to trust the protest narrative and view it as a pressing issue that needs to be addressed. The opposite, again, also holds true: negative assumptions about protesters' motives will make news consumers less sympathetic to the protest narrative and make them less concerned about legal reform.

The inductively generated subcategories will elaborate much more on these arguments in the "Results" chapter (5).

4.6. Reliability

Of equal concern to QCA is the question of reliability (Schreier, 2012, pp. 166-169). Reliability concerns pertain to the challenge of developing an instrument that can consistently yield error-free data. There are different ways researchers have traditionally tried to increase the reliability of QCA. One involves comparing coding across different coders, i.e., “intercoder reliability” (Mayring, 2000). The argument is that coders who use the same coding framework independently of one another should, ideally, vary minimally when analyzing the same text. This is a contentious criterion, as some (e.g., Seale, 1999) have argued that qualitative research encompasses many different context-dependent interpretations, i.e., reliability is not necessarily increased through intersubjective convergence.

Notwithstanding the epistemological challenges of that debate, it was not an option for this study since it is conducted as an individual assignment which rules out the possibility of receiving assistance from a secondary coder. Another option to increase reliability is to maintain consistency in the coding over time (Schreier, 2012, p. 167). To be consistent does not mean that no revisions of the coding frame will happen. In this study, the coding has been punctuated by time intervals which allowed the codes to “breathe” in between coding sessions. I could subsequently return to them at a later point and “knead” them for more meaning and revise them if necessary. The consistency emerges out of those iterative coding sessions (Mayring, 2000): it is something one is working toward.

My iterative coding strategy drew inspiration from Mayring (2010). This entails a researcher developing a set of tentative codes that (a) define categories and (b) explicate their abstract relationship to each other, which leads to (c) the development of a hierarchy of main categories and their subsidiary constituents which expound the content in greater detail across more than one dimension. Once about 10-50 % of the coding has been finished a “formative” reliability check is commenced to revise some of the codes by checking their relevance to

the research question and the structure of their rank order. If some codes appear to be superfluous or ill-conceived, one can either dispense with them entirely or revise their placement within the coding hierarchy. Afterwards, one is supposed to proceed with the coding by using the revised framework. Once all the coding has been finished, a final “summative” reliability check is recommended, which is a repetition of the one prior.

4.7. Reflexivity

Although epistemological positions are rarely fully explicated by researchers who apply QCA, a constructivist position is often implicitly assumed by default (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 88). This position assumes that knowledge is socially situated: it is mediated by the available concepts which perceivers have acquired through the historical, cultural, and social context in which they are in (Patton, 2015, pp. 121-126). In practice, this would mean that different researchers can approach the same material and arrive at mutually exclusive conclusions about it. That is why *reflexivity* is an integral part of the QCA. This would require the researcher to engage in self-reflection, become aware of how one’s social position is a regimenting force behind countless decisions that are made throughout the coding process (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, pp. 116-118; Schreier, 2012, pp. 23-24).

Bourdieu (1990; 2010) wrote extensively about the mistake of assuming social scientists are situated in a complete social vacuum. No, to be a researcher, he contended, is to enter a prestructured social space (a “field”, to use his terminology) wherein norms, social expectations, and habituated patterns of collective behavior, along with the imposition of received wisdom or self-evident truths (“doxa”), assume the function of a prism through which the object under study is perceived. Bourdieu entreated researchers to interrogate the social determinants of knowledge production by reminding them to reflect not only on the object itself in isolation, but also on how they as socially situated beings can

be partial to certain ways of relating to it rather than others. Reflexivity is therefore a call for introspection, the process of becoming self-aware, the realization that one has biases which must be contended with openly and routinely, as argued by Finlay (2002).

As I reflect on my own social location, several factors come to mind. For instance, I am not American but Scandinavian. Even though modern American culture has had an outsized influence in Scandinavia, there are notable differences between the regions. The racial conflicts between whites and blacks which have marked American history will struggle to find a direct parallel in Scandinavian history. My own experience tells me that Scandinavians have a different ethos when it comes to public discourses about racial justice than Americans. Terms like “race” are not ones I have grown up with or used in any capacity in my daily life. This could be worth reflecting more on. Other factors which may influence my coding could conceivably be that I am a young, white, male who has been raised in a rural environment with practically no crime or general police presence. It is not obvious how any of those factors may influence my coding, but it can be worth reflecting on, nonetheless.

There is yet another way of being reflexive which is not a purely self-oriented exercise in introspection, but instead one which is other-oriented and relational. This can be described as an “intersubjective” form of reflexivity, which is meant to represent an awareness of the feelings and motivations which develop in relation to research participants (Finlay and Gough, 2003, pp. 8-10). Although I will not conduct any fieldwork, and therefore not have any direct contact with research participants, I will analyze texts which involve all kinds of actors, liberals, conservatives, protesters, police officers, and others, and it is not inconceivable that I will develop novel ways of relating to these actors as the research progresses. Another possibility is that I enter the analysis with preexisting relational dispositions vis-à-vis these actors.

The instrument with which data is assessed in QCA is not some inanimate device like a microscope but the mind of the individual researcher. If one is going to give a full account of how one interpretation was preferred over another, it will rarely suffice to leave out any inquiry into what makes an individual researcher different from another. In this way, reflexivity integrates both validity and reliability concerns by treating the mind that does the coding as susceptible to social influences which must be openly reflected upon and documented. While other concepts took precedence in the analysis of the news coverage for this study, I kept myself reminded of the importance of being reflexive by making a habit of engaging in meta-reflections (thoughts about thoughts) and to put them down in words by using the annotation function in NVivo.

4.8. Ethics

When the subject of research ethics comes to mind, it is easy to think that it only applies to research which draws data directly from human subjects, e.g., clinical trials. Since this study draws data from published news articles (see, 4.9), it would be fair to think that any ethical considerations are superfluous. I will argue that this is not the case. Indeed, I have drawn some inspiration from Hammersley and Traianou (2012) to help me think more about the potential "harm" that can result from a study of this kind. The first type that I identified is the cost that can be levied on a protester whose identity is revealed by a researcher who has failed to first solicit informed consent from the person in question. Given how contentious the BLM protests were, a protester may incur social costs if protest participation is revealed. Now, this would normally not be a concern since major news outlets are supposed to observe the same ethical standard, making it difficult to name non-public figures who participated in the protests. However, in case there is a lapse in the judgment of an editor, there is no point in repeating the error.

Secondly, given how politically contentious the subject of this study is, it is understandable if one may feel the urge to pick sides. Thus, there is a risk that one

participates as an agent of partisan discourse, which could lead to more polarization and political conflicts. In fact, the integrity of the study hinges upon my ability to subject each political side to critical scrutiny.

Thirdly, given the central role of race in the news coverage, it is important to not blithely reproduce racialized depictions of people who participated in the protests or who have been impacted by police brutality. The reification of race is not something that should be taken lightly especially in the context of the US with its tragic history of racial essentialism.

4.9. Sampling

The unit of analysis in this study is news coverage which is represented by a selection of sampled news articles. Before I began sampling the relevant articles, I had to decide which news outlets would most likely exhibit politically polarized coverage of the BLM protests. The criterion I used to make that determination was taken directly from the Pew Research Center's (Grieco, 2020) study on Americans' political news consumption. According to this study, Fox News (16%) and CNN (12%) were found to be the news outlets which the largest segments of the American public named as their preferred source of political news. Since these two news outlets also showed large differences in how their respective audiences identified politically, they met my criterion: 93 % of Fox News' audience identified as Republican, while 79% of CNN's audience identified as Democrats.

Out of left-leaning news outlets, however, both MSNBC (95% Democrats) and the New York Times (91% Democrats) showed greater partisanship in terms of audience identification than CNN. Since MSNBC does not offer users the ability to search for articles by date, I decided to include the New York Times⁹, which does offer that function alongside Fox News and CNN. By having two liberal

⁹ Full disclosure: I have been a subscriber to the New York Times for years, while I have only consumed content from CNN or Fox News intermittently.

news outlets, I can contrast them with one another, which allows for interesting nuances to be discovered between liberal perspectives. It can also strengthen the argument for political bias in the news coverage if there is much overlap between them. Unfortunately, Fox News has no major conservative news competitor with which it can be contrasted.

The next step in the sampling process was to set the temporal scope. I decided on the 25th of May, the date of George Floyd's death, as the starting point and ending with the 30th of June 2020. Since the protests erupted sporadically across the country, I decided to focus on news coverage of the protests in general rather than any specific protest event. Many references to BLM in the news coverage were also general in nature and did not make it clear to which protest event allusions were made. Thus, I decided to cast the proverbial net wide as the sampling proceeded. While the time span covered a wide variety of protest events, the only two search terms were conceived to do the same: (a) "Floyd" and (b) "Black Lives Matter".

The culled articles were subsequently screened for their relevance to the main categories in the coding frame. That is, articles were excluded if they contained no references to protesters' actions, motivations, or the legal issue of racially biased policing. By way of further delimitation, I also excluded articles which contained references to the protests, but which were labeled as lifestyle, entertainment, or culture news rather than traditional news. Similarly, articles about BLM protests outside of the US were not included. Finally, I only assessed articles on their textual rather than visual frames (i.e., images and videos) as those would have stretched the analysis to the brim of what would be feasible for a study of this scope.

Of the sampled articles which met my criteria, 197 were from Fox News, 169 were from CNN, and 246 were from the New York Times. Out of these, I subsequently reduced the number to a more manageable 60 per news outlet as a

way of meeting time constraints. Half of them were categorized as traditional news articles (or “news analyses”) and the other half as opinion articles. The criterion for those categories was taken directly from the news articles themselves which clearly indicated which was which. Up until this point, the sampling had followed a non-random strategy, however, to expedite the process, the 30 articles which were selected for each category were drawn randomly by using a random number generator. They were finally screened a final time for their relevance before the coding commenced.

In total, 180 articles were coded. The results of which, I will cover next.

5. Results

The results of the coding will be presented in three separate stages: Deductive main- and subcategories (5.1); Inductive subcategories (5.2); and finally, Composites (5.3). The chapter that follows will subsequently discuss the results (6). Across all 180 articles, 1259 frames were coded (Table 1). The coding illustrates the importance of qualitative research, as many of the codes could not be readily unearthed through a standard quantitative study but only through a rigorous qualitative analysis. More on this, below.

Table 1. Frame distribution

News Outlets	Fox News	CNN	The New York Times
Main categories			
Actions of protesters	155	79	170
Motives of protesters	135	162	214
Racial bias in policing	40	167	137
Total	330	408	521

5.1. Deductive main- and subcategories

The polarization of the news coverage is unmistakable. Fox News stands out by more consistently employing frames that disfavor the protests, while both CNN and the New York Times were even more consistent in their use of frames that favored them. The only main category where there was a significant degree of overlap between the three news outlets was in their coverage of the actions of protesters (Table 2). What is interesting is that this pattern pertains exclusively to news articles. While there was overlap, Fox News (76%) was more likely than both CNN (41%) and the New York Times (56%) to frame the protests as disruptive. Turning to opinion articles, the overlap evaporates completely. Here, more than 90% of all frames for all three news outlets followed the predicted pattern of polarization.

Table 2. Framing the actions of protesters (%)

News Outlets	Fox News	CNN	The New York Times
News articles			
Disruptive	76	41	56
Peaceful	24	59	44
Opinion articles			
Disruptive	93	0	2.5
Peaceful	7	100	97.5

The polarization continues with the motives of the protesters (Table 3). The news outlet that offered the greatest number of conflicting frames was Fox News. While its coverage of the protests remained firmly on the side of delegitimization, it was

less pronounced compared to the previous framing category. As a result, in this category there was a greater proportion of frames for both news articles (42.5%) and opinion articles (22%) which made validating references to the motives of protesters. The liberal news outlets, on the other hand, were uniformly backing the protesters. In fact, the overlap between the two news outlets was practically absolute. The only difference was a meager 5% of news article frames at CNN which invalidated the motives of the protesters. Remarkably, I could not find a single frame in the New York Times coverage which did the same.

Table 3. Framing the motives of protesters (%)

News Outlets	Fox News	CNN	The New York Times
News articles			
Invalid	57.5	5	0
Valid	42.5	95	100
Opinion articles			
Invalid	78	0	0
Valid	22	100	100

The framing of racial bias in policing (Table 4) adds yet another dimension to the polarized news coverage. The pattern that was set by the preceding categories can be traced to the third one as well. Fox News remains the news outlet with the greatest number of conflicting frames, but it continues to disfavor the protesters by giving a different diagnosis of America’s problems with policing. A solid majority of frames in the news articles (75%) and opinion articles (62.5%) at Fox News diminished the significance of the protester’s main cause. Unsurprisingly, the liberal news outlets were resoundingly univocal when they framed the same issue. Excluding 3-4 % of news article frames, policing was consistently framed as an institution afflicted by a serious degree of racial bias.

Table 4. Framing racial bias in policing (%)

News Outlets	Fox News	CNN	The New York Times
News articles			
Less serious/nonurgent	75	3	4
Serious/urgent	25	97	96
Opinion articles			
Less serious/nonurgent	62.5	0	0
Serious/urgent	37.5	100	100

5.2. Inductive subcategories

The presentation of the inductively generated subcodes will proceed in two steps. First, a table for each news outlet will present (a) the name + relative share (%), (b) a short description, and (c) an example of the most common subcategories. Second, I will use Entman’s (1993) framing functions as a tool to construct composites of several subcategories. These will be compiled when a functional overlap between them has been identified. Beyond merely providing a concise way of covering multiple subcategories, a composite may better represent meanings that are constructed in the mind of an average news consumer. This is because a person may be exposed to multiple frames by reading a single news article or by reading multiple news articles. These meanings could potentially complement each other in a way which results in a composite frame to be constructed.

In the tables below, some cells can be understood without being contextualized, while others demand further elucidation. Note, for example, the disproportionate use of the frame “Violence, looting and rioting” (Table 6) in the news coverage of

Fox News. As already mentioned, Fox News was more likely to use the “Disruptive” frame in their coverage compared to CNN and the New York Times, and here it is possible to see that they were also more likely to use the most censorious subframe of all three news outlets. An astounding 92% of all subframes in the “Disruptive” category depicted the protesters at their most violent and destructive. CNN (Table 7) and the New York Times (Table 8) were, on the other hand, more likely to use subframes which depicted the protesters clashing with police, without adopting the same censorious tone.

Table 6. Fox News

Actions of protesters	Name (%)	Description	Example
Disruptive	Violence, looting and rioting (92)	A way of accentuating the most destructive elements of the protests by portraying protesters as dangerous moral reprobates who commit serious crimes.	”The demonstrations quickly escalated to outright violence and looting. For several days after, city residents woke up to fires still burning from the violent protests.”
Peaceful	Explicit peacefulness (88)	Explicit references to the protesters as “peaceful” or descriptions of their activities from which the reader can infer the same.	”As large-scale peaceful rallies have marched through city streets mostly unhindered”
Motives of protesters			
Invalid	Guilty by association with the left (31)	A way of linking objectionable components of the protests with left-wing politicians, public commentators, or the Democratic Party itself.	”Blue states pride themselves for their liberal governors, big-city mayors, police chiefs and state attorneys general. But progressive urban bastions like Los Angeles, New York, Minneapolis and Philadelphia are also the ground zero sites of arson, violence and looting, where racial relations are the worst.”
Valid	The tragedy of Floyd	A way of showing	”All Americans have

	(48)	sympathy toward the protesters who found the killing of George Floyd deeply upsetting.	been shocked by the death of George Floyd while in police custody. This sickening act has set off more than a week of unrest.”
Racial bias in policing			
Less serious/nonurgent	A negation of racism (58)	A way of dismissing the imputation of racial discrimination as a regular component of public life in America.	”If America is so insufferably racist, how is it that Lester Holt anchors “The NBC Nightly News?” How does Don Lemon host a CNN program every evening? Why are so many black musicians, actors, and athletes worshipped, rather than reviled, by white fans? How do millions of other non-famous blacks succeed in so many walks of life — quietly but concretely?”
Serious/urgent	Racism in America (50)	A variety of assertions regarding the burden of racism in America.	”Will we as a nation finally do the work needed to achieve true and lasting racial equality? Or will we choose the status quo and fail to make the changes needed to eliminate the cancer of racism that has plagued America since Africans were first brought to the colonies in chains 400 years ago?”

Another notable feature of the coverage is the subframe “Guilty by association with the left”, since it shows how the protests were viewed through a partisan lens by Fox News. This is an indirect frame which sees conservative writers level criticism at their political opponents by linking them with the disruptive elements of the protests. In this way, conservative audiences come to associate the

protesters with the political left and thereby learn to distrust them the way they would their political opponents. Moving one cell below to the “Tragedy of Floyd” frame, what is especially interesting about this frame is not what is said but what is left unsaid. Compared to CNN and the New York Times, Fox News was much less likely to depict the protesters’ motivations as a function of a much broader problem with police brutality against blacks. By emphasizing the brutality of Floyd’s killing, readers are liable to form an impression of the protesters as principally reacting to the tragedy of an isolated incident rather than a broader pattern.

In Table 7, there are two subframes that need to be contextualized further. The first is “Trump’s response to the protests”: another example of how the protests became a partisan issue. Journalists at CNN use this frame not only as an opportunity to denounce a Republican president but also to validate the motives of the protesters. This can be done in a literal sense, as in the example below, or it can be done by implication. If one responds with aversion to the protesters, and is criticized for that, it implies that they deserve more sympathetic feedback. It also implies that the conflict between the protesters and the president is based on opposing worldviews, which is another way of tethering them to one camp in the polarized political climate they are in. This frame was also popular at the New York Times with 27%, which made it the second-most common.

Table 7. CNN

Actions of protesters	Name (%)	Description	Example
Disruptive	Clashes with police (52)	Descriptions of altercations between protesters and police officers.	“Protesters and police clashed in Brooklyn and several were taken into custody. At least one police officer was injured.”
Peaceful	Explicit peacefulness (47)	Explicit references to the protesters as “peaceful” or descriptions of their activities from which	“There were large groups of protesters in downtown Tulsa near the site of the rally, police said, but they

		the reader can infer that they are peaceful.	were demonstrating peacefully.”
Motives of protesters			
Invalid	Defund the police (100)	Various ways of communicating critique of protesters who advocate for the proposal to “defund the police”.	“Yet most Democrats at the national level, including former Vice President Joe Biden have said they do not support defunding the police.”
Valid	Trump’s response to the protests (32)	Trump’s public statements (e.g., Tweets) and executive decisions, as they relate to the protests, are treated as unduly unsympathetic or unbecoming.	“Trump talked of ‘law and order,’ a phrase designed to attract a political base that might feel threatened by the valid grievances of a multicultural coalition of marchers for whom taking to the streets has become their only recourse.”
Racial bias in policing			
Less serious/nonurgent	-----	-----	-----
Serious/urgent	Systemic racism (25)	Different ways of suggesting that policing, the criminal justice system, or America are permeated by “systemic racism”	“Whatever it was, it led to a collective realization that spread around the country and around the globe that America has a systemic racism problem. We have been carrying it around since our country was born. It is killing us -- some of us, literally.”

In the last cell, the frame “Systemic racism” needs clarification. Earlier in the paper, I presented a theoretical account of that concept. Most likely, it is from these academic sources it has migrated into the public discourse. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say with certainty since it is rarely clearly defined. As in the example, most often it is asserted with unwavering confidence, as though it is self-evident. Other times, it simply means “something” that produces racial disparities, and which is rooted in racism. Exactly what that “something” is or

how we know its relationship to racism, for some reason, is rarely clarified. In practice, what the frame does is to portray racism as endemic to American institutions, if not as an amorphous essence, then as a metaphysical specter looming menacingly above them. The imprecision of the concept democratizes its usage. Everyone, whether they have or have not acquired any deeper insight about the effect of racism on modern institutions, is free to assert its existence with equal amounts of confidence.

The most common frames in the coverage at the New York Times (Table 8) all need clarification, except one, “Clashes with police”, as it is self-explanatory. The one a cell below, “Excessive force by police”, however is different. This is another indirect framing device. This is used to depict the protesters as peaceful through a negation. By depicting the police as the ones who are violent or overly aggressive, the protesters come across as peaceful by contrast. Indirectly, it also validates that protesters’ motives, if there was not a problem with police brutality then, surely, the police would treat all protesters with due care and consideration. Another sign that the journalists at the New York Times took the side of the protesters is the “Protesters’ POV” frame. This frame humanizes or personalizes the coverage of the protests by printing direct quotes from individual protesters or by documenting the reasons they give for participating in the protests. This frame was notably absent from the coverage at Fox News.

The last frame, “Other incidents”, is indicative of a trend that can be discerned in all three news outlets: a paucity of scientific references. The New York Times did not include a single reference to a study on police shootings or police brutality in any of the coded articles. Instead, there were 55 references to other incidents of police brutality in which the police officer was white and the victim black. The potency of this frame is directly correlated with the frequency of its deployment. The more often it is used, the more likely the reader is to believe that such incidents are more common than the available data would suggest, i.e., because of availability bias. This is especially the case when the reader has no prior

knowledge of base rates or other relevant statistical background information. Fox News and CNN were not much better in this regard. Although they both included some references, these studies were touched upon very lightly and were only found in one article from each respective news outlet.

Table 8. NYT

Actions of protesters	Name (%)	Description	Example
Disruptive	Clashes with police (46.5)	Descriptions of altercations between protesters and police officers.	"A demonstration turned destructive in Atlanta on Friday night, as hundreds of protesters took to the streets, smashing windows and clashing with the police."
Peaceful	Excessive force by police (58)	Police treatment of protesters is described as out of step in relation to protest behavior, i.e., excessively forceful.	"In the past several days, New York Times journalists covering the protests have seen officers repeatedly charge at demonstrators after curfew with seemingly little provocation, shoving them onto sidewalks, striking them with batons and using other aggressive tactics."
Motives of protesters			
Invalid	-----	-----	-----
Valid	Protesters' POV (29.5)	Interviews with, quotes from, or brief profiles of specific protesters or people who support the protests	"I'm not here to fight someone," said Eldon Gillet, 40, who was on the streets in Brooklyn. "I'm here to fight a system."
Racial bias in policing			
Less serious/nonurgent	-----	-----	-----
Serious/urgent	Other incidents (40)	References to other incidents of police brutality involving a white police officer	"There were times I was upset, like when I watched those cops beat Rodney King on

		and a black victim	the side of the road in 1991, but I forced myself not to remain angry or to allow it to define me or overwhelm my thoughts.”
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5.3. Composites

Since frames can be conceived as meaning-making devices which organize our experience for us (Goffman, 1974), and since research has shown that humans favor organizational consonance (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 1999), it can be meaningful to document the affinitive bonds between frames to demonstrate how they complement each other. One way to do this is to construct a composite of different frames which in unison register a more comprehensive set of meanings. I will construct my composites by linking them to Entman’s (1993) four framing functions. Each composite will be given a brief, summative description with some frames appearing in more than one composite, as they have more than one function. These composites are not meant to be exhaustive or encompass all the frames which have been coded. Instead, they are best understood as examples of the most popular frames from each news outlet. Composites from CNN and NYT will be conjoined, while Fox News will be treated separately.

5.3.1. Fox News

1. Define problems

Frames: Violence, looting, and rioting; Attacking monuments; Guilty by association with the left; Harm to blacks; Unreasonable; Miscellaneous; Defund the police

Composite: The problem lies fundamentally with the protesters themselves. They are violent and destructive, they are unreasonable in their demands, especially their desire to “defund the police”, because of their liberal biases and they are ultimately more likely to harm blacks than help them.

2. Diagnose causes

Frames: Violence, looting, and rioting; Guilty by association with the left; Unreasonable; Miscellaneous; Tragedy of Floyd; Not systemic racism

Composite: The causes are related to radical left-wing ideologies which legitimize self-serving opportunistic crime and an unpatriotic cynicism about the US.

Protesters are also misled by liberal narratives which falsely condemn the institution of policing for isolated incidents of police brutality against blacks.

Indeed, the protesters fail to understand how much progress has been made on questions pertaining to race in the US.

3. Make moral judgments

Frames: Violence, looting, and rioting; Attacking monuments; Guilty by association with the left; Harm to blacks; Unreasonable; Miscellaneous; Defund the police

Composite: It is a tragedy that looters and rioters are given free rein to destroy cities across the country, that Democrats and others associated with the left defend and even celebrate the social upheaval taking place, that the brave men and women in the police who defend public order are being defamed, and that not more is done to quell the disruptive behaviors of the protesters and defend individual property rights.

4. Suggest remedies

Frames: Guilty by association with the left; Harm to blacks; Unreasonable; Miscellaneous; Defund the police; Qualified immunity

Composite: Most importantly, the solution is not to “defund the police”. While reforms of policing, such as reviewing the possibility of discontinuing “qualified immunity”, could come a long way to placate some of the protesters, it is likely that this will not be sufficient, since most of them are not reasonable political actors.

5.3.2 CNN and NYT

1. Define problems

Frames: Excessive force by police; Combat racial bias in policing; Racial reckoning; Catharsis; Racism in America; Systemic racism; Other incidents; Black lived experience; Fault or responsibility of whites; Historical analogies or anecdotes

Composite: The problem is fundamentally one of racial injustice. America has failed to redress the sins of her past, and there is no better evidence of that than the treatment of blacks by the police. Racial discrimination by the police is clearly pervasive, and as countless incidents of police brutality have shown, Floyd's tragic death is only the tip of the iceberg. This is the reason why people are protesting. They understand that police brutality is a serious and substantive issue that principally impacts people who are black.

2. Diagnose causes

Frames: Excessive force by police; Combat racial bias in policing; Racial reckoning; Catharsis; Racism in America; Systemic racism; Other incidents; Black lived experience; Fault or responsibility of whites; Historical analogies or anecdotes

Composite: The legacy of slavery is the ultimate causal mechanism. It is not merely that white police officers may harbor prejudices against blacks, it is that the whole system of policing has been corrupted over generations by racism. There is no need for us to explain how that has come to be, because it is self-evident. What else would explain these incidents of police brutality against blacks? What else would explain the disparate impact of policing?

3. Make moral judgments

Frames: Peaceful; Excessive force by police; Combat racial bias in policing; Racial reckoning; Catharsis; Racism in America; Systemic racism; Other incidents; Black lived experience; Fault or responsibility of whites; Historical analogies or anecdotes

Composite: For too long have we remained complacent about racism in America. We have finally reached an inflection point, where all the pent-up feelings of righteous indignation felt by so many generations of black victims of racism, something whites, too long blinded by their own privilege, will have to come to terms with, can be unleashed upon the world in a truly cathartic cry for justice.

This is a struggle between those of us who are siding with these victims of racism and those who are not.

4. Suggest remedies

Frames: Miscellaneous

Composite: We may not have a coherent set of solutions to address the disparate impact of policing, but we understand the necessity of reforming policing radically. We are open to many potential reforms from specific issues such as discontinuing qualified immunity all the way to the complete abolition of the police.

6. Discussion

The demonstrable polarization in my coding frame illustrates that my interpretations supported the hypothesis: the conservative news coverage largely conformed to the protest paradigm, while the liberal coverage largely diverged from it. In this chapter, I will discuss the implications of this polarization from the perspective of legal culture. This will be done by first attending to differences in descriptive meanings about racially biased policing (6.1) and subsequently differences in normative meanings which are conceived as the impetus behind the former (6.2). In conjunction, the polarization in descriptive and normative meanings disseminated in the news coverage is conceptualized as a feature of an American legal culture.

6.1. Racially biased policing

The disjuncture between liberal and conservative news coverage begins with their uneven weighing of the significance of race. The coding of the liberal news coverage resulted in the general impression that the differential treatment of blacks is an inveterate symptom of modern policing. On this view, blacks have become inured to the caprice of prejudiced police officers who act with impunity, while a system of laws and institutions which are beholden to America's racist

past continually disfavors them relative to whites. The harm that befalls blacks as a result means that they tempt fate every time they choose to interact with the police. In effect, the concatenation of frames which approved the actions of protesters, empathized with their motivations, and treated racism as a significant variable, composes a narrative which leaves one with the impression that police brutality is decidedly racialized: to be victimized at the hands of the police is an experience peculiar to blacks.

Overall, references to the prejudicial and systemic types of racial bias abound in the coverage which is loath to recognize any other variables. Of course, the rational basis for the position that police brutality can be reduced to a function of racial discrimination, whether institutional or interpersonal, is tenuous since published research has not found conclusive evidence of racial bias in policing (see, 2.3). The centrality of race is therefore anything but a foregone conclusion. Absent scientific references, liberal commentators impress the significance of race upon the reader by discounting confounding variables such as age, class, gender, geography, or differential crime rates, among others. This form of “race reductionism” (Reed, 2020) may leave liberals ill-equipped to effectively attend to the causes of racial disparities in police impact.

The conservative news coverage settles into a similarly unproductive default position. The difference here is that the dominant frames circulated by the conservative news outlet diminished the significance of race. This alternative “deracialization” of police brutality was executed through frames that downplayed the role of racism in the “systemic” sense, sowed doubts about the motivations and the integrity of the protesters, treated incidents of police brutality against blacks as outliers perpetrated by a small number of racially biased (prejudicial) police officers, or in the subtle albeit no less significant trend to steer clear of the subject of racism altogether (see, e.g., Table 1). While there is a legitimate reason to be skeptical of the univariate racialization of police brutality found in the liberal coverage, the issue of racially biased policing is sufficiently complex (as I

have made a concerted effort to demonstrate) to warrant more than a casual dismissal. Indeed, several studies have found possible indicators of racial bias (see, 2.3) which clearly validate the concerns of people in the public who take this matter seriously.

The conservative news consumer is therefore not presented with as many frames which directly confront the legacy of slavery. Although the liberal coverage of that legacy tended toward the perfunctory more than the incisive, failing to contend with the issue altogether does little to ameliorate the historical grievances which have been left in its wake. Racism can have long-term consequences which can be difficult to tease out but nonetheless critical to understand the persistence of racial disparities, in policing or elsewhere. While it is not obvious that concepts promulgated by liberals, such as “systemic racism”, are the most suitable to advance our understanding, they do at least constitute attempts to make sense of these complex questions which is the only path toward solving them.

The willful neglect of published research on police brutality constitutes a serious impediment to bipartisan reforms of policing. Stranded on opposite sides, liberals and conservatives forgo an apolitical interrogation of the available research and data which could have bridged the gap between them by offering a rational foundation for reconciliation. The complete omission of references to the rationalist type of racial bias in any of the coded news articles is a perfect example. This type of racial bias implies that deeply entrenched inequalities between blacks and whites may feed racial biases. If black people are more likely to live in areas high in poverty and crime, negative assumptions about people living in those areas may persist because they are correlated with objective features of social reality. This has little to do with “systems” of policing or prejudices which have been inherited from the past.

Police reform may therefore be futile if the source of racial biases is located outside of how police departments are organized or in the racist prejudices of

police officers. Addressing entrenched racial inequalities could thus have been a hypothetical opportunity for bipartisanship which in this case was thoroughly thwarted.

6.2. Moralization

A major revelation of this study is that liberal and conservative news outlets frame the Black Lives Matter protests in a way which results in the construction of different meanings about racially biased policing. I will argue that the coding reveals more than the existence of this discrepancy. It also contains information from which the impetus behind the conflicting coverage strategies can be inferred. My argument is that rather than being based on a rational and solution-oriented model, these different types of news coverage flatter the political sensibilities of their respective audiences through a set of moralized frames. In other words, different moral priorities of liberals and conservatives dictated the terms of much of the coverage.

These moral priorities are corroborated by Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Graham et al., 2013; Haidt, 2012). The theory posits that five pairs of moral intuitions or “foundations” inhere as evolved features of human psychology and prearrange our perceptions of right/wrong in “advance of experience”: the ancestral evolutionary environment has honed cognitive structures of moral import in the human mind to adaptively respond to challenges of survival and reproduction. These have evolved to be sensitive to certain stimuli in the environment through effortless, unconscious intuitive responses while also being amenable to social learning in different cultural groups. The theory is thus based on an interactionist account of culture-psychology: moral pluralism is a function of these underlying cognitive structures responding to and interacting with variable sociocultural contexts. The five moral foundations are the following:

(1) *harm/care* (virtues: compassion or sympathy for the suffering of others)

(2) *fairness/reciprocity* (virtues: equality and fair treatment in reciprocal relationships)

(3) *authority/respect* (virtues: deference to legitimate authority and social hierarchies)

(4) *purity/sanctity* (virtues: to act in compliance with sacred values)

(5) *ingroup/loyalty* (virtues: patriotism and the defense one's ingroup)

Graham and Haidt (2007) showed that liberals were more likely to adhere to the first two moral foundations, and although conservatives adhered moderately to those as well, they exhibited a greater commitment to the remaining three than liberals. Since moral judgments are almost always made in social contexts in which demands for justifications are made, moral reasoning serves strategic social purposes. These may have more to do with what is perceived to be socially expedient to the individual reasoner and less to do with a desire to approximate what is true through dispassionate deliberation (Graham et al., 2013, pp. 65-67). In this sense, what passes for a “neutral” claim about protesters’ actions and motivations may in effect be rationalizations of moral evaluations.

6.3. Liberal news coverage

The moral priorities of liberals – care/harm and fairness/reciprocity – make them especially concerned about the unfair treatment of marginalized groups in society (Haidt and Graham, 2007). Because of the American context with its history of racial subjugation exemplified by the imposition of slavery, Jim Crow, and the pervasiveness of racial stigma, the dual moral intuitions of liberals may have become specifically attuned to the suffering of people of color: to the liberal mind, to be a virtuous person is to deliver blacks from the onerous perils of racism. This is where the issue of Black Lives Matter becomes relevant since it presents itself as a perfect opportunity for liberal news outlets to signal to their audience that they have taken it upon themselves to bring a vulnerable minority under their auspices.

Since public denunciations of racism are effortless and understanding the causes of racial disparities in police impact is not, a social incentive to see racism even in ambiguous or uncertain situations can arise. This is an incentive to dissociate from racism without putting in the requisite effort to understand it rationally. My argument is that much of the liberal coverage offered merely a cursory glance at the (potential) role performed by racism in policing despite journalists' assiduous attempts at stamping it out. At its most extreme, the zeal of the coverage was tantamount to a "moral panic" (Cricher, 2003) in which the desire to display one's anti-racist credentials superseded rigorous debates about the precise extent of racially biased policing.

There are several indicators of this phenomenon which make it easier to understand why the protest paradigm was rarely applicable to the liberal coverage. These illustrate how problems were defined and causes understood to meaningfully be conceived as extensions of moral judgments which largely benefitted the protesters.

A) *Racism is treated as an all-explanatory variable*: All cases of police brutality against blacks are assumed a priori to be a product of racial bias (e.g., think of the consistent references to "other incidents") or all racial disparities in police impact are ultimately caused by racism (e.g., how "systemic racism" is treated as self-evident).

NYT: At present, most policing in America reflects the attitudes embedded in the vast majority of government policies. Health, education, housing and food policies all reflect racist assumptions that African-Americans are the real problem, rather than systematic exclusion, discrimination and oppression.

CNN: So when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a black man's neck until he dies, that's the logical result of policing in America. When a police officer brutalizes a black person, he is doing what he sees as his job.

The examples above are indicative of a pattern in which claims of racist policing are made but never substantiated with any evidence. Instead of pointing to published research on police brutality, historical analogies or anecdotes were often invoked. These were used to meaningfully connect past racism with present claims of racism but often without clarifying exactly how there is a connection. As in the example below: what is the relationship between modern policing and police working as de facto slave patrols in the past? Since this is not clarified, the historical reference assumes the same function as the preceding examples: it enables the writer to denounce racism but little more than that.

NYT: There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700 and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo.

B) *Moral dichotomy*: Another function of the overwhelming emphasis on racism is to pit the protesters against it. As a result, a moral dichotomy (protesters v. racism) is constructed which makes any criticism of the protests seem misguided at best and callous at worst. The examples below show the rigidity of this binary way of thinking.

NYT: People are in the streets because their backs have too long borne the weight of racism, or because for too long they have averted their eyes from it.

CNN: Most of these events were unimaginable just one month ago. These monumental achievements are the results of an ongoing uprising of millions of people against a racist status quo in this country and around the world.

C) *Racialization of black victimhood*: Blacks are consigned to that of a passive and non-agentic victim role which precludes both active choices of black people themselves, such as the crime rate in the black community, and variables which

transcend race, such as class. They are also treated as internally invariable: all black people are equally likely to be impacted by police brutality. This tendency fosters a more cohesive sense of black victimization with the side effect of an oversimplified rendering of the issue of police brutality. The examples here are meant to illustrate the way “black people” were often referred to as an undifferentiated mass as well as treated as though they have little to no agency.

NYT: As the case of George Floyd makes clear, calling 911 for even the slightest thing can be a death sentence for black people. For many marginalized communities, 911 is not a viable option because the police often make crises worse. These same communities, who often need emergency services the most, are forced to make do without the help.

CNN: I hope this moment is a real wake-up call for white people, for our allies. And that they stay awake. Because that's where the only real change can come from. There's just not much more we - - black and brown people -- can do except try not to get shot each day. And hope...

D) *Partisan dichotomy*: Partisan frames which portray Trump and his Republican allies as antagonists to the protesters (e.g., “Trump’s response to the protesters”) accord the ends of the BLM movement a liberal validation: the moral dichotomy enables liberals to characterize the political opposition as racist while embracing the protesters at the same time. The following examples show the association that is drawn between conservatives and racism.

NYT: Republicans have, as I said, spent decades exploiting racial hostility to win elections despite a policy agenda that hurts workers. But Trump is now pushing that cynical strategy toward a kind of apotheosis. On one side, he’s effectively inciting violence by his supporters. On the other, he’s very close to calling for a military response to social protest. And at this point, nobody expects any significant pushback from other Republicans.

CNN: White fear is today exactly what Trump is hoping to turn to his political advantage. The combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting mass unemployment and the growing call for racial justice have, once again, further unleashed Janus-faced political forces rooted in America's original sin.

E) *Legal incoherence*: If indeed the repeated references to racism in the liberal coverage functioned mainly as descriptive claims about the central problem with modern policing, it would be fair to assume a similar level of conformity in the legal solutions proposed to address that problem. In fact, this is not the case at all. I counted as many as 44 different proposed legal solutions, some of which are radically different from one another or simply mutually exclusive. Interestingly, most of them, such as banning chokeholds or no-knock warrants, the creation of a register that tracks police misconduct, or ending qualified immunity, do not directly seek to address racial bias, although they may indirectly benefit blacks disproportionately.

The huge variety of legal proposals belie the consistent references to racism in the coverage, indicating a normative and descriptive disequilibrium: consistent liberal denunciations of racism conceal descriptive inconsistencies which are left unresolved.

6.4. Conservative news coverage

It would be easy to ascribe ignoble motivations to conservative journalists who excoriated the throngs of people who participated in the BLM protests. Banks (2018) has even suggested that such coverage is itself a function of racial bias. I am skeptical of that argument since it does not explain the prevalence of frames which showed support of George Floyd. In fact, those frames can best be conceptualized as functions of the moral foundations of care/harm and fairness/reciprocity, as in the examples below.

FOX: No question George Floyd's death drove people into the streets. And there needs to be an honest discussion of the lessons learned from this terrible tragedy.

The horrific May 25 killing by a white Minneapolis police officer of George Floyd, a black man in handcuffs who was not resisting arrest, has shocked the world and left America at a crossroads.

My argument is that a broader range of moral priorities of conservatives conflicted with the more focused moral priorities of liberals. Thus, polarized news coverage can be conceived as sophisticated ways of justifying different moral evaluations of the BLM protests. This would explain why there was some degree of support for BLM to be found in the conservative coverage. That support, however, was largely outweighed by more critical frames which therefore tilted the coverage toward the protest paradigm. The critical coverage, I argue, is a function of the following three moral priorities of conservatives.

A) *Disrespect for legitimate authorities*: The moral foundation of authority/respect demands obedience to time-honored traditions, institutions, or authorities which maintain order and stability in society (Haidt and Graham, 2007, p. 105). When millions of people are assailing established institutions of the law, those who feel a greater affinity for the status quo will naturally militate against the more radical elements of such social movements. The emphasis on the disruptive behaviors of protesters or their more radical legal proposals, such as defunding the police, may have been motivated by conservatives who felt that the protesters were conspiring against legitimate authorities with ramifications for social stability.

FOX: Some of the groups protesting to achieve racial justice have gained frightening traction pushing the idea that slashing police budgets nationwide would help create safer communities and more peaceful interactions between blacks and whites. This is utter nonsense.

In New York, 48 separate Democratic candidates -- and they were including in that the Manhattan district attorney -- signed a letter demanding a \$1 billion cut to the budget of the NYPD. Why are they doing this? There are reasons, not the ones they tell you. They tell you it's about racism. They tell you that cops are racist and must be reined in. Most Americans don't agree with that. That's not the experience they have. In fact, police departments are one of the most trusted institutions in the country.

Naturally, it would follow that the frames which directly addressed potential legal reforms would observe the same normative standpoint. This logic turns out to be

corroborated by the coding as a total of 69% of these frames criticized the proposal to “defund the police”. While some protesters did indeed issue that proposal, the liberal coverage revealed a much broader and less radical selection of proposed reforms. If indeed the coverage was entirely based on an open and fair depiction of the protests in the most comprehensive manner, it would not follow that one of the most radical legal proposals would be emphasized to such an extent.

Thus, the overwhelming emphasis on these elements of the protests can give the conservative news consumer the false impression that the protesters are much more radical than they in fact are.

B) *Violations of sacred values*: Another moral foundation – purity/sanctity – further reinforces the need to censure protesters in the news coverage. This foundation acts as a social glue that connects people in moral communities together by establishing a set of inviolable sacred values to which everyone is supposed to submit (Haidt, 2012, pp. 170-177). If someone in a community violates any of those values, those who prioritize this moral foundation may be particularly inclined to censure such a person. If protesters are perceived to violate sacred values of conservatives, it is likely that they will be met with much hostility. Values such as “don’t steal” or “don’t destroy other people’s property” along with “don’t debase yourself by acting on your lowest impulse” could in theory be sacralized by conservatives.

FOX: Locals attacked an elderly lady in a wheelchair and sprayed her with a fire extinguisher. That’s not activism. That’s bedlam.

Whatever sympathy people may have felt for Black Lives Matter or greater police accountability collapsed when hoodlums looted HDTVs, sneakers and other merchandise. Stunning images of thieves hammering open cash registers at a picked-clean Target store did not engender empathy for George Floyd or justice for his survivors.

As in the examples, people who assault elderly women in wheelchairs or commit

opportunistic crime by looting stores are likely candidates for violations of sacred values. In effect, the excess of frames of this kind which adopted an unfavorable outlook on the protests crowded out frames which could have offered greater insight into the motivations of the protesters, such as the “Protesters’ POV” frame frequently found in the liberal coverage.

C) *Anti-racist patriotism*: The final moral foundation – ingroup/loyalty – instills a sense of duty to subordinate oneself to the preservation of the ingroup (Haidt and Graham, 2007, p. 105). This is critical since the act of participating in the BLM protests is not merely a way of showing solidarity with victims of police brutality, it is also a way of depicting racism as a defining feature of the country: when millions of people decide to weather the risks of an ongoing pandemic to protest police brutality against black Americans, it would suggest that racism is a serious social ill which demands immediate attention. This national narrative can also be detected in the liberal news coverage, as in the following examples.

NYT: Senator Mitch McConnell correctly stated, “We are still wrestling with America’s original sin.” But the problem of systemic racism in this country is much larger than the stain created by our enslavement of another race, which ended 155 years ago. The persistence of racism stems from the myths and fantasies that were invented by our slaveowning society to justify its existence, which became so ingrained that they still fester in the American psyche.

CNN: What they, and others, see in George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, reminds them of the systemic racism in their own communities -- where Confederate monuments, some placed there more than a century ago, continue to "speak" of white supremacy and injustice.

On the one hand, if conservatives have a penchant for ingroup loyalty, and on the other hand have acquired a distaste for racism, they may have a good reason to pass judgement on the protesters. From their point of view, the act of opposing the protests helps them safeguard their national self-image from the stain of racism. In other words, if someone has been deemed to smear the character of the US, some conservatives may view that as a sign of disloyalty. As an example, see the quote

below of a conservative writer censuring the former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney for his support of BLM.

“Mitt just wants to make sure that Americans understand, get through their thick heads, that black lives matter, as if Americans didn't know that. But accusing your entire country of racism turns out to be a pretty small price for someone like Mitt Romney.”

Another way ingroup loyalty can be expressed in this regard is to jettison the protest narrative for one that is highly flattering of the US. Of course, there is a risk that a narrative of that kind becomes a purveyor of overly romanticized or sanitized imagery: see example, below.

”Tell the truth -- and the truth is, this is a good country. Better than any other. Of course, we are flawed, but we are trying, unlike most places. And we have nothing to be ashamed of -none of us. Immigrants know that best of all. That's why they come here -- a million new Americans every year. They're not coming because America is a racist country. They're coming because it's not.”

An opposition to racism linked with a patriotic sense of ingroup loyalty can thus lead to the kind of censorious coverage of BLM which was palpable in the coding frame above. Political partisanship adds another pertinent ingredient to the coverage. Conservatives now also have an opportunity to characterize their political opponents as disloyal to the ingroup: the virtue of being a patriotic American is the preserve of conservatives.

7. Conclusion

As presented in the introduction, this study has both a general and a discrete purpose which are meant to (a) contribute to a better understanding of how a legal culture can be shaped by the news coverage of a social movement, and (b) contribute to a better understanding of how the legal issue of racially biased policing was framed in the news coverage of BLM. To reiterate, the research question is: *How does news coverage of the 2020 BLM protests frame the social*

movement and its cause to address racially biased policing? To answer this question, I have coded 180 news articles about the 2020 BLM protests from Fox News, CNN, and the New York Times. I approached the analysis of the news coverage as a qualitative matter by adopting QCA as my method.

The results of my analysis provide answers to the research question in the following ways:

- (1) The news coverage contained a rich variety of frames, many of which either favored or disfavored BLM. Examples of the former are the “Protester’s POV” frame or the “Explicit peacefulness” frame, while examples of the latter are the “Violence, looting and rioting” frame and the “Defund the police” frame. This would indicate that previous research which has found evidence of news coverage tilting disproportionately in either direction has either missed framing devices which have been covered here or has underestimated the role of political biases in the news coverage, which I will address next.
- (2) The difference between the conservative news outlet and its two liberal counterparts was notable. As hypothesized, the conservative news coverage conformed much more readily to the protest paradigm, while the liberal news coverage for the most part diverged from it. While there was some degree of overlap between the three news outlets in their focus on the disruptive actions of protesters or in their neglect of published research on police brutality, partisan news consumers are liable to form radically different opinions about BLM based on the information they are exposed to through their preferred news outlets. Thus, this study both corroborates and elaborates qualitatively on Baranauskas (2022).
- (3) Finally, the analysis illuminated the complex mechanisms through which the legal issue of racially biased policing was framed in the news coverage. I first demonstrated that liberal and conservative news outlets construct different meanings about the subject. The former tended to racialize police brutality and the latter deracialize it. I subsequently appealed to Moral Foundations Theory to try to explain the drivers behind the polarized news coverage. I concluded

that the liberal news coverage was mainly driven by the moral foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity. The conservative news coverage, on the other hand, was driven by all five moral foundations which also included authority/respect, purity/sanctity, and ingroup/loyalty.

Thus, when legal culture is conceptualized to encompass the meanings that are disseminated in a society by the news media through its coverage of a social movement intent on addressing a specific legal issue (in this case, racially biased policing), this study makes several notable contributions to socio-legal scholarship: (a) it demonstrates that legal culture is dynamical and actively generates countless meanings, ideas, beliefs, values, and norms which are not all perfectly congruent; (b) it demonstrates that a major driver of these variable meaning-making processes are determined by political biases; and (c) it demonstrates that normative and descriptive understandings of a legal issue are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

7.1. Limits to the study and suggestions for future research

When conducting interpretive research, it is wise to unlearn the notion that there is a single way to derive meaning from a text. The social world is sufficiently complex to result in a cloud of uncertainty, randomness, or ambiguity to perturb the artificial order and structure of a coding frame. The contingencies of society cannot readily be collapsed into such neat categories. During the coding, I contended with this challenge by diligently using the annotation function of NVivo to document my thought process (to make reflexivity a habit) and through a code called “Ambiguous” in which excised segments of texts were placed if no apparent solution to competing interpretations could be found. Be that as it may, coding bound by the finite perception of a single researcher will invariably be contestable. The first suggestion for future research is therefore to reappraise the research subject with a greater number of coders which would also facilitate the analysis of more data.

Another valuable suggestion would be to combine the analysis of texts with that of images/videos in future research. A limitation of this study is that it focused squarely on texts even though most articles also contained either images or videos. One thing that I noticed as I sampled the articles was that visual frames may serve a similar role to textual frames in communicating an idea or a sentiment. Images of burned-out cars or looted stores could communicate disorder and lawlessness, while images of black protesters grouped together, unfazed with their eyes closed and fists raised defiantly in the air could communicate faith, devotion, and justice. Visual data of that kind have the potential to elicit visceral reactions from news consumers and thereby be qualitatively relevant. Although I would argue that there was a sufficient amount of data to analyze in the texts coded for the current study, a future study could extend the analysis to visual data so as to lend further support to the argument devised from the textual data.

Other relevant suggestions would be to (a) contrast news media frames with social media or alternative media frames, (b) study the relationship between a public perception of legal reforms of policing and specific news media frames, (c) explore more thoroughly how race is constructed as a legal category by the news media, (d) explore other roles different political moralities assume in relation to the law; (e) increase the time span to see how news coverage of BLM evolves over a longer period.

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