Adherence to the protest paradigm?
An examination of Singapore's news coverage of Speakers' Corner protests from 2000 to 2015

Joann Tan,
MSc in Politics and Communication

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ABSTRACT

Communication scholars have used the protest paradigm as a theoretical grounding to explain journalistic conventions and why the news media tends to paint radical protest groups in a bad light. In this paper, we investigate the scope and applicability of the protest paradigm to Singapore's mainstream news media coverage of protests at the Speakers' Corner – the country's first and only legitimised outdoor space for protests and demonstrations without a licence. Based on a quantitative content analysis of English-language news coverage from 2000 to 2015, and a conceptual framework building on the protest paradigm, public nuisance paradigm, framing and the logic of numbers, this paper seeks to test the generalisability of the characteristics derived from earlier studies, identify new variables, observe the durability of and changes to the characteristics over time, and test the predictors of the protest paradigm in Singapore's context. It can be concluded from the findings that there are instances of conformity, for example, radical goals, Singapore government sources and race and religion issues would garner more critical treatment. But overall, adherence to the protest paradigm is weak and there are indications of further weakening over time. For instance, the amount of protest coverage, the share of protesters' voices and use of sympathetic and mixed frames have increased over time. Three reasons were offered to explain the findings holistically – the unique nature of Singapore's mainstream news media, the low deviancy level of protests groups and the government's unwavering concern over potential public disorder at the Speakers' Corner. Theoretical, empirical and methodological implications and limitations of these findings were also discussed.

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, national compulsory savings and financial losses. In 2013, Singapore saw its largest protest at the Speakers' Corner over the government's release of a controversial White Paper on population planning targets. At its peak, the mainstream news media reported that there were an estimated 5,000 people gathered (Chan & Lim, 2013), comprising of civil society and political activists, as well as a good number of the public-at-large. This represents a marked change from the several hundreds of spectators who had turned up to listen to the speeches at the Speakers' Corner during the initial years of its establishment.

Although protests in Singapore are not new, as seen by the religious and racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s, what is perhaps unprecedented is the extent to which protest groups pursue media attention through the mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012), in order to convey their messages beyond the like-minded, mobilise support and gain legitimacy. Capitalising on the opportunities accorded by the logic of numbers and witnessing (della Porta & Diani, 2006), protest groups, defined as loosely organised collectives that come together around issues of mutual concern (McLeod, 1999: 29) seek to bring about or prevent social change through media representation. As a result, the mainstream news media today has not only become an arena for the politics of dissent, where power struggles over the discursive and symbolic are fought and won, the media too are regarded as political actors.

These are just some of the emerging trends in Singapore's political, civil society and media landscapes that have prompted this paper's interest on how the mainstream news media treat the coverage of protests at the Speakers' Corner - the country's only outdoor location for protests and demonstrations that does not require a licence from the authorities. While there have been a number of studies on the growth of digital activism in Singapore, few have addressed how the mainstream media report on protests and even fewer focus on the Speakers' Corner. Using the overarching framework of the protest paradigm, this paper will also heed the call from earlier researchers to specify the characteristics of the theory and assess how strictly journalists apply journalistic conventions to covering different protest groups in different socio-political contexts across different points in time (Cottle, 2008; Lee, 2014).

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). For researchers, the protest paradigm provides a theoretical grounding to tease out the characteristics of the pattern of news coverage shaped by these antecedent forces.

More recently, some researchers argue that there is a weakening of adherence to the protest paradigm because protest coverage is becoming less predictable. They identified new driving forces affecting the degree of adherence, such as globalisation, increasing normalisation and mainstream acceptance of protests, an emerging media ecology based on the network of flows, the mediation of politics and the media's own agenda in championing certain causes. Against this backdrop, they launched their own investigation into the factors that trigger the protest paradigm in different socio-political communities, contexts and points in time (Cottle, 2008; McLeod, 2007; Papioannou, 2015; Rauch, Chitrapu, Eastman, Evans, Paine & Mwesige, 2007; Shahin, Zheng, Sturm & Fadnis, 2015).

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 characteristics and predictors of the protest paradigm derived through this approach.

Level of deviance

The notion of a protest group's level of "deviance" is central to understanding why protest coverage tends to be critical. Traditionally, deviance has been conceptualised and operationalised through two components - goals and tactics – and studies have shown that a more radical group would receive more unfavourable news treatment (Chan & Lee, 1984; Shoemaker, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; McCluskey, Stein, Boyle & McLeod, 2009; McLeod, 2007;). Subsequent studies extended the literature by measuring the influence of goals and tactics separately, and found empirical support for two arguments: (i) protest tactics rather than goals were a stronger indicator of how the news coverage will be; and (ii) the more radical the tactics, the more negative the news treatment will be (Boyle, McLeod, & Armstrong, 2012; Lee, 2014).

Sources

The media's heavy emphasis on official sources (e.g. authorities, business and community leaders) is also said to lead to more critical coverage. Broadly, the news media rely on official sources for several reasons: to add prestige to the story, to increase the efficiency of news-gathering and production, and to maintain an illusion of "objectivity" (McLeod & Hertog, 1999: 314). With this reliance, they end up closely mirroring or 'indexing' elite debates and only offer critical commentary if there is disagreement among the elite (Bennett, 1990). Journalists' familiarity with officials such as the police also has the effect of supporting the status quo and marginalising protesters (Ryan, 1991; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Berkowitz & Beach, 1993). Here, we can clearly see evidence of the media's social control function, covering stories that are told from the perspective of the powerful and undermining those on the margins, such as protest groups which challenge the status quo.

However, when this proposition was tested in non-Western media systems, researchers found that the political affiliation of the news media in Brazil, India and China affected the types of sources used (Shahin et al., 2015). Others found that journalists' use of non-official sources (e.g. protesters) augmented over time, suggesting that sourcing patterns might evolve

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 public opinion according to the perspective of the political elites (Zaller, 1992), which may provide influential cues for audience interpretation. According to McLeod and Hertog (1992), depictions of public opinion can be embedded within news coverage to marginalise protesters through five ways. In its most conspicuious form, public opinion can be characterised by reports of *public opinion polls*. However, it was more common to find other forms of public opinion in news stories, such as statements made by the reporter or officials sources that *generalises public opinion* and emphasise the deviance of the protesters. A third form of public opinion involves the *violations of social norms,* or shared convictions about the patterns of beliefs and behaviours appropriate for members of a group (DeFleur, D'Antonio & DeFleur, 1977: 620; McLeod & Hertog, 1992: 41). Any irregularity from social norms is regarded as a marker of deviance. When there is social consensus that *violation of social norms* is sufficiently problematic, norms may become codified in law, with penalties to punish violations. This is the fourth form of public opinion which involves *legal violations*. The final form of public opinion involves how reporters use *comments from bystanders* on the protests as a representation of the opinions of the wider population (McLeod & Hertog, 1992).

While traditional studies have often assumed that the invocation of public opinion adopts a pro-administrative stance, more recent research suggested that this characteristic could be pro-protesters too (McLeod, 2007; Shahin et al., 2015). For example, the public opinion cues in the Los Angeles Times's coverage of the Day without Immigrant protests indicated that a large segment of the community was receptive to the protesters and their messages (McLeod, 2007: 5).

Delegitimisation and demonisation

The media may also often fail to adequately explain the meaning and context of protest actions, and delegitimise protests by judging them as failures. They do so by using quotation marks to question the legitimacy of the group (Tuchman, 1978) or statements to denigrate the image of protesters and portray their actions as childish, disorganised, deviant or threatening (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod, 1999; Shoemaker, 1984), while ignoring the more positive aspects of the protest groups such as campaigning against social injustice.

Journalists may also demonise protesters through the identification of potential threats and negative consequences of protests. For radical protest groups, the media may create "moral panics" by exaggerating threats, such as playing up the communist elements of the anti-Vietnam War movement (Gitlin, 1980), or emphasising the violence, property damage, traffic congestion and the cost of law enforcement of minority anarchist and anti-war protesters in Minneapolis (McLeod & Hertog, 1992).

Frames and the public nuisance paradigm

One of the most important characteristics of a news story is the "news frame" (Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993) which is a contested concept but is generally understood to involve selection and salience:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993: 52).

The protest paradigm can be considered a form of news frame as a journalist's portrayal of a protest group may have an impact on how audiences and other protest groups perceive them (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Over the years, an extensive typography of frames, broadly comprising of marginalising, mixed, sympathetic and balanced frames have been established (McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Dardis, 2006; Xu, 2013). In their study of anarchist protests, McLeod and Hertog (1995) found that stories tended around the *circus-carnival, riot* or *confrontation* frames, rather than the *debate* frame. When extended to non-Western media systems, violence and violence blame continued to be relevant elements of media coverage of protests outside the US (Shahin et al., 2015: 159).

Related to this is the public nuisance paradigm, which focuses on the dismissal of the method of protest rather than the specific protest (Di Cicco, 2010: 136). The theory suggests that in a political culture that is more conservative, the media would adopt three possible narratives - protests are bothersome, impotent (i.e. no merit) and unpatriotic - to reflect the dominant view (Di Cicco, 2010).

While some argue that the notion of framing is relatively stable (Hertog & McLeod, 2001), others insist that this line of thinking may be outmoded and insensitive to the dynamics at work in contemporary protest coverage (Cottle, 2008: 858). So far, the evidence has been mixed. McLeod's (2007) study on the Day Without Immigrants demonstrations found a lack of derogatory news frames, possibly because illegal immigrants made up a large segment of the readership which made the media more sympathetic towards them. And as cited earlier, elite disagreement may lead to more pro-protester coverage (Bennett, 2010). On the other hand, other empirical studies which set out to test the durability of frames in a longitudinal study of protests against trade policies found evidence to support the resilience of marginalising frames over time (Rauch et al., 2007).

Size of protest

In social movement studies, the "logic of numbers" was identified as one of three core-type protest logics which legitimises the movement and its ability to mobilise people (della Porta & Diani, 2006: 170). Using the spectacle of numbers, protest groups hope to overcome the "selection bias" of the news media (McCarthy, McPhail, & Smith, 1996: 494), so that they can disseminate their messages beyond the like-minded, and establish their credibility and legitimacy in public discourse. However, past literature on the size of the protest has yielded mixed observations in terms of its adherance to the protest paradigm. Some argue that when the size of movements becomes disruptive enough to attract media attention, the coverage protesters receive is often unfavourable (Shahin et al.: 145). On the other hand, others found that the size of the protest was a common frame used in newspapers because of the absence of the usual fodder for the protest paradigm such as violence, property damage and conflict (McLeod, 2007: 189) and was used to portray the legitimacy of concerns of the protest groups. This could possibly be the case in Singapore where protests are generally viewed as less deviant.

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; Tay, 1998). At the other end, the common narrative from supporters of liberal Western democracy likens the Singapore model to "soft-authoritarianism", "nanny-state" or even an autocracy (Means, 1996; Diamond, 2002; Trocki, 2006). But perhaps what irks the latter group is that Singapore's version of democracy (or "benign authoritarianism") has been held up as a possible political model for other societies that do not embrace liberal democracy (George, 2012).

In 2004, Lee Hsien Loong, the eldest son of the country's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, became Prime Minister after taking over the reins from Goh Chok Tong, promising a more liberal environment. Besides the transition in Singapore's political leadership, changes were also afoot on the ground. Traditionally, the question if the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) was going to win in elections was never in doubt; what was of more concern was the margin of victory. The 2011 general elections was considered historic by many as it had the largest number of voters ever – 2.3 million, increasing from 2.1 million in the 2006 general elections, and the largest ever participation of first-time and younger votes aged between 21 and 35 (Chong, 2012). However, what prompted many political pundits and media commentators to use the terms "watershed" and "new normal" to describe the sense of change were the results. By most accounts, winning 60% of the popular vote and 81 out of the 87 parliamentary seats, would be regarded by many as a decisive victory. However, this was the PAP's worst electoral performance since independence. There were signs of broad swathes of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the PAP government over income inequality, housing, transport and immigration issues. As one academic observed, it was the PAP's inability to counter the public discontent over policy missteps, coupled with the opposition parties' exploitation of this weakness for more checks on the government, that led to the incumbent's poor electoral showing (Chong, 2012: 285). Furthermore, these political grumblings appeared to have spilt over into the Presidential elections held three months later, with a former PAP veteran only winning by a slight margin.

After 2011, there was an expectation that the opposition would perform as well or better at the 2015 general elections. Yet, the results surprised many because not only had PAP increased their share of the popular vote to 70%, but the persistence of a one-party-dominant state in Singapore was seen as an affront to the rising tide of democratisation. Reasons for PAP's win could be attributed to the national celebratory mood of Singapore's 50th year of independence, the sombre rallying of citizens around Lee Kuan Yew's passing, a correction of policy missteps, a shift to left in social policies and the electorate's desire for a stable political environment in view of external economic and security threats. Yet, in spite of this nation-wide swing in favour of the PAP, there appears to be no slow down in the expressions of political defiance from members of civil society and the public.

Singapore's civil society

Although the concept of civil society has many definitions, it is widely accepted that the character of a country's civil society is dependent on its political climate, the nature of the state and the status of state-society relations. In Singapore, the ideological fault lines of what is understood as "civil society" are said to lie between the Hegelian views of the state and liberal-pluralist views of some members of civil society. During the 1990s, the Singapore government, recognising that outward emigration of citizens was a problem and a more educated citizenry had more political demands, sought to scale back its intervention to allow for greater participation from civil society (Yeo, 1991). This, they felt, was needed to build a sense of ownership and affiliation between citizens and their country, and outlined how civil society could assist with decentralisation of the government and self-governance through the delivery of welfare services (Yeo, 1991; Goh, 1997). In contrast to the state's model of civil society, some segments of society saw their participation as integral to strengthening democracy, aligning themselves with the view that the government holds no monopoly on wisdom and, as such, policies would benefit from greater involvement from the ground.

Speakers' Corner

In a move that was both lauded and criticised by civil society, a 6,000-square metre open-air Speakers' Corner was established on 1 September 2000 in Hong Lim Park to allow citizens and Permanent Residents to deliver public speeches, without a need to apply for a licence. The venue was modelled after the Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park and aimed to provide a public space for political discourse, although with certain restrictions such as a ban on topics relating to race and religion and on foreigners. While supporters called the Speakers' Corner a move towards a "participatory democracy" model, these regulations were

seen by some as going beyond what would be regarded as reasonable and rational in a democratic system of government, prompting political opponents and academics to term its set-up as "gestural politics" (Lee, 2005). In further support of this argument, the Singapore government said that it did not see the Speakers' Corner as a formal feedback mechanism and thus was not obliged to respond to it (Chia, 2001).

Over the years, changes to the Speakers' Corner regulations widened the space for political discourse. In 2008, it became possible to hold demonstrations, in addition to speeches, exhibitions and performances, and the time period restrictions were lifted to allow for protests around-the-clock. A new rule was later instituted to ban the exhibition of any lewd or obscene banner, film, photograph, placard or poster. Online registrations to protest was also made possible through the National Parks Board's website, making it more convenient for protests. However, in 2009, the police installed CCTVs for "safety and security" reasons, to the outcry of civil society members (Wong & Ow, 2009). Media and government officials reported that there were 2,144 applications to the Speakers' Corner between 2000 to 2008, 141 registrations between 2008 to 2009, 66 in the following year, 169 in 2013 and 136 in 2014 (Au Yong, 2008; Khaw, 2015). While the lack of consensus on what constitutes the Singapore civil society still lingers, it was clear that the Speakers' Corner had gradually came into its own as a physical and symbolic site of contestation, mirroring the political and social developments of Singapore.

Singapore's mainstream news media

Many academics have also attempted to categorise Singapore's mainstream news media using normative roles. The most common description would be Christians et al.'s (2009) "collaborative journalism" where journalists act unequivocally to protect and safeguard the interests of those in power. Related to this are more negative connotations such as the "guard dog" and "lap dog" models, (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995) and even propaganda. Others were kinder, calling it "developmental journalism", seeing the news media as partners in national development (Bokhorst-Heng, 2002: 560; Richstad, 2000; Wong, 2004)

Providing more clarity on the Singapore media's role, then deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong set out the government's views in a 2004 speech:

> 'The media should report news accurately and fairly, in order to inform and educate the public. It should adopt a national perspective on issues...But it should avoid crusading journalism, slanting news coverage to campaign for personal agendas. This

way the media helps the public to decide and judge issues for themselves, and provides a valuable channel for them to voice views and opinions…Ours is a different model from the US media, which uses its powerful position to set the national agenda, champion policies and pass judgment on the country's leaders. We have developed and refined our model over many years to suit our own circumstances and needs. We should not abandon it, or unconsciously drift towards the American model. Within our framework there is space for the media to evolve, for excellent professional journalism, and for debates and contending ideas to flourish.' (Lee, 2004: 9)

Yet, there are others who take a more nuanced view of the mainstream news media model in Singapore, calling it "calibrated coercion" – a way in which the state provides the media with periodic reminders of their authority but also some latitude in the practice of professional journalism (George, 2005, p.15). In other words, the PAP retains its control over the mainstream media not through an unsophisticated form of coercion but a strategic use of power, economic imperatives and a careful balance of pressure in selected contexts. These interventions can be seen in two entities – the Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp Private Limited – which dominate the country's print and broadcast media respectively. Although both are privately owned, their management are linked to the government and generally hold a pro-government stance. While blanket censorships are rare, provisions in various media laws provide the authorities with powers to impose sanctions on broadcasters of content deemed offensive to public interest or order, national harmony or decency.

From the media's perspective, a former editor of the influential newspaper The Straits Times, wrote in a tell-all memoir that the pressures on the newsroom were on three fronts: (i) tensions with the state and readers; (ii) tensions within the newsroom between the "old guards" and younger, Western-educated writers; and (iii) economic pressures, particularly from digital media. With readers, he was aware that an increasingly informed and English-educated electorate demanded more political space and critical coverage (Cheong, 2013: 422). And with a growing political consciousness sparked by the 2011 general elections, media observers have also noted more "elbow room" today for the mainstream media, with political coverage becoming more balanced and moving towards the centre (Mahizhnan, 2011; Tan, 2015).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper has thus far mapped out the ideas and debates surrounding the protest paradigm, the public nuisance paradigm, framing and the logic of numbers. It also discussed the

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 study seeks to combine the protest paradigm with the public nuisance paradigm (Di Cicco, 2010) and the logic of numbers (della Porta & Diani, 2006) to extend the typography of frames and protest paradigm characteristics put forth by previous researchers. In addition, this research also acknowledges the impact that changing antecedent forces that may have on the media's adherence to the protest paradigm and therefore making protest coverage more unpredictable (Cottle, 2008; McLeod, 2007; Rauch et al., 2007; Papioannou, 2015; Shahin, Zheng, Sturm & Fadnis, 2015), by seeking to test the durability and change of the characteristics over time.

The theories will be applied to Singapore's mainstream news media's coverage of Speakers' Corner protests from 2000 to 2015. Although it was researchers in Asia who first coined the protest paradigm concept, it was only developed more fully in the West and mostly applied in Western contexts. This paper takes up the call to "de-Westernise" protest paradigm research and to re-apply it to a non-Western media system, specifically situating it in Singapore's "benign authoritarian" political model (George, 2012) which is closely affiliated to the mainstream media. It also aims to address the country's academic literature gap on traditional news media's coverage of protests.

Taking into account that the protest paradigm is a product of specific sociocultural contexts, and an outcome of institutional and ideological linkages between a country's media and political systems (Chan & Lee, 1989; Shahin et. al., 2015: 146), we adopt an idiographic approach that focuses on the coverage of local protests in the local media of a single country, thus evading the problem of "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1970). The Singapore context is worthy of examination as a single-case study bearing multiple protest issues because of the uniqueness of its mainstream news media – one that faces competing demands from the government and readers, while battling internal divisions within the newsrooms and

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 since earlier studies documented how law and order dominated protest coverage, marginalising protesters as deviant and delegitimising their aims by emphasising spectacle and violence. Therefore, it would also be useful to take a longitudinal approach towards studying how strictly Singapore's mainstream news media adheres to the protest paradigm across different protest issues, in different situations and at different points in time, given the political changes that have emerged in recent years.

Against the backdrop of the positions above and propositions highlighted in the literature review, this paper aims to answer the following research question, which is operationalised through two sub-research questions and five hypotheses:

> **RQ**: To what the extent does Singapore's mainstream news media's coverage of Speakers' Corner protests adhere to the protest paradigm?

>> **SRQ1:** How have the characteristics of the protest paradigm changed over time?

>> **SRQ2**: Which are the predictors of the protest paradigm?

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.

H3: Coverage of protests with official sources will be treated more negatively.

H4: Coverage of political and social issues will be treated more negatively.[1]

H5: The bigger the size of the protest, the less negative the coverage will be.[2]

RESEARCH DESIGN

The English-language mainstream news media's coverage of protests at the Speakers' Corner was content analysed over a 15-year period. Quantitative content analysis is deemed to be appropriate for this study as it produces a "big picture" over a large amount of text (Gerbner, 1969) and is particularly useful in identifying the trends, patterns and absences used by the media over time. Because of its suitability in identifying and measuring characteristics of the news coverage through pre-defined categories and coding, content analysis is often used in protest paradigm studies. Its quantitative indicators assess the degree of attention or concern devoted to themes or issues (Weber, 1990: 10) in a systematic manner that makes the process replicable – a benefit for future comparative studies on this topic, especially in a post-Lee Kuan Yew era where we can expect to see more changes to Singapore's political system. While there have been questions over the positivist claims of "objectivity" in content analysis because of the ambiguity of word meanings, category definitions or coding rules that affects the reliability of text classification (Weber, 1990: 16), inter-coder reliability tests have, to a certain extent, mitigated these weaknesses.

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[1] War protests were excluded given that there were hardly any protests on such issues at the Speakers' Corner for the period under study.

[2] This hypothesis was derived from della Porta and Diani's (2006) theory on logic of numbers. It proposes that a protest group would be deemed more legitimate by the news media and hence be treated more favourably if the size of the protest was large enough.

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.

In addition, other researchers repeatedly highlight that some of the best empirical studies combines quantitative with qualitative methods (Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdock, 1999: 3; Weber, 1990: 10), such as the use of newsroom ethnographies (Shahin et al., 2015: 160) to determine the institutional and ideological reasons why a journalist had used a particular reporting slant, interviews, focus groups or surveys to tease out these attitudes, journalistic routines or journalist-source relationships. Nonetheless, this paper places a heavier emphasis on quantitative content analysis because of the large number of articles to be studied over time. The purpose is to quantify the salient and manifest features of a large number of mainstream news media texts. The statistical results will be used to make generalised inferences about the protest paradigm literature in the Singapore context

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and time frame

The protest coverage of six English mainstream news media in Singapore *(Channel NewsAsia, TODAY, The Straits Times, The Business Times, The New Paper and MyPaper)* was selected for this study as English is the main working language. The stories were retrieved from news research databases Lexis-Nexis and Factiva, using the search term "Speakers' Corner". Besides newspapers, Channel NewsAsia's television broadcast transcripts were included because newspapers and free-to-air television are still the top two sources of Singapore-related news in the country (Media Development Authority Singapore, 2014). Moreover, these six media outlets belong to the two largest news media companies in Singapore. The search period (1 September 2000 – 31 December 2015) was selected to cover all press coverage since the launch of the Speakers' Corner.

The sample of articles retrieved was exhaustive and scanned for relevance. Articles about the

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*

Mainstream news media	*Number of reports*	*Readership/viewership* (% of adult population)*
Channel NewsAsia	67	30.0
TODAY	43	12.6
The Straits Times	139	30.0
The Business Times	7	1.5
The New Paper	30	7.4
MyPaper	3	5.7
Total	289	-

*Source: *Nielson Media Index Report 2015.*

Designing the code book

The article was chosen as the unit of analysis over the paragraph or sentence even though the reliability of content categories decreases as the level of aggregation increases (Grey, Kaplan & Lasswell, 1965). This compromise was made given the extensiveness in coding 289 articles. To overcome content analysis's deductive-inductive dichotomy, this research adopted Kuhn's (1970) approach and undertook exploratory work and test coding on sample articles, before a final code book was established. To address the research questions and hypotheses, the coding scheme drew heavily upon McLeod & Hertog's (1999) characteristics of the protest paradigm, but adjusted the variables and coding protocols to account for deviations from the Western protest paradigm research.

First, the protest coverage was coded for year of publication and media outlet. Protest coverage that contained any of the following categories were coded as 1: *political, economic,*

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), education, healthcare, arts and culture, and sports, *infrastructure* was used for transport, environment and housing issues, while *race and religion* was included as a separate standalone category as it was the only protest issue banned under the Speakers' Corner regulations.

Goals of protesters were coded in the following order 1 =*"maintain status quo"*, 2 = *"moderate reform"* (e.g. minor policy reform, raising awareness, showing solidarity) 3 =*"major reform"* (e.g. major policy reform, abolishing laws, overturning court rulings or governing structures, investigations, filing legal suits) and 99 = *"none"*. Departing from the previous research which usually code tactics of protesters along a continuum of deviance, tactics of protesters were coded as 1 =*"legal"*, 2 =*"illegal"* or 99 = *"none"*, due to the legal boundaries of the Speakers' Corner which were pre-determined by the authorities.

To code for sources, *governments, industries and businesses, and community leaders and institutions* were considered official sources while non-official sources include *protest leaders and participants (Singapore citizen or PR), protest leaders and participants (non-Singapore citizen and non-PR), laypeople* and *others* (e.g. academics, media, experts etc.). The size of the protest was coded: 0 = *zero*, 1 = *1 to 50*, 2 = *51 to 100*, 3 = *101 to 500*, 4 = *501 to 1,000*, 5 = *Over 1,000*, 99 = *none*. The tone of coverage for the entire story was measured on an interval scale: 1 = *positive*, 2 = *neutral*, 3 = *negative*. Each paragraph in the story was first assessed and scored before the tone with the highest total score was coded. The invocation of public opinion was probed through: (i) *statements about public opinion*; (ii) *social norms*; (iii) *legal conduct*; and (iv) *bystander portrayals*, and coded as 1 = *mentioned*, 0 = *not mentioned*. Similarly, where *terms to delegitimise* or *demonise* were used in the protest coverage, they were coded as 1 = *mentioned*, 0 = *not mentioned*.

Lastly, the examination of frames employed in the news reports relied extensively on McLeod and Hertog's (1999) framework and Di Cicco's (2010) nuisance paradigm narratives: (i) marginalising frames: *carnival, freakshow, romper room, storm watch and moral decay*; (ii) mixed frames: *showdown, protest reaction, psychoanalysis, association, comparison and trial*; (iii) sympathetic frames: *creative expression, unjust persecution, our story and we are not alone*; (iv) balanced frame: *debate*; (v) protests as *bothersome, impotent or unpatriotic*. They were coded as 1 = *mentioned*, and 0 = *not mentioned*. The Appendix sets

out the code book in detail.

Inter-coder reliability (ICR)

After revisions were made to the draft code book in the pilot study, two trained Singapore postgraduate students each coded a sample of 30 articles (about 10% of the corpus) independently using the revised code book. An inter-coder reliability test using the kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among coders. The results ranged from 0.60 to 1.00, which is in line with the interpretation of the level of agreement for Cohen's Kappa provided by Landis and Koch (1977). However, since Cohen's Kappa can only measure ICR for nominal scales, variables with scale or ordinal measurements were calculated manually using percent agreement. Table 2 sets out the details of the results.

Table 2: *Summary of level of agreement for variables*

Level of agreement	Variables
Perfect or substantial (0.80 to 1.00 for Kappa)	Year of publication*, media outlet, type of protest, tone of coverage*, size of protest, sources, tactics of protesters
Moderate (0.60 to 0.80 for Kappa)	Goals of protestors*, terms that delegitimise, terms that demonise, invocation of public opinion, frames,

Note. * = level of agreement calculated manually through percent agreement

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To help answer the research questions and hypotheses, descriptive statistics of the major variables derived from the content analysis was analysed. Table 3 summarises the key frequencies and percentages of the findings.

Although the proportion of news stories containing negative coverage of protests was higher than those with neutral and positive tones, the difference between the number of negative stories (39.1%, $n = 113$) and neutral stories (34.0%, $n = 97$) was only 5 percentage points. In addition, only one-fifth of the total protest coverage had included terms to delegitimise or demonise protesters, which departs from earlier arguments that the media tend to question the legitimacy or exaggerate the potential threat of the protest group (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). More than half of the stories reported on legal (57.8%) rather than illegal tactics (35.3%). Singapore protest leaders and participants ($n = 225$) were also quoted about 1.5 times more than the Singapore government ($n = 151$).

The use of sympathetic ("our story", "we are not alone" and "unjust persecution") and mixed ("trial") frames departs from earlier protest paradigm research where marginalising frames were more commonly cited to denigrate protesters (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Here, we see that journalists often gave protesters an opportunity to convey their views in their own words, as "our story" constituted 20% of the protest coverage. In addition, "we are not alone" (7.4%) portrays protesters in a positive light by drawing links with other like-minded groups in order to represent the protest as part of a wider phenomenon (McLeod & Hertog, 1999: 313). "Unjust persecution", the last of the three sympathetic frames, was also used in about 5% of the news stories, usually to chronicle the protesters' complaints of a lack of free speech and democratic rights. In terms of mixed frames, the "protest reaction" frame, which formed 19% of the protest coverage, confirms the argument that reporters tend to cover protests through "episodic" (isolated events) rather than "thematic" (broader context) frames (Iyengar, 1991). The "trial" frame formed 12% of the stories and Di Cicco's (2010) public nuisance paradigm which carried the "protests are impotent" narrative made up 5.6% of the coverage.

Group goals that advocated major reforms had the highest proportion (45.0%) out of the three goals (moderate reform – 30.4%, maintain status quo – 0.3%), and the use of legal conduct statements to invoke public opinion against the protesters formed slightly over half of the protest stories (50.6%), compared to the other three forms of public opinion (statements about public opinion – 20.2%, social norms – 15.4% and bystander – 13.8%).

Table 3: *Frequencies and percentages of key variables*

Variable	Frequencies (%)
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	Protesters = 225 (44.8%); Singapore government = 151 (30.1%), Others = 59 (11.8%)
Invocation of public opinion	Legal conduct = 128 (50.6%); Statements about public opinion = 51 (20.2%); Social norms = 39 (15.4%); Bystander = 35 (13.8%)
Terms to delegitimise	No = 233 (80.6%); Yes = 56 (19.4%)
Terms to demonise	No = 228 (78.9%); Yes = 61 (21.1%)
Frames	Our story = 122 (20.1%); Protest reaction = 116 (19.1%), Trial = 73 (12.0%); We are not alone = 45 (7.4%); Protests are impotent = 34 (5.6%), Unjust persecution (5.1%)

SRQ1: How have the characteristics of the protest paradigm changed over time?

Next, we turn to SRQ1, which investigates the stability and changes of the characteristics over time. We ran a cross-tabulation of the results from Table 3 over a 15-year period and illustrated the trends in Figures 1 to 7. To help with the interpretation of the results, the period of analysis was divided into: (i) Period 1 (2000 to 2007); and (ii) Period 2 (2008 to 2015), as this was where the differences were most noticeable. A chronology of events in Singapore and protest coverage was also documented. Broadly, we can see that the changes in characteristics over time followed an asymmetrical "U-shaped" pattern. Observations were

the most obvious in the earlier half of Period 1 and the entire Period 2, but not between 2003 to 2005. 2008 and 2014 appeared to be exceptional years where protests over the fallout from the Lehman Brothers collapse and an incident where a protest group heckled special needs kids sharing the same space at Hong Lim Park respectively accounted for the peaks in protest coverage characteristics. We will examine each of these variables in detail below.

First, the amount of protest coverage had increased by 2.5 times between Period 1 (n = 82) and Period 2 (n = 207). Based on Figure 1, the number of news stories started out moderately high in the early 2000s probably because of the newsworthiness of Singapore's first outdoor political forum. But it gradually declined from 2002, hitting its lowest levels from 2003 to 2005, likely due to the media's pre-occupations over the national concerns such as the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and alleged terror attacks on Singapore's transportation hubs by militant groups. However, it soon began to rise slowly in 2006, and then sharply from 2007 where we see an overall increase in protest coverage for all media outlets.
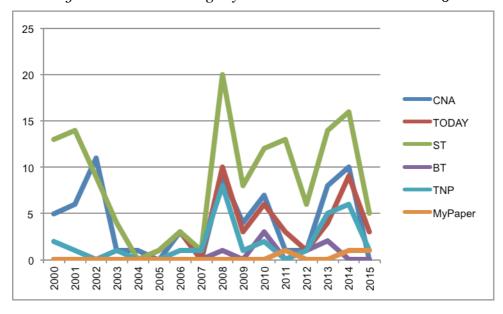
Figure 1. Protest coverage by media outlet from 2000 to 2015.

Second, the tone of coverage towards protesters was on average about 40 percentage points higher for negative news than positive news from 2000 to 2003. By examining the news stories, we find several possible reasons for this finding. In particular, the media appeared to cast a cynical eye on the protests in the early days, using phrases such as "they didn't have much substance", "no show by bulk of speakers", "same grouses repeated" or "the crowds have died away" to suggest that there was no merit in engaging the speakers. There were also a handful of protesters who had contravened the pre-2008 Speakers' Corner regulations by

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 = 2), almost reaching the same levels as in Period 1. Nonetheless, while positive and negative coverage have generally declined from Period 1 to Period 2, the amount of neutral coverage has been steadily increasing, indicating that there might be some evidence to support previous studies on the changing face of media politics of dissent.
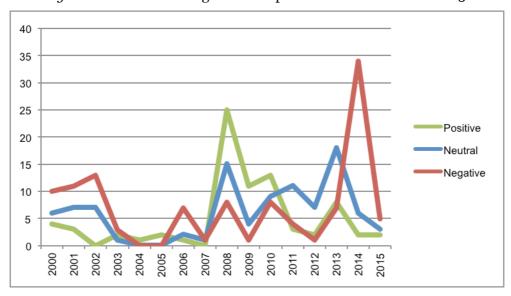
Figure 2. Tone of coverage towards protesters from 2000 to 2015.

Third, we studied the sources quoted in the coverage and saw similar trends for Singapore protesters, the Singapore government, businesses and others (e.g. academics, media, lawyers, experts not involved in the protest activity) in both periods. Specifically in Period 2, we see that the direction of change was largely the same for all four sources, as they appear to move in tandem with each other, with the exception of business sources from 2012 to 2015 where there were few protests targeting them. Figure 3 also indicates that Singapore protesters were generally quoted more often than Singapore government sources throughout the 15-year period. There are two possible reasons for this. One, this suggests support for the argument that journalists' use of non-official sources augmented over time and the media increasingly represented their views (Rauch et al., 2007: 141). Or perhaps the larger number of protesters quoted could be due to the Singapore government's lack of recognition of the Speakers'

Corner as a formal mechanism for feedback and thus saw no need to respond to it in the early days (Chia, 2001).
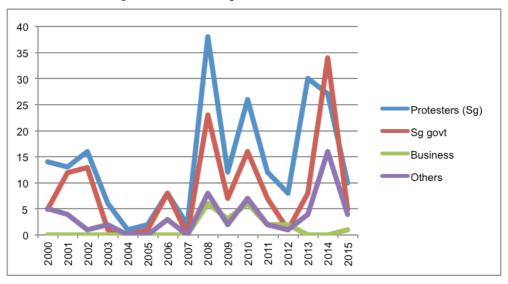
Figure 3. Sources quoted from 2000 to 2015.

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 (*n* = 175).

Figure 4 also indicates fluctuations for both legal and illegal tactics across the timeline. Stories that covered the use of illegal tactics by protesters was relatively low but peaked in 2002 when Chee Soon Juan contravened public entertainment laws for speaking on race and religion issues, and in 2014 when protesters were charged with public nuisance offences over

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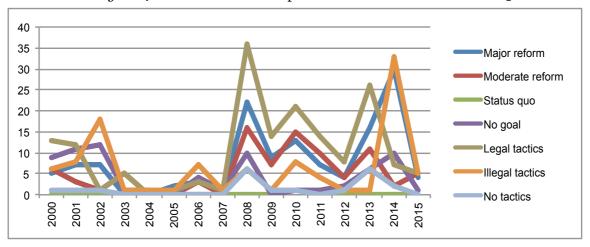
Figure 4. Goals and tactics of protesters cited from 2000 to 2015.

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 reached another peak in 2013 over the government's release of the Population White Paper which cited a controversial population planning target of 6.9 million. The use of "trial" frame was generally low in Period 2 but rose steeply over the heckling incident in 2014
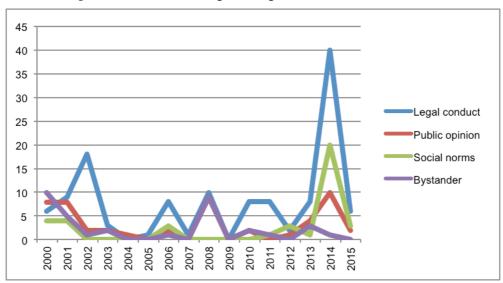
Figure 5. Invocation of public opinion from 2000 to 2015.

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.
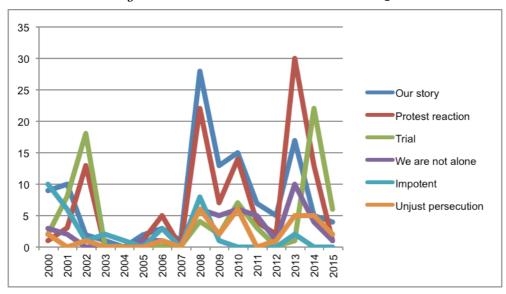
Figure 6. Use of frames from 2000 to 2015.

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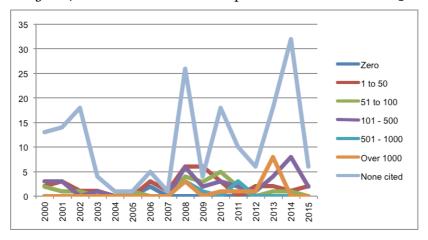
Figure 7. Mentions of the size of protest from 2000 to 2015

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 (β = 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 the focus was on legal proceedings and the laws that were violated, rather than causes that the protesters were advocating.

Looking at the data for H2 more closely, we see that the adjusted R^2 value was -0.003, meaning that the number of news stories with group tactics (*n* = 102) was too small for any significant correlation with the tone of coverage towards protesters. Therefore, we cannot draw any inferences to support or not support the argument that group tactics are a stronger predictor of news coverage and exert a greater influence than a group's goals (Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014), in Singapore's context.

H3: Coverage of protests with official sources will be treated more negatively.

There is strong evidence to support H3 for sources from the Singapore government, but not the other official sources, possibly because the number of Singapore government sources quoted (n = 151) was larger than those by foreign governments (n = 1), business (n = 20) or community (n = 11) leaders and institutions. Beyond H3, stories that quote laypeople were also more likely to be more critical in coverage. This might be attributed to the skepticism expressed in the early days that speeches at the Speakers' Corner were not worth engaging.

H4: Coverage of political and social issues will be treated more negatively.

There is no evidence to support H4. Coverage involving *political* issues was not statistically significant, despite earlier studies finding support for critical coverage (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014). As for *social* issues, which were statistically significant, we see that treatment towards protesters was more likely to be positive than negative. This perhaps is substantiated by a growing unhappiness over the Singapore government's emphasis on economic growth at the expense of social welfare which led to a widening income gap, thus prompting the authorities to "shift to the left in its policies", in order to quell possible societal divisions (Sim, 2015). Social protests that were treated positively include those involving gay rights, welfare of foreign domestic helpers, reduction in weightage of mother tongue language in national examinations, and the Population White Paper.

Going beyond H4, the regression analysis also showed that *race and religion* issues had a tendency to be covered negatively. The critical coverage is likely because the topic is not only banned but also years of government rhetoric had highlighted the sensitivities and potential threats of discussing these issues openly in Singapore's multi-religious, multi-racial and densely populated society.

H5: The bigger the size of the protest, the less negative the coverage will be.

Finally, despite past literature depicting how the spectacle of numbers may overcome the media's selection bias (della Porta & Diani, 2006), results for H6 were not statistically significant. A majority of stories still did not cite the size of the protest (61.2%), although we can see an upward trend in the number of mentions from Figure 8, as the size of the protest and its legitimacy grows. It may be that it is too premature at this stage to conclude if the size of the protest is a predictor of the protest paradigm but it could be considered for future research.

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: 190). As such, we can expect that news coverage of protests to be nuanced with different viewpoints and to different degrees at different points in time.

For instance, the tone of coverage towards protesters in the initial years was slightly more negative than neutral as journalists used the theme "protests are impotent" and legal conduct statements against protesters. Speeches on personal grouses rather than worldviews at the Speakers' Corner (Vasoo, 2000) could have contributed to the view that these protests were without merit and hence warranted a bias portrayal. A series of civil disobedience incidences involving protesters could have also prompted the media to chronicle their brushes with the authorities and to paint them as "deviants" intent on ignoring or pushing the boundaries of the law.

However, the tone of coverage moderated from 2008. Positive coverage outstripped negative coverage substantially for the first time in 2008 when the media took a sympathetic view towards investors who suffered heavy losses from the malfeasance activities of Lehman Brothers. Journalists too perhaps had more latitude to deviate from the protest paradigm as

the primary target was not the Singapore government. After 2008, the amount of neutral coverage and the use of "sympathetic" and "mixed" frames also increased. This lent some weight to earlier observations that there has been a shift in the Singapore media's attitude towards the centre (Mahizhnan, 2011; Tan, 2015), as well as signs of an evolving sympathy among journalists (Rojecki, 2002) and support for "frame dynamism" (Rauch et al., 2007) which challenges the argument that framing devices are relatively stable (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; Reese, 2001).

Table 4: *Predictors of tone of coverage towards protests*

Variable	Co-efficient	P-value
Media	0.021	0.544
Goal of protester	0.004	0.002**
Tactic of protester	-0.002	0.213
Source:		
Singapore government	0.411	0.000***
Foreign government	-0.871	0.218
Community leaders or institutions	-0.183	0.495
Industry or business leaders, institutions	0.107	0.576
Protest leader/participant (Singapore)	-0.108	0.317
Protest leader/participant (Non-Singapore)	-0.685	0.189
Laypeople	0.315	0.031*
Others	0.117	0.265
None	0.176	0.630
Protest issue:		
Politics	0.086	0.275
Economic	0.110	0.162
Social (excluding race and religion)	-0.315	0.000***
Infrastructure	0.233	0.179
Race and religion	0.345	0.051#
Others	0.195	0.111
None	-0.046	0.827
Size of protest	0.002	0.105

Note: R^2 = 0.323, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, #p < .06

In addition, protest coverage increased substantially over the years (except from 2003 to 2005 due to SARS and terrorist threats). This could imply several reasons: (i) protest groups are becoming more sophisticated in the issues they choose to debate; (ii) protest groups are

improving their access to journalists, (iii) protest groups are succeeding in conveying their concerns to and through the media (Rauch et al., 2007); or (iv) the news media is now be more willing to devote attention to issues and causes as a result of increasing competition in a fragmented media environment (Milne, 2005; Stroud, 2010).

Also reflective of the uniqueness of the Singapore mainstream news media is how the proportion of protesters quoted was consistently higher than the Singapore government throughout the period of study. Without further investigations of the driving forces shaping news-gathering and production, we suggest that there could be two inter-related explanations. First, the news media, in an attempt to convey the impression of independence from the Singapore government, made an editorial decision to give a larger voice to protesters. Second, as was discussed earlier, the authorities did not see the Speakers' Corner as a formal mechanism for the government to collect feedback or respond to it (Chia, 2001). Therefore, we can expect that the media would focus on the viewpoints of protesters as material for their stories. However, given that the findings show an increase in Singapore government sources after 2008, it would appear that this "no response" position has become untenable the years as the size and legitimacy of protests increased. What these findings illustrate are the complex and different meanings that the Singapore media play as a political actor, as well as a tool for activism by lesser powers and a tool for the dissemination of discourses from those in power.

Another reason for the low adherence to the protest paradigm is that protests in Singapore are generally considered peaceful and less deviant than the case studies depicted in earlier research – for example, Gitlin (1980) and the Students for a Democratic Society, McLeod (1999) and the Right to Party Movement, and Papioannou (2015) and the Cypriot protests. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious being that unlike most other countries, protests and demonstrations without a licence are confined to a 6,000 square metre physical space in a public park. Penalties are also in place to deter those who breach the legal conditions.

But more importantly, protest groups in Singapore appear to strategically adapt to their socio-political environment by practicing "pragmatic resistance", rather than confrontations with authorities (Chua, 2012). Recognising that the illegal tactics apparent in the early years did more harm than help to the advancement of their causes and only repelled the public, some protesters have begun to moderate their activities. For instance, Chee Soon Juan, the opposition party leader responsible for a number of pre-2008 civil disobedience incidences has of late rebranded himself as a "moderate" (Neo, 2015). Other protest leaders have also

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" include a repression of counter-hegemonic resistance strategies as a form of democratic expression and citizen participation, as well as a reinforcement of the legal norms and the existing power structures that protesters seek to challenge.

Lastly, similar to the discussion on protest group goals, one of the few indications of conformity to the protest paradigm could be attributed to the persistence of the state's concerns over the potential of public disorder at the Speakers' Corner (Wong, 2000). We can see this manifested in quotes throughout period of study:

> 'Those intending to speak at the Speakers' Corner cannot speak, directly or indirectly, on any religious matter, or on matters which may cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility between Singapore's racial and religious groups. This reminder from the Police comes after Dr Chee Soon Juan's recent speech on the '*tudung*' issue which the Police regarded as a breach of conditions at the Speakers' Corner' (Channel NewsAsia, 2002).

> 'In a statement on Saturday, the Singapore police said foreigners have to abide by local laws, and should not import their domestic issues into Singapore and conduct activities that can disturb public order, as there can be groups with opposing views. Those who break the law will be dealt with seriously, it said' (Wong & Ho, 2013).

These are just examples that could account for why protest stories with Singapore government sources and race and religion issues were more likely to be critical towards protesters, as compared to other official sources such as business or community leaders and institutions, which do not have the force of law to back such statements. As evident from the

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-term cues on how the audience should view protests and race and religion issues, impacting their willingness to speak out. News coverage critical of protesters could also sharpen the differences between the group and the society at large, reinforcing group boundaries or strengthening internal solidarity of the protest (Cohen, 1980). Nonetheless, as citizens now have more access to information outside of officialdom through the Internet, it remains to be seen if these lines from the authorities are sufficient to outweigh the counter-narratives.

Limitations

A few limitations of this study needs to be acknowledged. First, the design of the code book does not take into account the total number of times official and non-official sources were quoted *within* the story or if the quotes were for or against protesters. Instead, it merely records if official or non-official sources were cited. As a result, the variable may not have been a true reflection of the prominence of voice given to each source, which limits the insights as to why protesters were quoted more often than Singapore government sources.

Second, the protest stories under examination are not a true representative sample of the media's coverage of the level of political dissent in Singapore because it excludes opinion pieces and editorials, foreign media reports, as well as online and offline protests that take place outside the confines of the Speakers' Corner. Indeed, opportunities in digital activism have been growing because of the integral role that the Internet plays in informing and mobilising protestors to the offline protests. Singapore is no exception. In a less democratic environment, social media may be even more crucial for political dissent as the affordances of the platforms help local activists to circumvent the authorities' controls or avoid being marginalised by the media (Goh & Pang, 2016).

Lastly, while much of the protest paradigm literature is based on the communicative acts approach and the use of content analysis, we would recommend newsroom ethnographies as a useful means of examining the forces of social control that shape the production of news, which could help explain the motivating factors of why messages are the way they are

(McLeod & Hertog, 1999: 308). Future research ought to extend to these antecedent processes in detail.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings have helped clarify the scope and applicability of the protest paradigm in Singapore's mainstream news media coverage of Speakers' Corner protests from 2000 to 2015. Notably, while there are a few instances of conformity, there is generally a weak adherence to the protest paradigm. Radical goals and official sources from the Singapore government were found to be predictors of critical coverage, providing some support to earlier studies (Shoemaker, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999), as well as race and religion issues which appears to be unique to Singapore because it is a banned topic at the Speakers' Corner.

In spite of these indicators, there were more signs that the degree of conformity is weak and weakening further over time. Over the years, the amount of protest coverage, use of sympathetic and mixed frames, and protesters quoted have increased while the tone of coverage has moderated from negative to neutral. There was little support for previous arguments that radical tactics, social issues, non-Singapore government official sources would garner more negative news treatment (McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Boyle et al., 2005; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Boyle & Armstrong, 2012; Lee, 2014). Journalists also hardly used terms to delegitimise and demonise protesters, and only legal conduct statements appeared to have an effect on invoking public opinion against protesters. Three reasons were offered for a holistic explanation of the findings: the unique nature of Singapore's mainstream media, the low deviancy level of protests in Singapore and the persistence of the authorities' concerns over law and order over time.

Theoretically, this paper has contributed to the de-Westernisation of protest paradigm literature. It has also provided evidence of how the protest paradigm and the public nuisance paradigm could be combined to analyse frames in protest coverage, finding support for the use of "protests are impotent" in the initial years. Although an attempt was made to extend the literature by identifying the size of the protest as a new variable, the results were inconclusive and perhaps premature at this point in time but could be considered for future research when there are more mentions of the variable.

This study is also consistent with other scholars' observations in the broader research on media and protests that the contemporary mainstream news media have become less

prejudiced against protesters (Rauch et al., 2007; Cottle, 2008; Lee, 2014), especially in light of Singapore's growing political participation after the 2011 general elections, a normalisation of Speakers' Corner protests and a news media that is keen to fulfill the readers' needs of critical news reporting to stave off competition from digital media.

Empirically, the paper has demonstrated that the protest paradigm is limited when media systems, in spite of a strong political affiliation to the government, adopt an editorial policy of maintaining or creating the resemblance of independence, credibility and objectivity in news coverage. One might argue this could imply a Singapore version of the protest paradigm where journalists adopt a pattern of coverage that appears to be neutral but in reality, end up exercising social control behind-the-scenes, in the form of the government and media's agreed policy of nation-building while upholding the journalistic principles of independence and objectivity.

Finally, there is still a paucity of research analysing the effects of the protest paradigm on readers, protest groups and society as a whole (Shoemaker, 1982; McLeod, 1995; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Detenber, Gotlieb, McLeod & Malinkina, 2007). Notably, it is a challenging task to suggest casual relationships by isolating variables. Methodologically, there are also weaknesses in conducting experiments and surveys, practical problems in assembling an appropriate subject pool, as well as assessing the impact of messages on protest groups or society as a whole (McLeod & Hertog, 1999: 322). Nonetheless, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to investigate if long-term exposure to protest coverage has a cumulative effect on the attitudes and perceptions of Singapore audiences and protest groups.

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