

Black Lives Matter in the National Media: Analyzing Coverage of Legacy Newsrooms and Digital-First Outlets

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Abstract

This study examines the differences in coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement throughout its existence between national legacy newsrooms and national digital-native newsrooms. A content analysis of 412 articles was conducted to examine how frames, tone, language use, support and blame of relevant actors, and frequency of coverage differ between the six newsrooms studied. The results suggest that both legacy and digital-native newsrooms use a variety of frames in their coverage, and that digital-native newsrooms are more likely to positively portray the movement than legacy newsrooms.

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On July 13, 2013, the closely followed aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s death finally came to a head. George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch coordinator who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, was acquitted of the second-degree murder and manslaughter charges against him (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). The killing and subsequent legal case had been a source of national interest and debate, but the case’s final decision sparked an outcry across social media. Three Black activists—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi—created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to voice their anger with the decision and its ties to a societal disregard for the health and safety of Black people in the United States (Herstory, 2019). The hashtag quickly came to be more than just a means to find similar stories of pain and frustration—it

became a platform and organizing tool for the United States’ latest civil rights movement. With each new, high-profile killing of a Black American since 2013—Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile and Breonna Taylor to name only a handful—Black Lives Matter has been mentioned in the media, raising the visibility and awareness of the movement time and time again. Today, Black Lives Matter is a globally recognized movement, a leading force in the struggle for Black justice and ending police violence.

Today, in the wake of George Floyd’s death at the hands of Minneapolis police, support for Black Lives Matter is at an all-time high, with 67 percent of American adults supporting the movement, as compared to 2016, when 43 percent of American adults supported the movement (Pew Research Center, 2020). This should come as no surprise—the uproar that was seen during the summer of 2020 was unlike any other in recent

memory. During a time when many were holed up at home in the midst of a tragic and terrifying pandemic, neglected by their government, and continuing to see heinous treatment of their fellow Americans, residents of Minneapolis showed up in droves to protest the unjust killing of George Floyd. These demonstrations quickly and exponentially spread around the world. Interviews with people who participated in the civil rights movement say they have not seen this kind of civil disobedience in the name of Black justice since the 1960s (Bates, 2020; Thomsen, 2020). There are many reasons that factor into why the Black Lives Matter movement is now, at this exact moment, seeing such public displays of support both nationally and internationally—the ever-growing connection and power fostered through social media platforms, a pandemic that has seeded a restlessness and anger towards the current systems of power that continue to ignore the needs of its people, and the seemingly endless stream of news about unconscionable Black death at the hands of law enforcement. News coverage is contributing to the current energy behind Black Lives Matter, but just as the people shape a newsroom’s coverage, how a newsroom covers current events shapes their audience’s perception of said events (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001). As Phillip L. Graham once said, journalism is the first rough draft of history—much of the information that people acquire and absorb about current events still comes from credible news organizations (Mitchell, 2020). Because of this, the media plays a significant role in what the American public’s perception of Black Lives Matter has been from the start, a concept that has been vastly under-

researched.

According to a report on national media coverage of Black Lives Matter, coverage of the movement during the Trump presidency had fallen until George Floyd’s killing (Mehta, 2020). This trend begs the question of how the national media has shaped the story of the Black Lives Matter movement in this country. The national media has certainly changed their coverage of Black Lives Matter since the movement’s inception, just as journalistic coverage evolves over time for any major event, as reporters learn more about a topic and reporting precedent is set. Different facets of this coverage, such as frequency, language, and stylistic choices between legacy media organizations like The New York Times and newer, digital media organizations like BuzzFeed are important to consider in this day and age. The most popular digital newsrooms in the United States were created only a year or two before the start of the Black Lives Matter movement. These are organizations that were created in and of the moment that sparked Black Lives Matter itself. Their coverage has inherently been different from large, established, print-first media conglomerates because of this. Digital-native newsrooms also tend to be more outwardly liberal and progressive in their coverage while still being seen as trustworthy to many Americans (Pew Research Center, 2020). This points to a divergence in what Americans want and expect from their frequented news organizations.

All of these variables within coverage are important to examine, because they have an effect on Americans’ knowledge about and perception of Black Lives Matter. When looking at media coverage of the civil rights

movement, it is evident that news outlets played a role in the shaping of this historic moment as well, whether it be by omitting from publication certain photos of peaceful protesters being harmed by law enforcement or by keeping coverage of the explosive movement off the front page (Alabama Public Radio, 2013; Cornish, 2013). The questions raised over media coverage are worthy of examination so that national news organizations can understand how their reporting is shaping our current fight for Black American livelihood and break old patterns of reporting that do not serve the society we live in.

There has already been extensive research done that highlights the role of social media and peer-to-peer information sharing in shaping the national conversation about Black Lives Matter (Carney, 2016). However, other research shows that online activism for Black Lives Matter does not have an impact on what is reported in the news, because reporters continue to use “elite and official sources” when writing stories, rather than turning to social media (Erkkinen, 2017). Because of this, what is discussed online and across social media sites such as Twitter can often be an echo chamber, without any real notion of what information people not present in these circles are consuming. Even more research has shown that both local and national newspaper coverage of Black Lives Matter can suffer from the protest paradigm, a phenomenon where news outlets tend to portray protests as deviant or violent (Mourão, Kilgo & Sylvie, 2018; Mourão, Kilgo & Sylvie, 2019). Despite all this relevant and important research, few studies have examined the difference in coverage between national legacy newsrooms and new digital newsrooms.

This is an area of research that has not yet been investigated, but should be to better understand how both kinds of newsrooms are evolving and how their work is shaping the most important fight for Black justice of this generation.

To fill this void, this study proposes to examine how digital-first newsrooms have covered the Black Lives Matter movement compared to legacy newsrooms. This study predicts that newer, online national newsrooms created in the early 2010s—BuzzFeed, VICE and Vox—have published articles with greater frequency, using more positive language than legacy national newsrooms, like The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. Digital-first platforms are still new and are quicker to change according to culture and industry, whereas legacy newsrooms are prone to sticking to their comfort zones and are slow to adapt. To test this hypothesis, I will conduct a content analysis of articles published by BuzzFeed, VICE, Vox, The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal from July 13, 2013 to December 1, 2020 to examine different organizational variables, such as ideological bend and article framing. I will be tracking how many articles are posted by each of these organizations for each calendar year that contain the words “Black Lives Matter” in the headline.

Framing theory will be the primary theoretical framework, a theory which explains how “an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations” (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In other words, a person’s opinion of a concept is affected by how it is presented to them, so

testing for frames makes the most sense for this body of research. I will subsequently screen each of these articles for the presence and frequency of keywords that can point to the tone and framing of the article. Words such as demonstration, protest, rioting, looting, violence, danger, reparations, and justice will help to determine certain frames such as attribution of responsibility, personal interest, and more. Words such as rioting and violence will be coded as negative, words such as demonstration and protest will be coded as neutral, and words such as reparations and justice will be coded as positive. After recording the presence and frequency of these coded words, the results will be analyzed to draw larger conclusions about the coverage of each of these news organizations and their propensity to lean on the protest paradigm.

Researching the effects of the media's framing of Black Lives Matter is essential because the movement is far from over. The field of journalism is both historically and contemporarily obsessed with the notion of objectivity—an ideal that is in fact subjective to each person and thus unattainable. Because of this, the industry has failed to properly cover marginalized communities and movements in the past. In order to better cover the movement going forward, news outlets must be hyper aware of the framing of their coverage and what they are conveying to their audience. This study aims to highlight the coverage of six major platforms with the goal of understanding how these newsrooms cover Black Lives Matter and what framings they use.

Literature Review

Mass media in the United States has long been a

large and important actor in shaping public opinion. Because of this reality, researchers have tried to measure the extent of this power (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). The state of journalism in the 21st century is tenuous and ever changing, but the power to shape current events still holds up. Gatekeeping theory and framing theory help to explain changes in industry standards in modern day newsrooms, that—no matter their style, size or ideological leaning—play a pivotal role in how Black Lives Matter and social movements are absorbed and understood by their audiences.

Gatekeeping theory

According to gatekeeping theory, news organizations play a vital role in the function of United States society (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). They report on and disseminate information across communities and regions large and small, helping citizens keep their finger on the pulse of what is happening both around the world and in their own backyard. Just as communities shape the coverage of any given newsroom, newsrooms can likewise influence the coverage and perceptions of any place or topic. This indicates a reciprocal relationship, but it is also worth noting the powerful resources and communication channels that news organizations hold, power that everyday citizens have not historically held. Gatekeeping theory recognizes this. It is described as the process through which events are covered and shared by mass media, determining which information is communicated, as well as the content and nature of these messages (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Gatekeeping has

been around since long before it was named as a theory; it simply helps to explain why news turns out the way that it does (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). Not only do these newsrooms have control over societal knowledge, they have control over how society itself is framed. This was especially true when media was solely formatted to be in print, television or radio. With the advent of the internet and its now near ubiquity, journalism has changed forever, and thus, so has gatekeeping. Global news events such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and almost anything concerning Wikileaks have shown that news travels fast, widely and with more avenues for audience participation online (Wallace, 2018). The traditional channels of communication dissemination are no longer the only way of getting information out into the world.

The rise of internet culture has complicated and transformed gatekeeping theory. Since the late 1990s, scholars have warned of the effect that online media would have on legacy media gatekeepers and the bottleneck they have on information dissemination (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). Social media networks now play a significant role in information sharing, both for everyday people and news organizations alike. Some authors say that social media has eliminated gatekeeping in online spaces, but that is not true either. The algorithms and software that govern social media are created and monitored by organizations that are gatekeepers in their own right (Wallace, 2018). Online influencers and the network of followers and connections that social media users immerse themselves in have become gatekeepers as well, heavily impacting

what content and news people are exposed to (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). Expectations of credibility, sourcing and newsworthiness become blurred in this space as users curate their feeds based on their own hyper-stylized demographics. However, the vast majority of people have such small followings on their social media accounts that are not really considered to be gatekeepers themselves either, with only a select group of them holding influence in reality (Wallace, 2018). Therefore, news organizations, usually boasting large followings, are still sought out and relied upon for factual information in this realm across sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

While traditional media that have found new, interactive means of publishing their content online may still conceive of their gatekeeping as unidirectional (from institution to individual), native digital and social media embraces multidirectional information and all of its relevant actors: institutions, professional communicators, and individuals (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). Consumers are aware and attuned to the speed of informational access online, which increases their needs and expectations of news organizations and gives them more leverage and agency to determine what they see as true or important (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). Despite this “multiplicity of gates” that exist with the creation of evermore platforms that promote higher audience engagement, scarcity of credible sources remains high as well. Thus news organizations maintain their status as gatekeepers even on newer online platforms, even if it is a role that is shifting (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). News consumers, in many ways, welcome this gatekeeping from media

even seeing it as a public and moral responsibility to let Americans know which news is relevant, timely and important (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). This online space is constantly evolving, with each news organization approaching its gatekeeping in different ways.

Gatekeeping and implicit biases in media

Gatekeeping can manifest in a myriad of manners, such as which stories are covered, what language and framing is used to cover them, which communities regularly receive coverage, and even what the staff looks like within a news organization (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015). Perhaps the biggest gatekeepers of all within the journalism industry are legacy newsrooms, or old media (Bailey, 2019). These are newsrooms that for decades have seen the identity of reporters, and even sources, as a potential threat to the “objectivity” of an organization’s coverage. Newsrooms have struggled with providing the fair and equitable coverage they claim to have always strived, as evidenced by extensive research (Bailey, 2019; Eligon, 2014). For example, journalism writ large has treated female politicians more critically than male politicians, and has overly associated Black families with crime and Muslim families with terrorism. According to one study, terrorist attacks committed by Muslims receive 357 percent more coverage than attacks committed by terrorists of any other identity group (Bailey, 2019). When Michael Brown was killed in 2014, *The New York Times* published an ill-conceived article that called Brown “no angel,” suggesting a sinister nature for someone who was killed at the hands of law enforcement (Eligon, 2014). Descriptors such as this are

rarely used for young white men, like Dylann Roof and James Holmes, who have committed devastating massacres. It is not only tone and framing. The frequency of coverage of an event or community can speak volumes about a newsroom's implicit biases. This unfortunately extends to the hiring practices of these same newsrooms. Disparate treatment within job applications occurs between applicants with “white-sounding” and “Black-sounding” names, and reporting assignments that are connected to race in any way are often passed on to white reporters to retain “objectivity” on assignment (Bailey, 2019). These are manifestations of implicit bias within journalism, or attitudes and stereotypes that affect our actions and decisions in an unconscious manner (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015). Implicit bias is insidious, because it usually does not align with our declared beliefs, but our biases do tend to favor one’s “in-group,” or people who hold the same identity markers (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015). With a historically white industry such as journalism, these biases run deep.

The United States is a country that is constantly reiterating centuries-old stereotypes and negative associations with people with marginalized identities, and journalism plays a heavy hand in perpetuating those messages through its coverage. Not surprisingly, almost no one is happy with the current state of news coverage. Indigenous and Black Americans suffer from a laundry list of disparities, but can feel left out or tokenized in their coverage (Bailey, 2019). Latinos and Asian-Americans feel the same way, while disabled people and mentally ill people feel almost completely excluded from news coverage (Bailey, 2019).

Even the historically and contemporarily privileged, such as white men, police officers and evangelical Christians, see implicit bias at best and intentional animus at worst in the state of news coverage concerning their respective identities. Correcting implicit bias is essential work for mass media, because it can help account for gaps in public knowledge and perspective. Without this recalibration of understanding, news consumers may answer unaddressed questions based on their own experiences, which only continues the cycle of misguided narratives.

With George Floyd's killing on May 25, 2020 and the subsequent ripples and reckonings that have cropped up in seemingly every professional sector, reparative diversity and equity is suddenly en vogue. This means that the media are suddenly now looking to trainings, policies and practices that can undo the systematic errors of their profession. These are easy fixes, but the most important work is done on the individual level, by every single reporter. Critical self-examination of story sourcing, content and delivery can cause ripple effects throughout news organizations (Bailey, 2019). Even with all these efforts, stories at the most well-intentioned news outlets who institute implicit bias training will inevitably fall through the cracks. *The New York Times* has published pieces that appear to feature Nazi sympathizing and unequal coverage of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the lead up to the 2016 election (Fauset, 2017; Lichtblau & Myers, 2016). On the whole, the media over-samples crime committed by people of color and over-samples how often white people are the victims of crime at the hands of people of color (Gladstone, 2015).

It is imperative to recognize that this universally accepted standard of objectivity was never so objective to begin with. For nearly all of journalism's history, the notion of objectivity has been upheld by white male journalists, because their identity is seen as the default, despite the fact that this practice has led to implicit biases (Bailey, 2019). It is imperative that newsrooms examine their biases. Huge barriers to access, inclusion and retention have been enacted because of structural racism (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2015). In a 21st century newsroom, it is a choice to tackle blind spots, whether implicit or explicit, in their coverage. No one can claim ignorance. This reckoning of institutional harm comes on top of an industry that has already experienced massive cultural and implementational shifts in the 21st century.

Industry standards

In an ever-changing world—where the internet is king and every person has a platform—the journalism industry is constantly shifting in order to meet reader demands, mitigate harm, and above all, survive. This sense of industry uneasiness is new to the internet era, but as gatekeeping theory suggests, news organizations have traditionally held positions of power in the communities they cover. The importance of the audience is often stressed in measuring the scope and impact of newsroom coverage, but these audiences are commonly thought of in the abstract. Community members are not in the morning news huddle as stories are being discussed amongst reporters (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Journalists are criticized for frequently catering to fellow media professionals in their coverage, treating them as their in-group and referring to peer judgement as to what is

newsworthy (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). This can create a self-perpetuating cycle, leaving newsrooms in a feedback loop that excludes their true audience and keeping them from taking chances in reporting and coverage (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Audience is typically thought of as recipients, receivers of the content that newsrooms are producing, or as product, a result of the presence of the media industry (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Now, thanks to the internet and all of its creations, the concept of the audience as an empowered network is emerging, signaling a point of no turn for direct, sometimes unmitigated contact with news organizations (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012).

As audiences have gained increased agency and access to journalistic organizations in the online realm, their power has grown too. They exercise their power through means such as online commenting and interacting with newsrooms and their reporters on social media. Audiences see this power as a way to leverage the playing field with these sometimes behemoth institutions. This reciprocity, the ability to create a two-way conversation like never before, is developing connectedness and social capital among communities that are both geographically bounded and virtual in nature (Lewis, Holton & Coddington, 2014). Thus, “reciprocal journalism” is increasingly important and both builds upon and departs from the typical concept of audience engagement, because there are a multitude of ways that both audiences and reporters benefit from these online interactions (Lewis et al, 2014).

Of course, some reporters and newsrooms have been better at adopting new technologies and digital strategies than others. It is generally accepted that journalism has

struggled and continues to struggle with finding new streams of revenue as print subscriptions dry up, readers hunger for free access online, and online advertising pays a fraction of what print advertising does (Pew Research Center, 2016). The media is still experimenting with how to best retain and grow their audiences. In fact, it is a top priority for 9 out of 10 newspaper editors in the United States (Lewis et al, 2014). Of course, the biggest newsrooms have successfully pivoted to investing in audio journalism and podcasting, holding events, writing special issues and more, à la *The New York Times*. Yet overall, elite national news organizations have resisted heavily increasing user participation, often because it can threaten their perception of traditional media gatekeeping and therefore lead to loss of reputational prestige (Lewis et al, 2014). Meanwhile, smaller media outlets, who are usually behind in terms of technology adoption, are more likely to engage audiences online and participate in this “reciprocal journalism” (Lewis et al, 2014). This helps to foster a sense of community in shared forums and social media pages, which is key for audience engagement. It helps citizens feel like they have a stake in the coverage of their city or region. This reciprocity of directly interacting with community members online is widely seen as necessary in building trust and growing your following as a contemporary journalist.

Not only does this reciprocity exist directly between news organizations and their followers, it also occurs indirectly through a follower’s own passing along of journalistic information, by sharing a story on Reddit threads, through using hashtags on Twitter, and more (Lewis et al, 2014). This allows for a story to reach even more people than it originally

would, and the more indirect reciprocity a story receives, the better. Ideally, journalists will utilize their social followings in a way that allows for sustained engagement and reciprocity, both directly and indirectly. As a framework, reciprocal journalism is a way to best use many existing forms of participatory journalism to build and maintain an active audience, questioning the role of gatekeeping in this evolving industry. Without this reciprocity, media outlets may risk not just losing audience, but eroding their trust in the organization along the way. The competition online for users' attention is infinite, whereas when print was king, newspapers only had to compete with fellow papers in their given market. But just because the challenge is daunting does not mean that newsrooms should throw in the towel before they begin (Stassen, 2010). Without the audience, newsrooms may not offer as comprehensive of coverage as they should, and lost audience members will turn to different sources of information to feel served in their news coverage. Reconnecting with audiences and meeting them where they are is a chance to advance democracy and reclaim a sorely needed interest base.

Industry standards and trust in media

It has been proven that audiences have a wide variety of needs and asks from the journalism industry. Through a large scale study in the Netherlands, researchers discovered that individuals want news that at least slightly skews according to their political leanings, offers a high level of coverage for public affairs, and not surprisingly, they need a high level of trust, an aspect currently lacking for audiences globally (Van Der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014).

Journalists, on the other hand, expect autonomy,

impartiality and diligent fact-checking to be a professional standard amongst themselves and their peers (Van Der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). There are many overlaps between what reporters and consumers expect from journalism—some more explicit than others.

The function of journalism has changed over the years in the eyes of the consumer. The 1980s saw a rise in the demand for national and global news, the 1990s saw audiences craving a more interpretive role from their chosen media outlets, and the 2000s saw strong support for journalism as a community forum (Van Der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). Because of the seemingly constant shifting in media needs from audiences, there is almost always a disconnect between journalists and consumers. A survey conducted in Germany in 2007 found that respondents thought of news as “manipulated, too prosaic, too sensational and frivolous” (Van Der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). This is emblematic of many changes that the industry has undergone over the years—the rise of late night infotainment programs, 24-hour news coverage from networks like CNN, and most recently, the spread of misinformation through social media from a sitting American president who decries and undermines the value and function of journalism. The heightened sense of competition amongst news outlets has led to more negative news coverage and interpretive reporting from the media (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl & Pingree, 2015). The public is paying less and less attention to mainstream media and giving more time to partisan news outlets such as Fox News, with demographics and political knowledge also playing a hand in audience preferences (Turcotte et al, 2015). This is despite the fact that systematic content analyses have

shown that the nonpartisan, mainstream media does not outwardly feed into any one political party or affiliation (Lee, 2010). Even a general lack of transparency about the function and execution of contemporary journalism has caused lack of audience trust (Lee, 2010). There is a big disconnect between what consumers want and what the media is presenting them with, and modern solutions will need to be implemented to address these issues.

Because Americans do not trust their media professionals, they are turning to the people who they reliably trust the most: their family, friends and peers. News sharing through social media, and specifically through the juggernaut Facebook, is reaching a critical mass. At least 30 percent of U.S. adults are consuming news on Facebook (Turcotte et al, 2015). The people who you follow online are sharing information that aligns with their personal beliefs, therefore exposing you to a certain array of ideas and sources. The trust you place in the people you follow affords them a level of influence and credibility, which in turn affects which news outlets you are attuned to and how closely you follow them (Turcotte et al, 2015). The peer-to-peer process of digital news exposure has wide reaching implications for what media trust must look like going forward. Misinformation is more likely to be shared amongst peers as it validates and perpetuates their personal beliefs. Misinformation operates cyclically—a decline in media trust fosters a heightened sense of political polarization, which further encourages consumers to ingest news that does not challenge their beliefs (Turcotte et al, 2015). In these ways, newsrooms across the United States are finding that gatekeeping, audience and trust are linked, and that in order to

move the industry forward and grow their audience, the media must first build trust and relinquish their notions of traditional gatekeeping.

Legacy newsrooms and digital newsrooms

As shown, the modern news media industry is increasingly complex and comprises many different actors and audiences, each pulling upon each other through the means of gatekeeping, trust and the growth of the internet. News is still being consumed in a multitude of ways: through print, television, online, radio, and more. Digital and online media is the quickest growing sector of news consumption. With 37 percent of Americans preferring to consume their online, only television at 44 percent remains a higher preference than digital news (Pew Research Center, 2016). This figure points to the importance of all newsrooms that are online, specifically digital native newsrooms and legacy newsrooms with a digital presence.

Legacy newsrooms are what some would consider to be old media or media institutions that were dominant prior to the rise of the Information Age (Peterson, 2003). These are newsrooms that have been around for decades, with some boasting more than a hundred years of continuous operations. While old media can encompass many different distribution methods—radio, television, film and more—here, the focus will be on print, and specifically newspapers, the quintessential news medium. Legacy media is traditionally characterized by its one-way communication style with its audience, while new media is characterized by a decentralized model of operations and interactive features that allow two-way communication between the newsroom and audience (Peterson,

2003). Only since the emergence and rapid growth of the internet has legacy media pivoted to change their modes of communication because of the threat they saw from this new distribution model (Peterson, 2003). Legacy media is the late bloomer in this situation. Audiences went online before legacy newsrooms really got around to it, and in that time, audiences became accustomed to procuring information for free. As a result, most newsrooms are still trying to get audiences to purchase digital subscriptions, putting up article limits and paywalls to encourage readers to pay if they want full access. Newspapers were slow to adopt new media because their biggest revenue sources were slow to utilize the internet as well. The biggest, wealthiest advertisers were still primarily focusing on print until only a few years ago, and the oldest age groups in the United States are still overwhelmingly loyal to newspapers for their news consumption (Desjardins, 2016).

Legacy media is now strapped with the double burden of needing to maintain old business models based on physical newspaper subscriptions and dwindling print advertising revenue while successfully navigating digital subscriptions and digital advertising, both of which typically sell for cheaper than their print counterparts (Desjardins, 2016). As of 2018, digital advertising accounted for 35 percent of newspaper advertising revenue (Pew Research Center, 2020). Digital native media, the new media companies that have sprung up since the beginning of the Information Age and have only ever had a digital presence, have seen tremendous growth and success. *Vice*, *BuzzFeed* and *Vox* are each valued at over \$1 billion (Desjardins, 2016). Employment in digital newsrooms increased 82 percent from 2008 to 2018, while in this same time frame, 33,000 newspaper employees lost

their jobs (Pew Research Center, 2020). Legacy newsrooms have made and continue to make many changes to better adapt to this reality, such as turning to niche areas of coverage rather than doing some of everything and centering beats around relevant topics instead of standard newspaper sections (Jones & Tompkins, 2017). The growth of digital media and the decline of legacy print newsrooms continues to have a significant impact on the audiences who rely on them for their news.

Websites are an important aspect of how newsrooms acquire online traffic, but even more important than having a high quality, functional web platform is having a means to drive new audience members to that platform. In other words, social media. Social media, just as much as the internet itself, has profoundly shaped the media landscape. As of 2018, more adults get their news from social media than from print newspapers, with Facebook dominating the field for news consumption—43 percent of Americans get news from the social platform (Pew Research Center). In fact, the most common ways that adults in the United States access online news is either through social media or direct visits to news organizations' websites (Pew Research Center, 2020).

This dependence on social media is aided by the developments in technology that ran parallel to the growth of the internet. Smartphones and the applications you can install right on the homescreen make it so accessing social media is as easy as tapping an icon. As of 2017, 45 percent of American adults often get news from their mobile phones, a means of news consumption that is increasingly preferred (Pew Research Center, 2020). Despite being the most loyal consumers of print newspapers, adults 50

years and older are also driving news consumption through mobile devices, helping increase the number of total adults consuming news in this manner to 85 percent (Pew Research Center, 2016). Americans are overwhelmingly on board with getting their news online and through social media, further proving that the future of modern newsrooms most certainly includes the savvy use of digital media as a means of reaching audiences.

Despite these trends, Americans are skeptical of what they see on social media. The ease with which anyone can create polished but fraudulent news products has grown exponentially, which makes this a valid concern for modern news consumers to hold. Even as they regularly turn to social media for their newsgathering, 57 percent of consumers say they expect the news that they see on these platforms to be largely inaccurate (Pew Research Center, 2018). Americans are already skeptical of the media as a whole, with 72 percent of adults expressing at least some trust in national news organizations and 85 percent of adults expressing at least some trust in local news organizations (Pew Research Center, 2016). When it comes to news from social media, only 37 percent of American adults have at least moderate trust in the information they gather there (Pew Research Center, 2018). Despite these attitudes, a significant portion of adults in the United States still choose to get their news through social media.

Since all of these media channels have become so layered and entwined, gauging the size of digital audiences for legacy newspapers is difficult. As of 2018, across the 50 biggest daily newspapers in the United States, there was an average of 11.6 million unique monthly visitors to their websites, almost mirroring the same numbers as 2016 and 2017 (Pew Research Center).

On average, visitors spent 2 ½ minutes per visit to these newspapers' websites (Pew Research Center, 2018). As a comparison, digital native newsrooms experience much higher engagement numbers than newspapers' digital websites. Out of the 37 largest digital native news sites, the average number of unique monthly visitors totaled more than 22 million in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018). On the flip side, the average number of minutes spent per visitor on these same digital news sites is two minutes (Pew Research Center, 2018). Digital native newsrooms are also typically ahead of the curve in adopting audience outreach and engagement strategies. The vast majority of this sample of digital native newsrooms offer newsletters, have an official presence on Apple News or Flipboard, and release podcasts as of 2019 (Pew Research Center). Similarly, almost all of these newsrooms have a very robust social media presence, maintaining accounts on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2019). Despite these differences in online traffic, digital native and legacy newsrooms share many similarities, including their coverage and journalistic practices.

Framing Theory

A key characteristic of news reporting across any medium is how the news is framed. A frame in the context of the journalism industry is a way that the media presents a story to their audience, the impact on perception of events ranging from subtle to obvious (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Goffman, 1974). Thus, framing is the process in which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Goffman, 1974). The frame acts as a lens that affects how people intake and interpret

information. In the context of the news industry, the act of framing can fall on many different actors—the news organization, a certain department, a specific editor. In this case, I am examining the act of framing as it falls on the shoulders of the reporter, whose writing dictates how the information they want to convey is ultimately portrayed to the reader. Identifying frames in the media helps to understand what key considerations are emphasized in a media product (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

To identify a frame within the media, there must first be an issue, event or actor that is being framed (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames also take attitudes, or attributions of reasoning, both positive and negative into account. This means highlighting any number of considerations in a news product: economic costs, humanitarianism, individualism, social justice, environmental, etc. These frames are important to note because they ultimately affect the attitudes, and therefore the behaviors, of their audiences. This is called a framing effect (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Framing itself is unavoidable—every human being brings their own frames to their communication, whether that be in everyday conversation or their professional life. The strongest frames emerge from public discussion as “the best rationales for contending positions on [an] issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

The use of frames within the media is a hotly contested issue, as political conservatives continue to rail against the journalism industry and its loss of objectivity. This debate is only continuing to intensify as some outlets lean into more alternative types of reporting that allow for more style and analysis, whether that be new media explanatory reporting or hyper-partisan political reporting. Despite the outcry, there is no way for

individual reporters, or the media as a whole, to eliminate framing from their coverage. Even the standard use of a sterile inverted pyramid to write a journalistic article is a type of frame (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). The narrative frames that the media use can be split into several categories: the straight news account, the conflict story, the consensus story, the conjecture story, the historical outlook and the reaction story (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). This is not an exhaustive list, but it does include some of the most common narrative framings employed by the media.

Each of these frames plays a subtle yet important role in the dissemination of news. A straight news account is when there is no dominant narrative frame, but rather a basic outline that covers the who, what, when, why and how bases (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). A conflict story focuses on the conflict inherent to the situation or brewing between the actors (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). A consensus story emphasizes the points of agreement around an issue or event (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). A conjecture story focuses on a story’s conjecture or speculation of what is to come (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). A historical outlook details how the current news fits into history (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). The reaction story showcases a response from a major actor (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

Just as there are narrative frames that determine the structure of a story, there are also content frames that inform the writing within a story. The attribution of responsibility frame examines whether and how the government and related agencies are responsible for events portrayed (Beaudoin, 2007). The human interest

frame emphasizes the emotional angle of a story, humanizing and dramatizing the issue and its effects on everyday life (Bennet, 1995). The severity frame emphasizes uncertainty, seriousness and potential harm to the public caused by the event portrayed. The economic consequences frame looks at the financial and economic impact of events. The action frame focuses on prevention and education (Bardhan, 2001). Lastly, the new evidence frame looks at the impact of new findings in relation to the reported topic or event. All of these frames, both narrative and content, will be used in the methodology to examine how news organizations in the United States are using narrative framing in their coverage of Black Lives Matter.

Media coverage of Black Lives Matter

In order to understand how contemporary newsrooms have framed and continue to frame the evolution of Black Lives Matter, a comprehensive look at their coverage of the movement is necessary. The way Black Lives Matter is covered is important, because it influences the way the public perceives the movement. News coverage of the movement has resulted in several tangible impacts. One of the biggest takeaways from the analysis of Black Lives Matter coverage is that its frequency is tied to the direct political action that has resulted from its activism. According to one study, an initial increase and subsequent decline in media attention to policing was linked to when policing legislation was proposed and passed within their corresponding state legislatures (Arora, Phoenix & Delshad, 2019). This indicates that even as protests and the movement as a whole continue to make progress every day, the media typically follows what changes are happening in government and politics, not necessarily through the work of local activists.

Within the online community, a plethora of

counter-frames have been created—ones that defend and uphold conservative ideologies. These frames, namely the blue lives matter and all lives matter framings, serve to make Black Lives Matter seem exclusive, divisive or threatening (Arora et al, 2019). These community-created frames almost always make their way into the media, as evidenced by the wide understanding of blue lives matter and all lives matter, but news organizations also play into anti-Black Lives Matter framing. Mainstream media frames that portray Black Lives Matter protesters as social deviants through sensationalist and individualistic lenses decreases audience empathy with the movement, as well as reinforcing support for maintaining the status quo (Arora et al, 2019). The mere presence of all lives matter and blue lives matter in the media is evidence of the advancement of blatant whiteness within news coverage. Through the lens of critical race theory, another study posits that the whiteness within the news industry has created white fear when covering “minority issues” (Kil, 2019). Even when attempting to be “race neutral” in the media’s reporting has backfired, upholding the standard of objectivity has ignored the needs of marginalized communities and instead advanced whiteness (Kil, 2019). Through this framework, the spread of all lives matter has allowed for the co-optation of Black social justice work, fear of Black power and the equating of all lives matter with white power (Kil, 2019). In these ways, the content and framing of Black Lives Matter coverage has resulted in the continued iteration of institutionalized oppression, without the knowledge or intention of the reporter.

Though this framing may seem extreme, other framings that have been used by the media when reporting on Black Lives Matter are less so. The framing and rhetoric used by a given news outlet depends on the size and stature of the

organization. Some news outlets have framed advocacy and non-violent protests organized by the movement as riots, while the organization as a whole has been characterized as racist and anti-law enforcement (Banks, 2018). A binary is drawn by news organizations between “good Black people,” who adhere to neoliberal values such as individualism and personal responsibility, and “bad Black people,” who identify and admonish systemic racism (Banks, 2018). Tools such as public memory, rules of decorum and post-racial discourse are often employed in United States media when discussing the movement. According to one study, newsrooms as disparate as The New York Times, CNN and Fox News all used these tactics in some capacity to ignore and delegitimize the movement’s goals (Banks, 2018).

One reason that newsrooms cover social movements, namely Black Lives Matter, so critically is because of the protest paradigm. The protest paradigm states that the media tends to emphasize the drama, inconvenience and disruption that protests create, rather than highlighting the demands and grievances of the protesters themselves (Kilgo, 2020). In this way, news organizations contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, making it more difficult for social movements to appeal to a broader audience. On the other side of this coin is the knowledge that in order to get the attention of the press, protests must be loud and attention-grabbing. In order to get the words out about their movement, protesters must be brash and outlandish, because they need the media to help get the word out about their demands (Boyle, McLeod & Armstrong, 2012). Though this is growing less and less true because of social media, the press is still a key actor in the dissemination of knowledge and information about social issues, with the cycle continuing on from protesters to press,

press to protesters.

On the other hand, some academic studies have shown that coverage and framing of Black Lives Matter has been anything but negative—it has been neutral to positive. One study compared post-Michael Brown coverage from The New York Times, the leading national news outlet, and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the local regional newspaper, and found that both outlets were more likely to employ a positive frame associated with peacefulness, than a lawless frame associated with lawlessness and deviance (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2017). The coverage from both newsrooms directly quoted protesters more often than law enforcement or government officials, while not fixating on protester-committed crimes and making scant mention of any looting, arson, assault or gunfire (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2017). All types of media play a role in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and frames.

Research questions

In sum, the relationship between newsrooms, their reporting, and the people they are trying to share their coverage with is more complex than it has ever been before. The Black Lives Matter movement is a modern call for civil rights that requires the best, most thoughtful journalistic coverage possible. Due to how rapidly the industry and the media tastes of the general public are changing, both frequency, framing and tone of coverage of Black Lives Matter is expected to be variable. These factors are important, because they determine the quality of coverage available to media audiences, as well as affecting their perceptions of the movement as well. As changes within the journalism industry and the demands of audiences mount around the topic of Black Lives Matter, consensus must be reached amongst the largest

players in the media as to how to best address the social justice movement while reckoning with its own history. At this moment, the largest players—legacy newsrooms and digital-first newsrooms—have notably different approaches to their coverage. To properly analyze these approaches, proper research on their coverage of the movement must be conducted. Therefore, the study proposes the following research questions:

RQ 1: How has media coverage of Black Lives Matter between legacy newsrooms and digital newsrooms changed since the start of the movement?

RQ 2: How has the frequency of coverage changed over time, for each newsroom and overall?

RQ 3: How has the framing of coverage changed over time, for each newsroom and overall?

RQ 4: How has the tone of coverage changed over time, for each newsroom and overall?

RQ5: How has the language of coverage changed over time, for each newsroom and overall?

RQ6: Does any outlet support or blame any relevant actors in their coverage?

Methodology

The goal of this study was to investigate how the media has covered the Black Lives Matter movement since its inception, including changes in frequency of coverage, tone of coverage, framing of coverage, and the differences in coverage between legacy newsrooms and digital native newsrooms.

This study examined 10 articles for every year since 2013 for each of the six selected news organizations, three legacy and three digital native. This timeframe encompasses every year from the start of the movement, 2013, to the present, 2020. Black Lives Matter has undergone many changes in public perception and acceptance over the years, and it is important to note all of those changes so that a complete picture can be captured. To collect data for this study, a content analysis was conducted, which is a way to determine patterns in communications in an objective and quantifiable manner. This research method is perfect for this study, especially in identifying trends and changes in coverage.

Procedure

This study analyzed articles from six different news organizations: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *BuzzFeed*, *Vox* and *VICE*. These publications were chosen because they are national outlets and thus cover the movement more frequently than local publications that only mention the movement when it is relevant to their geographic region. The number of articles examined per year from each organization was set at 10 to allow for a breadth of articles to be analyzed. Once all possible data was collected, a total of 412 articles were sampled and analyzed. To determine which articles to analyze, a total inventory of the number of articles for each year that appear when “Black Lives Matter” is searched using each newsroom’s appropriate in-house search engine is conducted. Once the total number of articles, or population, for a year is recorded, that number is divided by 10, the desired sample size, to establish a systematic method of sampling. Article types that do not suit the study, such as opinion pieces, are omitted to ensure that only journalistic coverage that is historically

supposed to be objective is analyzed.

Measurement

In accordance with content analysis methodology, I used a coding book to organize which variables I would investigate. First, language is assessed, both as its own variable and to help determine tone for the articles. Each article was coded for frequency language of specific words. The words justice, peace and reparations were coded as positive; the words rally, march, protest and demonstration were coded as neutral; and the words violence, danger, riot and loot were coded as negative. After words in each category were recorded, the category with the greatest frequency was recorded as the overall language. Then, absence or presence of blame or support for a variety of actors—Black Lives Matter, law enforcement, government, the media, or other—to help guide the determination of article tone. Tone is then defined as positive, neutral or negative in reference to Black Lives Matter, aided by what was recorded under language, blame and support variables. The last variables that were studied were the narrative frames and the content frames. The coding book used for this study can be found in the appendix.

Narrative and content frames

I coded for the presence of six narrative frames and six content frames (see Appendix for codebook). The narrative frames pertain to how a story is structured in its writing, while the content frames deal with the messaging in the writing. The chosen narrative frames drew from the Project for Excellence in Journalism at the Pew Research Center, while the chosen content frames are from a variety of previous framing studies. The narrative frames included are (1) straight news account, (2) conflict story, (3) consensus story, (4) conjecture

story, (5) historical outlook, and (6) reaction story. A straight news account is when there is no dominant narrative frame, but rather a basic outline that covers the who, what, when, why and how bases, and a conflict story focuses on the conflict inherent to the situation or brewing between the actors. A consensus story emphasizes the points of agreement around an issue or event, while a conjecture story focuses on a story's conjecture or speculation of what is to come. A historical outlook details how the current news fits into history. The reaction story showcases a response from a major actor.

The selected content frames for this study are (1) *attribution of responsibility*, (2) *human interest*, (3) *severity*, (4) *economic consequences*, (5) *action*, and (6) *new evidence*. The attribution of responsibility frame examines whether and how the government and related organizations are responsible for the events described in a news article. Stories with a human interest frame emphasize the emotional angle of a story, often dramatizing the issue and its effects on everyday life. News articles with a severity frame emphasize the uncertainty, seriousness and potential harm that the issue at hand poses to the public. The economic consequences frame deals with the financial and economic impact of events, while the action frame focuses on prevention and education about the issue. Finally, stories with the new evidence frame deal with the impact of new findings.

Results

The overarching research question asked how media coverage of Black Lives Matter between legacy newsrooms and digital newsrooms has changed since the start of the movement. In order to better understand and address this question, the other five research questions must be answered. The first

research question looked to determine how the frequency of coverage of Black Lives Matter has changed over time between legacy and digital newsrooms. When combing through the six chosen news websites, only the legacy newsrooms had internal engines that allowed for clear and easy sorting of articles by year, while also displaying the total number of articles per year. The websites for the digital newsrooms did not have an easy way to sort through their articles, therefore those websites had to be manually sorted through for data collection and could not have the total number of relevant articles per year determined.

The results that were able to be collected show that coverage of Black Lives Matter across legacy newsrooms has fluctuated over the years. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* did not reference Black Lives Matter at all in the movement’s first year, 2013. Coverage picked up in 2014 through 2016, then went quiet until 2020. Evidently, Black Lives Matter is currently seeing an all-time high in national press coverage, as evidenced by the lines in Graph 1. The

The New York Times leads overall in 2020 news coverage of the movement, followed by *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* respectively.

The second research question studied how the framing of Black Lives Matter coverage has changed over time in legacy newsrooms and digital newsrooms. The most frequently used narrative and content frames for each news organization between 2014, 2017 and 2020 were assessed and compiled. Most news organizations used the reaction narrative frame in 2014, and diversified across each outlet as time went on. *The Washington Post* used the reaction frame most frequently throughout the whole scope of their coverage, while *BuzzFeed* used the conflict frame most frequently, as seen in Table 1. Other narrative frames that were used include straight news account, conjecture and historical outlook. Meanwhile, the analyzed articles show in Table 2 that there was generally a variety of content frames used across the selected newsrooms. Despite this variety, some key takeaways show that *The New York Times* most commonly used the human

Graph 1

Frequency of BLM Coverage in Newsrooms

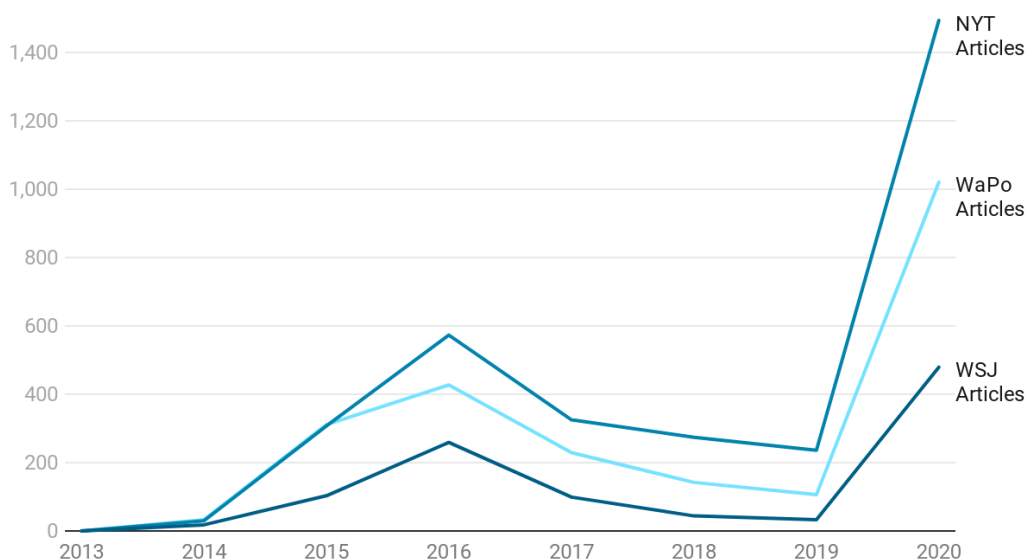


Table 1

Narrative Frames Over Time

News Org	2014	2017	2020
NYT	Reaction	Straight News	Conflict
WaPo	Reaction	Reaction	Reaction
WSJ	Reaction	Conflict	Reaction
Buzzfeed	Conflict, Reaction	Conflict	Conflict, Reaction
Vox	Reaction	Reaction	Historical
VICE	Reaction	Conjecture, Reaction	Reaction

Table 2

Content Frames Over Time

News Org	2014	2017	2020
NYT	Human Interest	Human Interest	Human Interest
WaPo	Human Interest	Human Interest, Severity	Human Interest
WSJ	Severity	New Evidence	Attribution of Responsibility, Human Interest
Buzzfeed	Attribution of Responsibility	Severity	Attribution of Responsibility, New Evidence
Vox	New Evidence	Severity	Severity
VICE	Severity	Attribution of Responsibility	New Evidence

interest frame in its coverage, as well as The Washington Post. Other favored frames were the attribution of responsibility, new evidence and severity frames.

The third research question looked at how the tone of coverage, in reference to Black Lives Matter, had changed over time for each news organization. Tone of coverage across the board is almost completely neutral, except for *VICE* in 2014 and *Vox* in 2020, as seen in Table 3. *VICE* saw an equal number of positive and neutral tone articles in 2014, indicated in that entry in the table.

The fourth question asked how the use of language and words with positive, neutral or

negative connotations has changed over time for each news organization. The findings for this question were unanimous, showing that overall, mostly neutral language is used in the majority of the analyzed articles across each news organization. The final research question investigated whether any of the surveyed news outlets broadly supported or blamed any relevant actors in their coverage of Black Lives Matter. Across all eight years of collected data, all newsrooms but The Wall Street Journal most frequently used supportive language and framing towards Black Lives Matter in their coverage. The most frequently blamed actor overall depends on which newsroom is

Table 3

Tone of Coverage, in reference to BLM

News Org	2014	2017	2020
NYT	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
WaPo	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
WSJ	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Buzzfeed	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Vox	Neutral	Neutral	Positive
VICE	Positive, Neutral	Neutral	Neutral

Table 4

Language Around BLM Over Time

News Org	2014	2017	2020
NYT	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
WaPo	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
WSJ	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Buzzfeed	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
Vox	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
VICE	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral

is examined, as shown in Table 5.

Overall, media coverage of Black Lives Matter in the six examined newsrooms has remained more stable than expected since the start of the movement. Examining each of the five research questions helps to show how each organization’s coverage has changed on a macro level. Language use and tone has remained fairly consistent across the board, while framing and frequency of coverage has changed dramatically over the years. In order to fully understand these observations, we must delve further into the reasoning behind the research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences between coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement between legacy newsrooms and digital-first newsrooms through a content analysis model. Different elements within the examined articles, such as frequency of coverage, language use, support and blame of key actors, tone, and narrative and content framing, were used to investigate six different national news organizations.

Major Findings

From the numbers that could be compiled from the traditional legacy newsrooms, coverage of Black Lives Matter spiked during key

Table 5

Most Frequent Blame & Support Actors by Newsroom

News Org	Most Frequently Supported Actor	Most Frequently Blamed Actor
NYT	Black Lives Matter	Government
WaPo	Black Lives Matter	Other
WSJ	Other	Other
Buzzfeed	Black Lives Matter	Law Enforcement
Vox	Black Lives Matter	Law Enforcement
VICE	Black Lives Matter	Government

times of social and political unrest in relation to the movement. As seen in Graph 1, coverage first picked up in 2014 when the movement first gained traction during the protests surrounding Michael Brown’s killing. A significant bump in coverage then occurred in 2016, when the high-profile killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile took place. Coverage across *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* then begins to dip, reaching a low point before skyrocketing in 2020, which can be attributed to George Floyd’s killing and the international protests it spurred. While Dhrumil Mehta from FiveThirtyEight attributes these patterns in coverage in part to Donald Trump’s presidency, I argue that we would still see these patterns if any other president were in office. Trump has made plenty of disparaging comments about Black Lives Matter, but journalists will still cover news that they believe is critical to public knowledge and wellbeing. Though the national Black Lives Matter organization and its subsequent city chapters have been active since the movement’s start, journalists have given most attention to the movement during its times of highest visibility, when people are out in the streets protesting and there are violent clashes between groups. Thus, the frequency of Black Lives Matter coverage from these three

newsrooms can be linked to the visibility of the movement. Journalists are likely to cover the most attention-grabbing news because they know it is what the public finds interesting and is what will get the most online traffic in a competitive digital media landscape.

Due to the nature of this digital landscape and the competition between media outlets, framing is another tool that newsrooms use to leverage their position as a news leader. This study looked at narrative frames, or how the story is written, and content frames, or what aspects the story focuses on. Across all years and newsrooms, the reaction frame was the most common narrative frame. The reaction frame focuses on a response from a major actor. In the case of Black Lives Matter, that could be the organization itself, individual activists, police involved in high profile shootings, police brutality victim’s families, government officials, etc. Considering how quickly Black Lives Matter became a politically polarizing topic, it is not surprising that the media would try to follow every development in relation to the movement, so that readers could stay in step with the latest information.

The second most common narrative frame was the conflict frame, which focuses on the conflict inherent to the story or that is brewing

amongst the relevant actors. With a movement that is socially and politically controversial in the United States like Black Lives Matter, actor reactions and actor conflict can go hand-in-hand. Table 1 shows that the three legacy newsrooms analyzed almost exclusively used the reaction and conflict frames when examined over time. Past research on the protest paradigm supports this—movements have a hard time grabbing the attention of the media unless there are large, physical demonstrations (Boyle et al., 2012). The three digital-first newsrooms had a slightly more diverse use of narrative frames over time, which included the use of the conjecture frame, which speculates about future events, and the historical outlook frame, which considers related events from the past. This can be attributed to the fact that the bread and butter of traditional newsrooms is still breaking news and straight-forward accounts, while digital-native newsrooms like BuzzFeed and Vox try to explore different angles or offer explanatory journalism.

In terms of content frames, there was a greater variety in frame usage over time, and a much starker difference between the frames chosen by traditional newsrooms and those chosen by digital-first newsrooms. The traditional newsrooms tended towards using the human interest frame, which emphasizes the emotional angle of the subject to help humanize it and make it more relatable. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* almost exclusively used this frame, while *The Wall Street Journal* used the severity, new evidence and attribution of responsibility frame. The severity frame discusses the uncertainty and seriousness of the topic at hand, the new evidence frame emphasizes the impact of new findings, and the attribution of responsibility frame looks at how the government and related organizations are

responsible for the issue being discussed. *The Wall Street Journal* is the only conservative-leaning outlet out of the six selected for analysis, therefore it makes sense that the framing of their coverage differed from that of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This points to each newsroom's hand, the new evidence frame emphasizes the impact of new findings, and the attribution of responsibility frame looks at how the government and related organizations are responsible for the issue being discussed. *The Wall Street Journal* is the only conservative-leaning outlet out of the six selected for analysis, therefore it makes sense that the framing of their coverage differed from that of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This points to each newsroom's respective audiences and what they may be looking for in their preferred newsroom's coverage. While readers of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* may want a more dramatized framing, readers of *The Wall Street Journal* may feel more apprehensive about Black Lives Matter and want to be affirmed in their trepidations and the newness of the movement.

Similarly, the content frames most frequently used over time by the digital-first newsrooms were also severity, new evidence and attribution of responsibility, though certainly for different reasons. Over the years studied, the new evidence and severity frames are specifically emphasized, pointing to how serious Black Lives Matter and the issues it champions are. At newer, more liberal-leaning media institutions such as *BuzzFeed*, *Vox* and *VICE*, reporters use these frames to point to the necessity for change and the severity of the issues at hand, rather than playing into the apprehensions of their audience. The use of these frames makes sense for *Vox*—an outlet that specializes in explanatory journalism. It is

important for reporters there to relay just how serious and grave the issues related to Black Lives Matter are.

In regard to the tone that each newsroom used when writing about Black Lives Matter, the findings over time across the six newsrooms are more homogenous than anticipated. With the exception of *VICE* in 2014 and *Vox* in 2020, who mostly wrote about the movement in a positive tone, the majority of articles examined over the chosen years were neutral in tone. While this is expected for the legacy newsrooms because they are traditionally committed to the standard notion of objectivity, I anticipated that a more prevalent positive tone would be taken by the digital-first newsrooms, though it is notable that there was any positive tone at all. Language use and its connotations also inform the tone of each article, and as seen in Table 4, the language use across the board is almost entirely neutral. Though there is a larger quantity of neutral language articles written by the legacy newsrooms than by the digital newsrooms, the digital newsrooms still used neutral language over positive language a majority of the time. Tone is seen as an indication of objectivity in this study, since it is industry standard to report on all actors neutrally, or without bias or subjectivity. This can be attributed to the prevalence of objectivity in journalism that has been passed down by the traditional newsrooms. In order to grow your audience, you must meet the expectations laid out by the institutions that predate yours, which harkens back to the gatekeeping role that legacy media plays (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011).

The last research question examined which actors relevant to the coverage of Black Lives Matter were supported or blamed throughout the articles analyzed from each media institution. The relevant actors were Black Lives Matter, law enforcement,

the government, the media and other. As seen in Table 5, the most supported by every newsroom except *The Wall Street Journal* is Black Lives Matter, meaning that the coverage given to Black Lives Matter was more favorable to them than to any of the other actors. The category most supported by *The Wall Street Journal* was other. This correlates with the ideological categorization of the investigated newsrooms, as *The Wall Street Journal* is the only newsroom that is conservative-leaning. Since Black Lives Matter is less supported amongst Republicans than Democrats, it makes sense that they are the only newsroom that does not support the movement over other actors (Pew Research Center, 2020).

In terms of blamed actors, there is a diversity of answers with an equal number of newsrooms blaming the government, law enforcement and other categories. *The New York Times* and *VICE* most frequently blamed the government, while *BuzzFeed* and *Vox* most frequently blamed law enforcement in their articles. Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* most frequently blamed actors who fall under the other category. These results point to the newsroom's ideological leanings, but certainly not whether they are a legacy newsroom or a digital-first newsroom. I anticipated that the three digital-first newsrooms would blame the government or law enforcement most frequently, but seeing *The New York Times* do the same could indicate a loosening of the traditional ideal of objectivity. Likewise, it is surprising to see *The Wall Street Journal* had "other" as their most blamed category, rather than Black Lives Matter, seeing as they are a conservative-leaning newsroom and conservatives show less support for the movement than liberals (Pew Research Center, 2020). However, it is unsurprising that *The Wall Street*

Journal did not blame law enforcement due to the link between police favorability among conservatives (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Theoretical & Practical Implications

With all of these observations in mind, conclusions about how Black Lives Matter has been covered in both legacy and digital-first newsrooms can be made. Differences in coverage are notable, but not glaring. Digital-first newsrooms are more likely to push the boundaries of traditional journalistic objectivity through use of tone and which actors they support and blame in their coverage, though adherence to objectivity still remains across the board in the realm of language use. Digital-first newsrooms, however, are more adversarial in their framing of coverage, prompting readers and audiences to question the status quo of society, while legacy newsrooms look to humanize the movement or question the movement and its activists. Both ways of framing can be important, though they point to the inherent nature of these two types of media institutions. Although only the legacy newsrooms were able to have their frequency of coverage assessed, it is obvious that coverage across these newsrooms is in direct correlation to major events in the trajectory of Black Lives Matter.

Legacy newsrooms, which are decades and decades old, are still married to their notions of objectivity that came about in the early to mid-twentieth century, a notion that takes the word of government and law enforcement as sacred since they are more institutional than grassroots movements and everyday citizens. The influence of traditional objectivity still impacts the industry as a whole, but it is obvious that digital-first newsrooms, though decidedly more progressive than legacy outlets, are nonetheless producing journalism that challenges the power dynamic of mass movements

like Black Lives Matter. Though liberal-tilting legacy newsrooms such as *The New York Times* are leaning in to this change, it is obvious that digital-first newsrooms shepherded this slow burn change across the industry. Maintaining audience trust is important for outlets, but in the year 2020, the existence of an objective ideal begs the question: who does it serve? Countless communities—Black people, American Indians, disabled people—in the United States are already apprehensive about the national media because of how they have historically covered these same communities. Objectivity is a notion that was invented by white men and continues to be upheld by majority white media institutions. Trust in the media is fragile and has been for many years and many reasons. As the United States continues to become more progressive, trust in the media will be contingent upon righting past editorial wrongs and making meaningful changes going forward (Kenworthy, 2019). This includes reporters and newsrooms being mindful of the frequency, framing, tone and language used in coverage of Black Lives Matter, and every other people-powered movement in the United States.

Limitations

It should be noted that my research was limited to 10 articles per newsroom per year. There was also a limited number of articles available for BuzzFeed in 2014, so in all a total of 412 articles were analyzed. Examining more articles from each institution would likely yield more precise data and results. Only six national news outlets were able to be examined for this study, and seeing as the United States has countless national news organizations, a more comprehensive evaluation that includes more of these newsrooms is worth pursuing. Secondly, and somewhat surprisingly, the digital-first

newsrooms had a much less sophisticated search engine built into their websites, which made sorting and finding articles more difficult and potentially less methodical than the legacy news sites. This also may have affected the findings. Furthermore, my findings are limited to the search terms “Black Lives Matter” and “black lives matter.” By using a greater variety of search terms, it is possible that a greater number of relevant articles could have been included. Lastly, a content analysis can only go so far in ascertaining the difference between Black Lives Matter coverage in legacy and digital-first newsrooms—in order to truly measure their effects, a secondary study would need to be done to see how this coverage affects their audiences.

Conclusions

While I cannot make a statement about the effects of coverage of Black Lives Matter by the national media, I recommend that more research should be done to see how media consumption of certain outlets affects readers' perception of the movement and the correlation between the two. The need for this research is critical—2020 has shown tremendous growth in approval for the movement amongst Americans, but outlets have no shared language that is used to report on it. The movement has called into question the status quo of the journalism industry writ large, asking which stories get told, who is sourced for interviews, and who is seen as an objective voice. Examining both changes in newsrooms themselves and their audiences is crucial as time progresses.

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Appendix

Codebook

Sampling Strategy

- Systematic sampling
 - 10 articles/per newsroom/per year

Coding Scheme

Part I: Basic Information

- A) Article URL
- B) News Organization & [ideology](#):
 - 1) *The New York Times* - liberal leaning
 - 2) *The Washington Post* - liberal leaning
 - 3) *The Wall Street Journal* - conservative leaning
 - 4) *BuzzFeed News* - liberal
 - 5) *Vox* - liberal
 - 6) *VICE* - liberal
- C) Author: copy and paste from the article
- D) Year:
 - 1) 2013
 - 2) 2014
 - 3) 2015
 - 4) 2016
 - 5) 2017
 - 6) 2018
 - 7) 2019
 - 8) 2020

Part II: Content Coding

- E) Language: what language is used in this article?
 - 1) Positive: language such as justice, reparations, peace.
 - 2) Neutral: language such as protest, demonstration, rally, march.
 - 3) Negative: language such as rioting, looting, danger, violence.
 - E1) Frequency of positive language
 - E2) Frequency of neutral language
 - E3) Frequency of negative language
- F) Blame: does the article place blame on any actor?
 - 1) Absence
 - 2) Presence

F1) If so, which actor:

- 1) Black Lives Matter
- 2) Law enforcement
- 3) The government
- 4) The media
- 5) Other

G) Support: does the article support or advocate for any actor?

- 1) Absence
- 2) Presence

G1) If so, which actor:

- 1) Black Lives Matter
- 2) Law enforcement
- 3) The government
- 4) The media
- 5) Other

H) Tone of Coverage

- 1) Positive
- 2) Neutral
- 3) Negative

I) Narrative Frame

- 1) **Straight news account:** no dominant narrative
- 2) **Conflict story:** conflict inherent to the story or brewing amongst actors
- 3) **Consensus story:** emphasizes points of agreement around an issue
- 4) **Conjecture story:** speculation of what's to come
- 5) **Historical outlook:** how current events fit into history
- 6) **Reaction story:** response from a major actor
- 7) Mixed frame
- 8) Other

I1) Mixed Frame

- 1) If there is more than one Narrative Frame, list all relevant frames here:_____.

J) Content Frame

- 1) **Attribution of responsibility:** examines whether and how the government and related organizations are responsible
- 2) **Human interest:** emphasizes the emotional angle, humanizes and dramatizes the issue and its effects on everyday life

- 3) **Severity:** emphasizes uncertainty, seriousness, and potential harm and threat to the public
- 4) **Economic consequences:** emphasizes financial and economic impact of events
- 5) **Action:** prevention and education
- 6) **New evidence:** the impact of new findings
- 7) Mixed
- 8) Other

J1) If there is more than one Content Frame, list all relevant frames here:_____.

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