



MEDIA@LSE MSc Dissertation Series

Compiled by Bart Cammaerts, Nick Anss j ETA1 T O d

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The author can be contacted at: joanntanh@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION

The protest movement in Singapore has grown lively over the last 15 years with energies directed towards a spectrum of political, economic and social issues that deal with values such as democracy, women, LGBT and animal rights, as well as concerns over immigration,

LITERATURE REVIEW

Protest Paradigm

Research has shown that despite the journalistic canon of “objectivity”, the media are not neutral third parties because of their links to the societal power structure. As they circulate ideas and images to mass audiences, the media end up reflecting the power relations in society and therefore the dominant perspective of those in power, thus acting as agents of social control through “the exercise of power over the interpretation of reality” (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1973; Chan & Lee, 1984; Schlesinger, 1990; McLeod & Hertog, 1999).

One manifestation of the media’s social control function is the tendency to report on protests that challenge the status quo through the “protest paradigm”. Coined by researchers studying Hong Kong protests, the protest paradigm refers to a set of assumptions that informs the media on what does or does not get covered, and how it gets covered (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999) Specifically, early propositions suggested that the more radical the protest group is, the more negative the media coverage will be, and the more closely the media will adhere to the protest paradigm (Shoemaker, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999).

But what are the reasons behind the news media’s support for the status quo? Researchers have identified a variety of driving forces such as the personal and professional backgrounds of journalists, the routines and practices of the journalistic profession, constraints of the medium, economic influences, source-media relationships, as well as political and cultural ideologies (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; McLeod, 2007; Schultz, 2007)

Despite the differences in views between researchers, both groups approach the study of the protest paradigm through the “communicative acts approach” which examines social control, deviance and norms by using media messages such as news coverage (McLeod & Hertog, 1999: 308). The following paragraphs will outline the ideas and debates surrounding the key

as reporters ruminate on their routines, respond to criticism and become familiar with new sources (Rauch et al., 2007).

Protest issue

Another characteristic of the protest paradigm that could affect the tone of coverage is the protest issue. While some studies focused on a single issue (Gitlin, 1980; Chan & Lee, 1984; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Papioannou, 2015), others compared coverage across issues and found that protests involving war, social or political issues received more negative coverage, especially when the deviance level was considered radical (Boyle et al., 2005; Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014).

Invocation of public opinion

The social control function of the media also includes the framing of pub

THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

Singapore's political system

Singapore's political system is a model that has confounded a number of Western scholars who are eager to categorise the small Southeast Asian nation-state of 5.5 million people into commonly understood polities. On one end, Singapore's regular parliamentary elections could fall within a Schumpeter (1947) definition of democracy. Yet others prefer to call it a "communitarian" or an "Asian-brand" of democracy, which emphasises a dominant party system and a practice of consensus, sustained by strong economic performance and "good governance" (Chan, 1993;

historical context of Singapore's politics, state-civil society relations, the symbolic importance of the Speakers' Corner as well as examined the dimensions of Singapore's news mainstream media and its affiliation with the government.

Conceptually, this paper adopts the protest paradigm theory, envisioned by researchers as a routinised pattern for coverage of protests, to study the extent in which social control messages are manifested in the mainstream news coverage of protests. This implies first setting aside the assumption that the news media in Singapore is biased against protests, in order to have a meaningful examination of the variations in the applicability of the protest paradigm, including its earlier propositions concerning the various characteristics. Next, this

competition from digital media. These factors, contribute an added layer of complexity to the research.

Although research on the use of the Internet to facilitate and mobilise protest movements has been increasing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; Goh & Pang, 2016), it still remains necessary to study the coverage of protests in traditional media as they continue to command a sizeable readership and fulfill an important role in the overall media consumption in Singapore. Related to this, the Speakers' Corner was selected because it is the first and remains the only outdoor site where protests and demonstrations are allowed in contemporary Singapore, without a need for a licence. Given the rarity of offline physical protests taking place outside the Speakers' Corner, it would be more feasible to focus the applicability of the protest paradigm and its characteristics to a single venue that has been legitimised for the airing of political views.

Finally, this paper also noted with importance that in contemporary societies, politics has become increasingly and extensively mediated (Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2003; Blumler & Coleman, 2010). How the news media frame protests, and how they give voice to protesters' views are integral to the media politics of dissent. As Cottle (2008) argues, much has changed

It is worthwhile to note that content analysis is not necessarily quantitative as the humanist approach to media content tends towards qualitative analysis (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Its qualitative form is useful in studying the deeper questions about textual and discursive forms. Furthermore, some studies on protest paradigm have also adopted critical discourse analysis on a small number of news stories, and has fared better in uncovering how lexicalisation and syntactic structures in press reports support hegemonic structures (Fang, 1994), or how journalists use non-speech quotation marks to express skepticism (Tuchman, 1978). These approaches overcome the weaknesses of aggregated text, which does not perform as well in providing descriptions of how meaning in the text is organised.

protests referred to those which focused on traditional news reporting of activities at the Speakers' Corner where individuals or groups promoted or rejected a change in policies and legislation, or sought to shape public discourse and worldviews. Rejected applications to protest and trials involving protesters that took place after the protest activity were also included in the sample. However, editorials, op-eds, columns and letters to the editor were excluded since they contained opinions and were not deemed traditional news reporting. Likewise, news summaries were removed because they lack content for substantive analysis. After some refinements to the screening criteria, the corpus yielded 289 articles. Table 1 summarises the breakdown of the number of news stories by media outlets and their readership or viewership figures.

Table 1: *Number of reports in corpus*

<i>Mainstream news media</i>	<i>Number of reports</i>	<i>Readership/viewership* (% of adult population)</i>
Channel NewsAsia	67	30.0
TODAY	43	12.6
The Straits Times	139	30.0
The Business Times	7	1.5
The New Paper		

social, infrastructure, race and religion. To keep the categories mutually exclusive, *political* was defined narrowly to refer to issues involving only democracy and elections. *Economics* looked at issues concerning jobs, financial losses, compulsory savings etc., *social* meant issues dealing with population, immigration, vulnerable groups (women, children, disabled, LGBT),

The use of sympat

Table 3: *Frequencies and percentages of key variables*

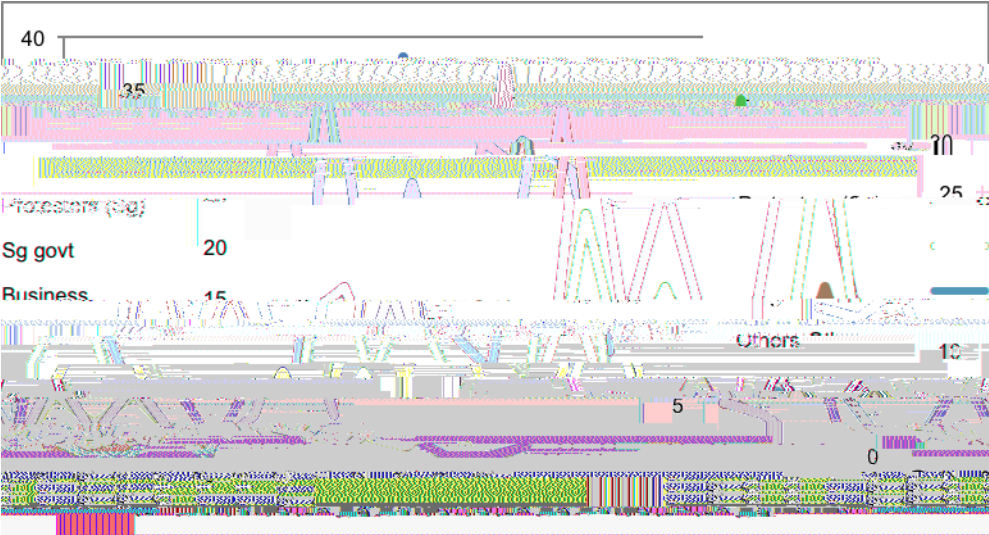
<u>Variable</u>	<u>Frequencies (%)</u>
Protest issue	Social = 99 (27.0%); Economics = 85 (23.2%); Politics = 85 (23.2%)
Goals	Major reform = 130 (45.0%); Moderate reform = 88 (30.4%); None cited = 70 (24.2%), Maintain status quo = 1 (0.3%)
Tactics	Legal = 167 (57.8%); Illegal = 102 (35.3%); None = 20 (6.9%)
Size of protest	None cited = 177 (61.2%); 101 to 500 = 35 (12.1%); 1 to 50 = 33 (11.4%)
Tone describing protest	Negative = 113 (39.1%); Neutral = 97 (33.6%); Positive = 79 (27.3%)
Sources quoted	

engaging in illegal marches and demonstrations, thus prompting the media to chronicle their brushes with the authorities and to portray them deliberately ignoring the law.

However, looking at Figure 2, these trends soon started to change very noticeably in Period 2. Setting aside the spike in 2014, we see that the amount of negative coverage ranged between zero and eight stories between 2005 to 2013. On the other hand, positive treatment of protesters saw wider fluctuations in Period 2, reaching its peak in 2008. Thereafter, the amount of positive coverage towards protesters dropped by more than 10 times between 2008 ($n = 25$) and 2015 (n

Corner as a formal mechanism for feedback and thus saw no need to respond to it in the early days (Chia, 2001).

Figure 3. Sources quoted from 2000 to 2015.



Fourth, we see from Period 1 in Figure 4 that out of the three possible goals of the protesters, major reforms had the highest count from 2000 to 2002 but dropped sharply in 2003 and remained relatively low before climbing upwards slightly in 2006. Looking at the text, stories with major reforms in the early years mostly centred on two issues: abolishing the Internal Security Act, which is a law that enforces preventive detention, and challenging the government’s ban on the wearing of the *tudung* (headscarves) to national schools. These stories on goals with major reforms subsequently tapered off but picked up again in 2006 when Chee Soon Juan, an opposition party leader, protested against the Singapore government’s alleged denial of free speech and peaceful assembly. In Period 2, goals with major reforms peaked in 2008, 2010 and 2014 over protests that involved substantial legal and policy challenges. Goals with moderate reforms followed a similar direction as major reforms but goals that sought to maintain the status quo was constantly at the bottom because of its low frequency count. Overall, the number of stories highlighting major and moderate reforms increased by about four times between Period 1 ($n = 43$) and Period 2 (

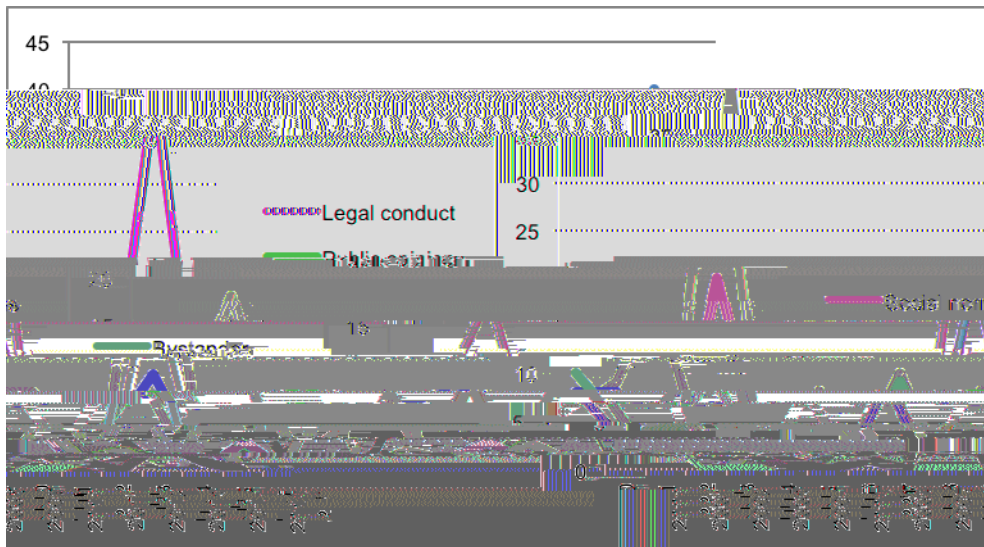
the heckling incident. In Period 2, legal tactics saw a higher number of protest coverage as well as wider fluctuations when compared to illegal tactics in the same period.

Figure 4. Goals and tactics of protesters cited from 2000 to 2015.

Fifth, longitudinal changes to the four modes to invoke public opinion are illustrated in Figure 5. In line with the frequency results for RQ1, the overall use of different forms of public opinion, except statements about legal conduct, throughout the timeline was relatively low. Similar to illegal tactics, legal conduct statements reached its highest peaks in 2002 and 2014 for possibly the same interpretations cited earlier. In addition, the use of social norms violation and an emphasis on the minority status of this group of protesters (i.e. statements on public opinion) in the news coverage also reached their highest peaks in 2014.

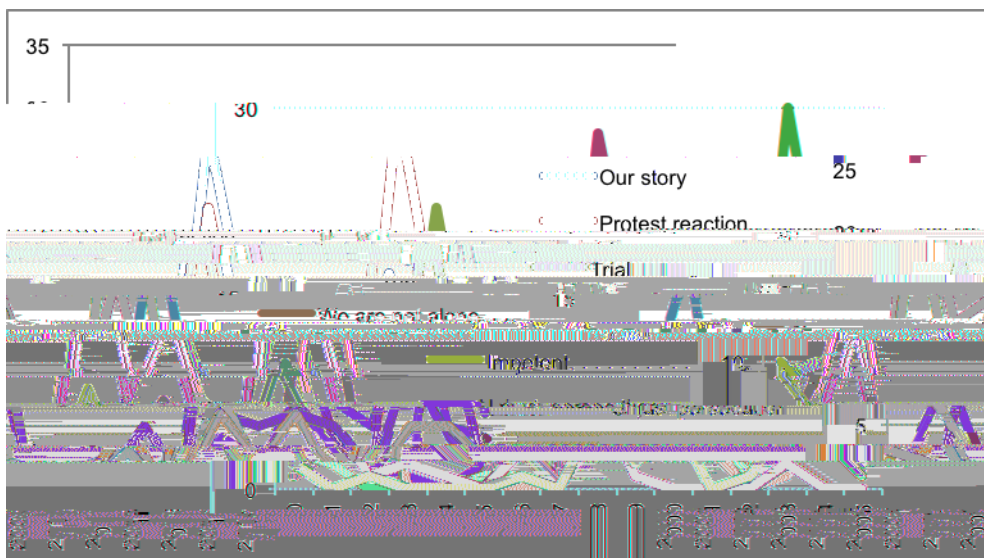
Sixth, we studied the stability and changes in the top six frames (out of 21 frames) of the protest coverage over time in Figure 6. In Period 1, the use of "our story", "protest reaction", "trial" and "protests are impotent" frames started out moderately high in early 2000s, before plummeting between 2002 to 2003, and staying at very low levels until 2006. In comparison, Period 2 illustrates saw a dramatic rise in "our story" and "protest reaction" frames in Period 2, possibly in response to the fallout from the Lehman Brothers collapse. Both frames

Figure 5. Invocation of public opinion from 2000 to 2015.



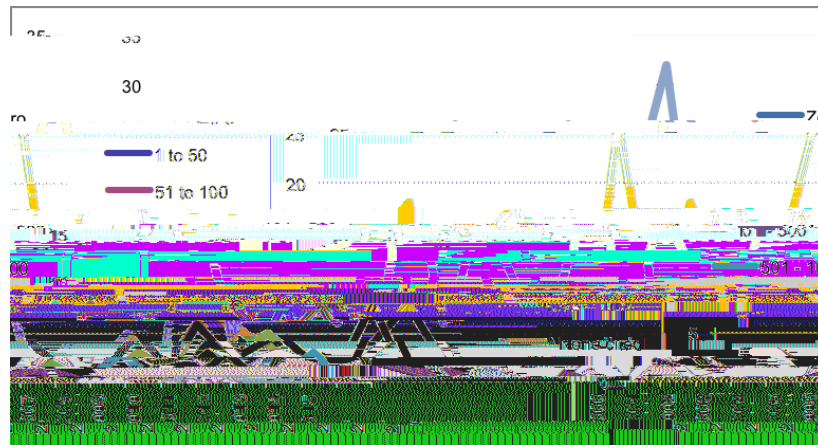
Interestingly, we see that “protests are impotent” generally declined from Period 1 to Period 2, possibly indicating support for the argument that protests are gradually shifting from the political margins towards mainstream acceptance as a legitimate representation mechanism (Papioannou, 2015). Overall, there is perhaps some evidence to agree with the argument on frame dynamism (Rauch et al., 2007) because of the growth in use of sympathetic and mixed frames, and decline in use of marginalising devices such as “protests are impotent” over time.

Figure 6. Use of frames from 2000 to 2015.



Lastly, although the majority of the stories still continue not to cite the size of the protest, Figure 7 indicates a gradual increase in the number of protest size mentions from Period 1 to Period 2.

Figure 7. Mentions of the size of protest from 2000 to 2015



SRQ2: Which are the predictors of the protest paradigm?

In the following paragraphs, we will investigate the factors that trigger the protest paradigm. Table 4 summarises the results of the multiple regression analysis that was conducted to examine SRQ2 and its hypotheses.

H1: Coverage of protests with more radical goals will be treated more negatively.

H2: Coverage of protests with illegal tactics will be treated more negatively.

First, on protest goals and tactics, the findings support H1 but not H2. What this implies is that in Singapore's context, there is partial support for Shoemaker's (1984) argument that the more deviant the protest group is (deviance comprising both goals and tactics), the more unfavourable the news treatment will be. Although the findings for H1 are statistically significant, it is worth noting that the tendency for news coverage to be more negative is only marginal ($\beta = 0.004$, $p = 0.002$), possibly affected by the 70 news stories (25%) that did not indicate the goal of the protester in the report. These stories could include court cases where

Looking at all the results from the content analysis and the statistical tests, the analysis reveals that Singapore's mainstream media showed conformity in a few instances but overall, there was a weaker adherence to the protest paradigm. Here, we offer three reasons from the perspectives of the news media, protest groups and the state to explain the findings holistically.

One possible reason why there was a low adherence to the protest paradigm is that Singapore's mainstream news media system is embedded in a starkly different political culture from the ones in Hallin and Mancini (2004)'s Western media models, where most of the protest paradigm literature was developed. Historically, Singapore's media has close links with the ruling PAP. Its journalists operate in a challenging terrain monitored by an eagle-eyed government that rejects the Western "watchdog" model in favour of one that plays a part in "nation-building". Traditionally, one might argue that ideological affiliation with the government of the day might make it more likely for the news media to conform to the protest paradigm (Weaver & Scacco, 2013; Shahin et al., 2007). However, the PAP is also aware that the Singapore mainstream news media, as an important channel of communication, needs to retain independence and credibility to fulfill the role of educating the public and to help them decide and judge issues for themselves (Lee, 2004). This has resulted in a general editorial policy that affirms the media's nation-building role while still upholding the journalistic canons of credibility and objectivity (Yip, 2012

begun to actively inform foreigners to “stay away” from protests to avoid contravening the law (Chan & Lim, 2013, Wong & Ho, 2013). Perhaps this could account for why goals were a predictor of the protest paradigm rather than tactics because protesters are increasingly adopting legal means without spectacle, preferring instead to focus on substantive reforms to policies and legislation, while refraining from illegal tactics or race and religion issues.

With the majority of goals advocating *major reforms* and thus challenging the status quo and existing power institutions, we can expect that the media, especially in a less pluralistic community such as Singapore that has a lower tolerance for conflict, to be critical of the protesters that target the government (McCluskey et al., 2007). Although pragmatic resistance could help prolong the survival of the protest group, especially those reliant on the authorities for funding and resources, it is worthwhile to point out that the consequences of “playing by the rules” i

quotes above, Singapore government sources also appear to have a tendency to include statements about legal conduct to invoke public opinion against protesters.

Given that authorities are notoriously resistant to change, we can expect that this unwavering concern over law and order would continue to be reiterated to deter illegal activities. The implication of this action is a potential reinforcement of legal norms and a generation of long-

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