

Defund, Reform, Abolish: An analysis of the media coverage of the police and prison abolition movement in the United States

Author: Sara Mortensen

Supervisor: Carles Roca-Cuberes

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Department of Communication

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Abstract: Critiques of the systems of justice and punishment in the United States are not new, but are experiencing unprecedented momentum after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May of 2020. After this event sparked protests against police brutality across the globe, it sparked something else: increased attention on the police and prison abolition movement and a national conversation around the reimagining of the systems of policing and imprisonment in the United States. This study analyzes how recent attention on the police and prison abolition movement has been covered by the media in the United States, specifically how coverage differs depending on the locality and political leanings of the news source.

Keywords: prison abolition, police abolition, defund the police, defund prisons, police reform, prison reform, media coverage of the abolition movement, media coverage of social movements

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Introduction

In the days after a Minneapolis police officer killed an unarmed Black name named George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 26 seconds, people began flooding both the streets and social media feeds with demands to “defund the police”, claims that “all cops are bastards”, and discussions about how prison labor is akin to modern-day slavery. At first, it felt like the nation had been here before: after the murder of Trayvon Martin, then Mike Brown, and then countless others. And yet, after a few weeks, it was obvious that something was different this time: the protests persisted (in some cities like Portland, Oregon for more than 100 consecutive nights), corporations posted (sometimes frivolous) messages of support en masse, and legislatures across the country began to seriously consider what it would look like to reimagine policing and prisons.

This reimagining is what the police and prison abolition movement has been working towards for decades. The modern abolition movement, with roots in the slavery abolition movement, can be referred to by many different terms – prison-industrial complex abolition, prison abolition, police abolition, etc. Whichever term is used, the goal is the same: “a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment” (Critical Resistance). The most radical goals of the abolition movement include the total abolishment of the current systems of policing and imprisonment in the United States. Acknowledging that abolishment is a long-term and difficult goal to achieve, the abolition movement also works towards goals to reform and defund (i.e. re-allocate funds from police and prison institutions towards social institutions that can better address harm and rehabilitation) the current systems of policing and imprisonment.

As the national consciousness in the United States remained focused on the issue of police and prison abolition, I became interested in researching how the media covered the social movement in the year and a half after the murder of George Floyd. The question of how the media has covered this movement is relevant for many reasons, starting with the fact that, according to Seguin (2016, 1000), members of the public who are not directly involved in a social movement are likely to get information about that movement through the news media. Therefore, understanding how the media covers a movement helps us understand how that movement is perceived generally. In addition, according to Cecil (2019, 2), “many form their opinions about criminal justice-related policies using information obtained from the media.”

A foundational study by McLeod (1995) further reveals the importance of understanding how a social movement is framed. In this study, it was discovered that subjects perceived protesters and police differently depending on the type of news story they read. That is, if a subject was shown a “one-sided story, [in which] the police were framed as responding to the protesters attempts to create disorder” the subject was “much more likely to disagree with statements that the police were out of line, initiated the conflict, acted violently and used excessive force” (McLeod 1995, 17). Not only does news coverage impact the perception of the general public, but has also been shown to influence the actual mobilization of well-known movements like the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street (Amenta and Elliott 2017, 822).

All in all, the importance in studying the media coverage of social movements is well-established and cannot be understated. Essentially, studies that only focus on events (such as protests) might fail to characterize all the dynamics involved in a movement (i.e. political media attention, attention to movement actors, social dynamics, temporal dynamics, etc.) (Seguin 2016, 1016).

Additionally, despite the fact that the police and prison abolition movement has been around for decades, academic research into how the movement has been covered by the media is severely lacking. This study, which analyzes how four news outlets have covered the movement from June 2020 until December 2021, will add novel, current, relevant research to the established field of studying the media coverage of social movements.

Literature review

Media framing theory & the protest paradigm

Research on how the media represents social movements has frequently been grounded in the theoretical traditions of media framing theory (McCurdy 2012, 246). Gitlin (1980) produced one of the most well-known studies employing media framing in *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Based on Gitlin’s foundational work, media frames are understood to be, as McCurdy (2012, 246) states, “powerful, hegemonic mechanisms which structure the practice and routines of journalism and ultimately influence what the news reports and how the news reports it”.

Much of the research on the intersection of media studies and social movement studies has specifically focused on protest events. While social movements and protest events are not

synonymous, they are closely related, with many social movements staging protests as a way to garner attention and awareness of their agenda. The concept of the protest paradigm has emerged in communications and media studies, as Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 414) describe, as a “well-established line of research support[ing] the theoretical position that protests that challenge the existing norms or status quo are routinely marginalized in media coverage”. Further, Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 416) explain how the protest paradigm is a “catch-22” for social movements in that peaceful protests, or protests that do not challenge the status quo, are not deemed “newsworthy” yet more violent protests that *are* newsworthy are subjected to negative coverage. According to McCurdy (2012, 245-246), in addition to media coverage of protests being predestined to be negative, there are two further negative consequences related to the protest paradigm. Firstly, media coverage tends to simplify the context of the protests while amplifying sensational aspects (McCurdy 2012, 245). Secondly, this sensational coverage then leads to the construction of protesters as ‘folk devils’ which has the very real-world consequence of police preemptively justifying forceful tactics (McCurdy 2012, 245).

If the protest paradigm describes the pattern of media coverage routinely applied to protests, then research has also uncovered the specific frames and devices utilized by media to reinforce this paradigm. Originally articulated by Hertog and McLeod (2003), Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 417) describe three specific media frames within the protest paradigm:

The “riot” frame accentuates deviant and criminal protest behaviors, such as the destruction of property. The “confrontation” frame emphasizes conflict and encounters between protesters and police. Conversely, the “protest” frame delivers information about protesters’ causes and demands, balancing coverage by giving information that ultimately can provide a space for debate.

The confrontation frame has also been called the “protesters vs. police” frame, with the protestors often framed as the initiators of confrontation (McLeod 1995, 6). According to McLeod (1995, 6) there are two additional devices utilized by the media to convey the “deviance” of protestors. Firstly, journalists often use the protestors’ intended opponents as sources. That is, quotes from police or government officials are more prominently favored in news stories while protestors are often not even interviewed (McLeod 1995, 6). Secondly, journalists may strategically use quotation marks to convey skepticism or the illegitimacy of a protest (McLeod 1995, 6).

Shifts in the protest paradigm

In recent years, academics have identified shifts to the protest paradigm that have occurred under certain scenarios. Particularly, Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 418) discuss how time may cause shifts in the paradigm related to the progression of protests, public awareness, or media coverage. For example, the way that the protest paradigm shows up in the media coverage of a social movement may change as time goes on, or may change before and after a judicial decision relevant to the movement. Secondly, Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 418) emphasize that the protest paradigm was “theorized within a media ecosystem that was more industrial than digital news audiences encounter today”. Both of these findings are important to consider for the current study as the research will be analyzing digital news articles specifically, as well as progression of framing over time.

Although marginalization has been the historical tradition when it comes to media coverage of social movements, examples of this shift in the protest paradigm have been seen in recent years with the use of more legitimizing devices in the coverage. For example, in addition to the riot and confrontation frames, Kilgo and Mourão (2021, 5) describe the “debate” frame in their study and call it a legitimizing frame. According to Kilgo and Mourão (2021, 5), “the debate frame provides the context of the movement’s social critique, complaints, or objections. This includes coverage of the movement’s grievances, demands, agendas, and goals”. In addition, Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 417) identified a “master frame” called a “rights” frame in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement (a social movement closely aligned with the police abolition movement). The “rights” frame is one that structures narratives concerning protesters through the lens of the movement being a human or civil rights issue (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 417).

In addition, media scholars have long since identified the differences between episodic and thematic coverage. Episodic news frames are those that focus on specific events or concrete issues (such as protests) while thematic news frames focus on contextualization of an issue or problem (Smith et al. 2001, 1404). Previous research has determined that the media tends to cover social movements episodically, especially in the case of protest coverage, and that this trend harms a movement’s objective by focusing on these protest events without any context as to why the movement is staging a protest (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 417). However,

recent studies have demonstrated that some reporting on prison reform is starting to shift towards more thematic reporting (Cecil 2019, 12).

Additional dynamics

Beyond media framing theory, there are other dynamics relevant to the coverage of social movements that are important to consider for the current study. Seguin (2016, 1000) discusses the importance of capitalism as it interacts with news content, particularly how capitalist systems create competition, therefore encouraging multiple outlets to report on the same stories. This causes a “media cascade” in which a story being covered in one outlet increases its likelihood of being covered in another, yet as Seguin (2016, 1000) states, “news outlets respond to one another's news with counter-framings that contest their ideological opponents' understanding of issues”. In other words, due to capitalist competition, news outlets are encouraged to not only report on the same story as their opponents but to report on these stories in a way that highlights the ideological differences between them and their opponents.

These media cascades then lead to a phenomenon called positive feedback. According to Seguin (2016, 1001), “media attention tends to increase the same variables that increase media attention, whether they be the scope of conflict, organization resources, frames, tactics, or the extent to which an SMO [social movement organization] is embedded in an ongoing news story”. This dynamic is important for analyzing the complex interactions between the tactics of a social movement and any media coverage they elicit. This phenomenon of positive feedback also explains why protests, although only a single facet of a social movement, are so highly favored by the media. According to positive feedback, because protests are deemed newsworthy, social movements are more likely to use them as a tactic to increase or maintain the newsworthiness of their agenda.

Finally, it is essential to mention the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT). According to Deal (2020, 10), CRT is a “lens through which scholars in all fields analyze race and institutionalized racism”. These “fields” can include the media, the prison-industrial complex, criminal justice institutions, and research institutions, and this current study is intrinsically intertwined with all of these. In fact, Anguiano and Castañeda (2014, 111) say that, “there are studies that endorse and extend CRT specifically to critical communication and how marginalized communities are impacted by race”. Although the abolition movement has no

centralized leader, many of the leaders are and have been people of color. Similarly, a large majority of people impacted by police interactions and the prison-industrial complex in the United States are people of color. For these reasons, it would be a misstep *not* to approach this research from a CRT lens.

Based on all of this previous research, the theoretical foundations for the current study include media framing theory, and within that the additional dimensions of the protest paradigm, media cascades and positive feedback, as well as critical race theory. It is now important to discuss the empirical research and findings related to media coverage of social movements, beginning generally and then moving towards research more specifically related to the abolition movement.

Media coverage & social movements

Seguin (2016, 999) identifies four aspects of social movements that affect media attention: scope of conflict, resources, frames, and tactics. In essence, social movements that have more elite allies and/or opponents tend to have greater resources which will allow them to receive more media attention, which then causes the movements to organize their messages and tactics in a way that will garner continued media attention (Seguin 2016, 999). Seguin (2016, 999) summarizes this point succinctly with, “media attention to SMOs is part of a dynamic process in which media representations are both causes and consequences of SMO characteristics”. Segun (2016, 1016) also critically points out the importance of studying not only *events* related to social movements (such as protests), but the entirety of the movements so as not to mischaracterize all the nuances of political media attention.

Amenta and Elliott (2017) proposed that there are two characteristics related to social movements and two characteristics related to political contexts that influence media coverage and, further, they hypothesized that an occurrence of three of these characteristics was enough to produce “extensive” coverage for a movement. Amenta and Elliott (2017, 806-807) describe the two movement characteristics are their “propensity to engage in disruption” and “size and organizational presence” while the two political characteristics are explained by “unified partisan political contexts will lead to the mobilization and coverage of all movements—right or left” and “politics of policy-making receives a high profile in newspaper coverage”. Indeed, after analysis, Amenta and Elliott (2017, 821) concluded that extensive coverage of a movement did occur

when at least three out of four of these conditions (disruptive capacities, extensive organizational presence, unified partisan regimes, or policy contexts) were present. These two studies by Segun and Amenta and Elliott form a basis of understanding in terms of how media coverage of social movements operate. Specifically, movements that have elite allies, resources, unified partisan and policy contexts, and engage in disruption are more likely to gain media attention.

Media coverage & protests

While protests and/or riots are but one tactic that a social movement may utilize to increase awareness of their agenda, most of the research around media coverage of social movements has been focused on these specific events. Empirical research by Smith et al. (2001) identified two specific types of bias that protest events face in media coverage. First of all, there is selection bias in which “media agendas can influence the selection of protest events that are reported on” (Smith et al. 2001, 1401). Further, Smith et al. (2001, 1401) confirmed that a protest is more likely to be covered if the objective of the protest is concerning an issue that the media is already interested in. Next, there is description bias which is very much related to the protest paradigm and other such concepts already discussed. Essentially, the media wants to portray the protests in a way that is familiar and appealing to their audience, and because the protest paradigm is so dominant, this means that description of protests tend to support the status quo, utilize episodic framing, and rely on elites for sources (Smith et al. 2001, 1401).

The specific devices used by the media to highlight the “deviance” of protestors has already been discussed. However, it is worth dissecting a bit further. Gitlin (1980) analyzed how the anti-Vietnam war movement was trivialized via deprecating comments by the media. Then, McLeod and Hertog (1992) demonstrated how the media highlighted the gap between protestors and the public through inserting public opinion into news stories. Finally, McLeod (1995, 5) states that, “the most obvious ways in which the deviance of protestors is communicated is through the emphasis on violence”. This focus on violence often causes the media to project protest “violence” from their intended target to the police, creating a “protestors vs. police” frame, as previously mentioned (McLeod 1995, 6). This conclusion is particularly interesting to consider in the current study given that the intended target of any protests in the police and prison abolition movement *is* the criminal justice system broadly, and is often the police specifically.

Media coverage & Black Lives Matter

Next, we can look at empirical research on the media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement because this movement is closely related, and even intertwined, with the broader aims of the abolition movement. Bagaric, Hunter, and Svilar (2021, 354) explain that while the main focus of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is ending police violence, transformations in the broader criminal legal system is also a focus. Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019), in their study about the changes in media coverage that occurred from the case of Trayvon Martin (2012) to the case of Michael Brown (2014), confirmed much of the theory that has already been discussed related to framing. That is, coverage emphasized conflict over peaceful activities and official sources dominated over the use of protestors as sources (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 425). Interestingly, the researchers looked at shifts in coverage before and after judicial rulings in each case and found that *before* the media was more likely to focus on the tactics of protestors while *after* they were more likely to focus on ideology (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 425). Although the post-ruling coverage was more likely to include legitimizing frames, “journalists still struggled to diverge from the influences and routines that create the protest paradigm” (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 425).

Interestingly, in a study about media coverage of the online movement #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (a movement inspired by events related to BLM), Deal (2020, 19) discovered that “coverage reveals tangible differences between coverage of events from Black American-centered news media and mainstream/regional news media” implying that ideological leaning does have an impact in media coverage of social movements. In this case, the tangible difference was that, “Black American-centered news media operates with a strong cultural and community focus, whereas mainstream news media approaches coverage from a strictly journalistic, hegemonic white perspective” (Deal 2020, 19).

Finally, in the realm of media coverage of the BLM movement, Kilgo and Mourão (2021) confirm, similar to Kilgo, Mourão, and Sylvie (2019) that the presence of the protest paradigm is still dominant. According to Kilgo and Mourão (2021, 18) their “findings show that debate-framed coverage has a small but significant impact on increasing support for and identification with protestors and criticism toward the police. However, delegitimizing frames can have devastating effects for protestors, further marginalizing their ideas and forcing them to escalate tactics, which in turn can be used to justify protest repression efforts”. All in all, this

very recent research confirms that the protest paradigm is still the dominant narrative, with small strides being made when other legitimizing frames are used and dependent on the ideological leanings of the news organization.

Media coverage & prison reform

Lastly, it is important to discuss two empirical studies that have focused specifically on media coverage of prison/criminal justice reform. Although reform is not exactly the same as abolition, with abolition being a more radical political vision, the two concepts are closely related, with many seeing reform as a necessary first step towards abolition. The Opportunity Agenda, an organization with the “mission to build the national will to expand opportunity in America” (The Opportunity Agenda 2014), produced an empirical report on media coverage of criminal justice reform. In this report they state that the three dominate media narratives include 1) the need to reduce the prison population nationally, 2) how overcrowding has led to inhumane conditions, and 3) “zero tolerance” school policies and the treatment of adolescents in the criminal justice system (The Opportunity Agenda 2014, 52). Although criminal justice reform is shown to be a part of mainstream media discourse, critically, “the narrative being communicated is incomplete...the links between mass incarceration, police policy, racial bias, and poverty are not receiving enough media attention to move the public discourse in the direction of more fundamental reforms”.

Finally, and most relevant to this current study, is research conducted by Cecil (2019) entitled *Newsworthiness of reform: prison news stories in an era of change*. Cecil (2019, 3) quickly points out a major issue when it comes to reporting about prisons: the fact that prisons are a closed institution and therefore coverage has historically been limited. Nevertheless, Cecil studied news coverage of the prison stories that *were* available in the United States and found that 59% of articles addressed efforts to reform the American prison system (Cecil 2019, 6). In addition, Cecil (2019) identified four reform-based themes in these articles. The first theme is related to the bipartisan nature of reform. In other words, “these articles remind readers that what makes these reform discussions unique, and perhaps newsworthy, is that both sides of the political realm are working together” (Cecil 2019, 8). The second theme is related to efforts to humanize the prison population, often by highlighting personal narratives (Cecil 2019, 8-9). The third theme, somewhat contradictory to the second theme, involves an emphasis on the fact that

reform is not for everyone, but only for low-level, non-serious offenders (Cecil 2019, 9). Finally, the fourth theme identified in these articles involves the complexity of reform: “Both challenges to and shortcomings of proposed reforms are featured throughout the news coverage of this issue” (Cecil 2019, 10).

Just as prison reform is complex, so is the media coverage of prison reform. On the one hand, prison reform is now considered a mainstream topic and yet the protest paradigm and “get tough” discourses are still prominent. On the other hand, Cecil (2019, 12) found that reporting on prison reform, with its inclusion of personal narratives, is starting to lean towards more thematic reporting, which has been proven by Smith et al. (2001, 1416) to benefit social movements more than episodic framing.

Research problem and questions

Critiques of the systems of incarceration in the United States are not new, but are experiencing unprecedented momentum due to two recent factors. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic alerted the public to horrific conditions in prisons that facilitated the spread of the virus, as well as caused many low-level offenders to be released (Bagaric, Hunter, and Svilar 2021, 353). Secondly, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020 brought the Black Lives Matter movement, and serious discussions around police reform, once again to the spotlight. In the aftermath of this increased discourse around prisons, police, and punishment, it is worth analyzing how this movement has been represented in the media as these representations greatly inform public opinion.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how recent attention on the police and prison abolition movement has been covered by the media in the United States, specifically how coverage differs depending on the locality and political leanings of the news source. The research questions that guide this study are:

- RQ1: What framing techniques are used by the media to report on the police and prison abolition movement?
- RQ2: How does the framing differ when comparing local (Portland, Oregon) versus national media?
- RQ3: How does the framing change when comparing liberal versus conservative media?
- RQ4: How has the framing changed over time from June 2020 through December 2021?

Research design

Sample

The availability of news articles related to the police and prison abolition movement dictated the sample. First, the researcher identified the universe of the study as consisting of online articles from four newspapers, two local to Portland, Oregon and two national publications, during the time period of June 2020 until December 2021. Portland, Oregon was chosen because protests following the murder of George Floyd lasted consecutively for at least 100 nights, providing ample material to analyze.

The outlets in Portland, Oregon include *Willamette Week* (liberal-leaning) and *The Oregonian* (conservative-leaning) – also known as *Oregon Live* – and the national outlets include *The Washington Post* (liberal-leaning) and *Fox News* (conservative-leaning). Secondly, the researcher identified the unit of analysis as individual online articles from these four outlets, found using search terms related to abolition (for example, “prison abolition”, “prison-industrial complex abolition”, “abolish prison”, “abolitionists”, “defund prisons”, “defund the police”, “anti-prison”, “protest”, etc.). This resulted in a sample of 99 online articles (24 from *Willamette Week*, 28 from *The Oregonian*, 24 from *The Washington Post* and 23 from *Fox News*).

Data analysis

According to Mayring (2014, 10), qualitative content analysis is a “start from the methodological basis of Quantitative Content Analysis... but to conceptualize the process of assigning categories to text passages as a qualitative-interpretive act, following content-analytical rules”. Mayring (2014, 10) also describes this as a mixed methods approach due to the fact that researchers take a qualitative step through the assignment of categories, and then a quantitative step in working through many text passages and frequency of categories. The process of qualitative content analysis is iterative, meaning that the process of collecting data, coding, analyzing, and then collecting more data was completed jointly rather than in a linear process. The process is also inductive, meaning that specific observations in the data led to generalizations of results, rather than broad generalizations or hypotheses guiding the research.

Through qualitative content analysis, the systematic coding of article text into categories allowed the researcher to identify themes and patterns across the sample. According to Mayring (2014, 22), the basic analysis method of “a content-analytical procedure is to count certain

elements in the material and compare them in their frequency with the occurrence of other elements”. The advantage of qualitative content analysis in the context of media coverage of a social movement is the emphasis on capturing meaning and context over numerical data, and the ability to discover textual and subtextual narratives presented to audiences about the police and prison abolition movement. These two elements of qualitative content analysis then allowed the researcher to identify specific frames used by specific outlets, as well as frames missing, in the reporting on the abolition movement.

In terms of data analysis, the researcher read each article in the sample multiple times, making notes on frames, themes, and characteristics of text through the completion of a coding protocol sheet (see Appendix). Data reduction was accomplished through the merging of complimentary categories during the coding process until a reasonable number of categories was reached. Sub-categories were developed as needed. Finally, data reconstruction was accomplished through the sorting, writing-up, and summarization of categories across the data.

Results

In this study, 99 online news articles from four different news outlets were read, coded, and analyzed – 24 articles from *Willamette Week*, 28 articles from *The Oregonian*, 24 articles from *The Washington Post* and 23 articles from *Fox News*. Each article was coded to ascertain: which aspect of the abolition movement was the focus of the article (i.e. police or prisons), use of the term “abolition” or “abolish”, sources used in the article, strategic use of quotation marks, framing employed by the author, whether the article was thematic or episodic, and whether the framing overall was positive, negative, or neutral towards the abolition movement.

Each article was coded with one frame that represented the framing technique that was most prevalent in that specific article. Each of the other categories contributed evidence to support the framing coded for each article. Analysis within and between categories provides the basis for answering the four research questions posed for this study.

RQ1: What framing techniques are used by the media to report on the police and prison abolition movement?

After data analysis and reduction was performed, eight distinct frames were identified between the 99 articles: division, confrontation, informational, progress, radical, protest, personal narrative, and celebrity.

Division

Articles coded as utilizing a “division” frame were characterized by a prevalent narrative centered on the political and/or ideological differences surrounding the abolition movement. Oftentimes, the division represented was of that occurring between members of opposing political parties (i.e. Democrat versus Republican) but, interestingly, the division represented was also often within the Democratic party and between those who do or do not believe in the goals of abolition. In this latter case, the division was always about how to handle the future of policing, prisons, or the criminal justice system generally. The police and prison abolition movement, a proponent of a radical reimagining of the current systems of justice and punishment, represent the more progressive side of this division.

There was also often division represented from the perspective of the police. For articles that focused on the division experienced by police, their “opponents” were often politicians who pursued policy to reform or defund police departments. Division between police and protestors were more often coded as utilizing a “confrontation” frame – discussed next – due to the aggressive, physical, and violent nature of these reports.

In all, the division frame was the most common with 27 articles (27.27%) utilizing this framing. A prime example of this division framing can be seen in quotes from the following article from *The Washington Post*. From the title (“*A year after George Floyd’s death, Minneapolis remains scarred, divided*”) to the content, division is front and center in this article by Bailey (2021):

The city remains deeply divided over the future of its police department, which some city council members want to replace with a public safety agency, a proposal that is likely to be on the ballot in November.

The debate over policing has divided many in the Black community — pitting younger activists who have called for the police department to be abolished against those who have criticized how the effort to defund or reimagine public safety has been handled.

As will be discussed later in the results section, articles that utilized a division frame could still ultimately frame the police and prison abolition movement positively depending on the sources used and other such aspects of the article. However, it is important to highlight the significance of the fact that the most common frame found in this sample was that of division. As established previously, public perception of a social movement, and particularly of criminal justice issues, largely stems from how the media represents such issues. From this we can understand that the public overwhelmingly perceives the police and prison abolition movement as a divided and contentious movement.

Confrontation

The second most common frame – utilized in 24 articles (24.24%) – was that of “confrontation”. This frame shares characteristics with the confrontation framing articulated by Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 417) as a frame that “emphasizes conflict and encounters between protesters and police”. While this “protestors v. police” dynamic is certainly the most prominent in these articles, there are a few articles in this category that are coded as confrontation because of the use of war or battle related terminology, because of the focus on the need for security due to protests, or because of the focus on destructive acts by protestors.

The confrontation frame is similar to the division frame in that they both portray different sides to the issue of police and prison abolition, and yet the focus of the confrontation frame is on the explicitly aggressive, violent, and often physical altercations between two or more parties.

A prime example of the confrontation frame is seen in the following quotes, all from a single article by Yau (2021):

Protesters who for nearly a year have demanded the defunding or abolition of the Portland Police Bureau responded to the fatal shooting by carving a trail of property destruction through downtown.

They shattered windows of banks, restaurants and a church, wrote “No More History” on the Oregon Historical Society’s front entrance, and faced off with riot police in streets near the upscale Pioneer Place mall.

While the May protests appeared to be a spontaneous outpouring of anguish following Floyd's death, tonight's acts were committed by a small group of strident and organized activists who use property destruction to avenge police violence and the City Hall policies they see as abetting it.

This article shows how journalists utilize terms like “faced off” to invoke battle-related terminology and emphasize the protestors versus police dynamic. Phrases like “carving a trail of property destruction” in conjunction with the title of the article “*Marchers Set Fire at Apple Store and Shatter Windows Across Downtown Portland After Police Killing*” exemplify the techniques common in this confrontation frame.

Informational

The third most common framing – found in 14 articles (14.14%) overall – is that of an “informational” framing. Informational articles are those in which the main focus of the article is on providing facts, data, or historical context on subjects related to the police and prison abolition movement. For example, articles detailing the data related to officer-involved shootings in the United States, articles that fact-check the claims of politicians regarding prisons, or articles that explain key developments, often utilizing bulleted lists, in an issue related to abolition.

In general, these articles avoid an emotional or personal angle to the story and focus explicitly on facts and figures, as seen in the following quote from an article by Rizzo (2020):

Today, of the 155,741 inmates in federal custody, 10 percent — about 14,000 — are in privately managed facilities, down from 15 percent in 2013, according to BOP statistics. According to the Day 1 Alliance, a trade association that represents private correctional facilities, only about 300 inmates in these facilities are U.S. citizens.

The prevalence of informational articles is likely due to the fact that the national conversation around police and prisons, and around reform, defunding, and abolition of those institutions, greatly increased after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Outlets used this increased conversation as an opportunity to provide resources to the public in the form of informational articles that convey data, facts, and history. As there was also constant movement in protests around the country at this time, these articles provided updates on the demonstrations in singular articles easily accessed by members of the public.

Progress

The “progress” frame, seen in 11 articles (11.11%), can be defined as articles that convey a hopeful narrative as it relates to the police and prison abolition movement. This can take the form of articles focused on reforms (either those proposed or those recently enacted), or the general progress that has occurred in line with the goals of the abolition movement. Within this category there are also articles that utilize the “rights” frame – a well-established framing technique within the study of media coverage of social movements. The “rights” frame is one that structures narratives concerning protesters through the lens of the movement being a human or civil rights issue (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 417).

An example of the progress framing can be seen in the following example from an article by Bailey (2020):

Hardesty and Eudaly said they were excited at the collective urgency shown by the city council to get reforms in motion sooner than later. Hardesty said she assumed some of the amendments she plans to be propose Wednesday would take her “about a decade” as city commissioner to accomplish.

“It is a direct response to both the unrest and what the community has been telling us for years,” Hardesty said. “The community doesn’t want people that are armed coming to engage with them when they are suffering from a mental health crisis.”

In this example, the author frames the article through a progress lens starting with the title – *“Portland mayor pledges to divert millions from police bureau, ban chokeholds in city reforms”* – emphasizing reforms aligned with the goals of the abolition movement. In the quotes above, the author emphasizes the excitement conveyed by Portland City Commissioners Hardesty and Eudaly to pass reforms, and the quote included from Hardesty highlights the fact that these reforms are happening a decade sooner than she hoped, therefore emphasizing the progress being made. In addition, by including the second quote the rights subframe is utilized, giving legitimacy to the demands of the abolition movement through Hardesty reiterating and justifying their claims and demands.

Radical

On the other hand, the “radical” frame was found in 9 articles (9.09%) out of the total sample and is characterized by narratives that frame the movement primarily through a lens of extremism, or emphasize the most extreme actions and ideologies of members of the abolition

movement. For example, the following quotes from an article by Graham and Bozell (2020) reveals many techniques used to convey a radical frame:

The radicals behind this movement don't just tweet about abolishing the police. They also talk about abolishing prisons. If violence is the problem, how is emptying prisons the solution? What next? Abolish the courts?

These activists seem to think only police officers commit the kind of violence worth protesting. Prosecuting violent crimes like burglary, rape and murder is apparently racist. Conversation about Black-on-Black crime is treated like a distraction employed by racists.

The radical experiment is coming. Cities will send social workers instead of police officers to deal with domestic violence complaints and drug overdoses. Will unarmed social workers be harmed in these volatile situations? Will they wish they had an armed cop backing them up?

Of course, the most obvious technique is the explicit use of the word “radical” to characterize the movement and/or ideology associated with the abolition movement. In addition, there is abundant use of rhetorical questions to encourage the audience to think about such scenarios without providing any context as to how someone from the abolition movement might answer such questions. The author also uses words like “apparently” to convey skepticism and phrases like “The radical experiment is coming” to incite fear in the audience.

Protest

Next is another frame that has already been well-established by research into the media coverage of social movements: the “protest” frame. According to Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 417), “the “protest” frame delivers information about protesters’ causes and demands, balancing coverage by giving information that ultimately can provide a space for debate”. This is very similar to the “debate” frame, also discussed previously. In this study, the protest frame was found in only 5 articles (5.05%) of the total sample. A prime example of the protest frame can be seen in the following quote from an article by Tan (2020):

Sofia Martinez, a 21-year-old D.C. native, said the importance of decreasing funding for the police and increasing funding for minority communities was especially important given how much the District has gentrified in recent years.

In this example, the author uses a protester in the movement as a direct source in the article, providing the reader with context for their perspective and demands. The author provides quotes not only from this single protester but many, further highlighting the nuances present within the beliefs of the those in the movement, and providing the “space for debate” characteristic of the protest frame.

Personal Narrative

The “personal narrative” frame, while only found in 5 articles (5.05%), is an impactful frame because it is characterized by the representation of the abolition movement through the lens of a single person’s personal experiences. Most often this took the form of articles that were direct interviews with one or a few people, or profiles about specific people in the movement. In a memorable article by Saslow (2020), the author details the story of Larry Muzzy, one of the first teenagers to be sentenced after the passage of Oregon’s Measure 11 mandatory minimum sentencing law. The article not only provides background and context to Muzzy’s experiences with the criminal justice system as a teenager, but Saslow’s father was actually the judge who sentenced Muzzy. Through interviews with her father as well as Muzzy, the author provides a personal narrative of how two very different individuals were impacted in very different ways by a law such as Measure 11. This framing, in general, provides the reader with greater insight, understanding, and sympathy of those involved in the abolition movement.

Celebrity

Finally, the last and least frequently used was a “celebrity” frame, only used in 4 articles (4.04%) of the total sample. A celebrity frame is characterized by a representation of the abolition movement through the lens of what a celebrity believes or has said about the movement. For example, an article by Napoli (2021) frames a discussion of prison reform around what household names Caitlyn Jenner and Kim Kardashian have to say about it:

"[Kim] believes Caitlyn's 'tough on crime' mindset -- reminiscent of Trump's -- only hurts communities because it costs taxpayers more and fails to address the underlying reasons why people commit crime," the outlet reported, per the source.

While this was the least common type of framing it still shows the power that “elites” have in informing the media discourse around a specific issue. Other celebrities or elites utilized in this type of framing included Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Colin Kaepernick, and Chelsea Clinton.

Thematic v. Episodic

Throughout the coding process, each article was determined to be either “thematic” or “episodic”. As mentioned previously, episodic news frames are those that focus on specific events (in the case of the abolition movement this is often protests) while thematic news frames focus on contextualization of an issue or problem (Smith et al. 2001, 1404). According to Smith et al. (2001, 1416), thematic reporting has more benefit to social movements than episodic framing, which makes sense considering thematic news reports provide context and background that help readers make sense of the actions, demands, and beliefs of a particular social movement.

Articles from *The Washington Post* and *The Oregonian* were overwhelmingly thematic with 83.33% and 85.71% thematic articles, respectively. Interestingly, articles from *Willamette Week* were exactly split between thematic and episodic with 50% for each. Finally, *Fox News* was mostly episodic with 73.91% of articles being coded as such.

Episodic articles most often focused on protest events, such as an article by DeMarche (2020) titled “*Portland protest turns violent, brutal assault caught on video*” that examines a confrontation between protesters and the driver of a pickup truck. Meanwhile, thematic articles often explored the history and background of the criminal justice system, providing context to the protest events and national conversation around prisons and police. One such example is the article by Kisiel (2021) titled “*Loopholes have preserved slavery for more than 150 years after abolition*” in which the author provides a historical dive into the language of the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution: where the language came from, how it evolved and got ratified, and the implications it has on slavery and the modern-day prison system.

Unsurprisingly, average article length was correlated with thematic versus episodic coverage, with the outlets producing the most thematic articles (*The Washington Post* and *The Oregonian*) also having the longest average word count per article (1,319 and 1,392 words, respectively). Conversely, *Fox News*, the outlet with the most episodic articles, had the lowest

average word count at 681 words. This result makes perfect sense as thematic articles provide more context, background, and historical perspective to an issue and therefore generally need more words to convey such information.

Positive, Negative, Neutral

Finally, the last major category to discuss for this first research question is the coding of each article as either positive, negative, or neutral in terms of its framing of the abolition movement. Positive articles tended to legitimize the movement and its demands by framing members and/or goals of the movement as productive and progressive for society, whereas negative articles delegitimized the movement by framing members and/or goals as destructive or delusional. Neutral articles either avoided emotional descriptions altogether and presented only a very fact-based account or conveyed both positive and negative framing of the movement such that in the end the two sides balanced out to portray neutrality overall.

Outlet	Thematic	Episodic	Positive	Negative	Neutral
The Washington Post	83.33%	16.66%	66.66%	4.16%	29.16%
Fox News	26.08%	73.91%	13.04%	65.22%	21.73%
Willamette Week	50%	50%	54.16%	16.66%	29.16%
The Oregonian	85.71%	14.28%	67.85%	10.71%	21.43%

Fig 1. A table conveying the results of the percentage of thematic, episodic, positive, negative, and neutral articles per outlet.

While the high points are less dramatic, you can see from Fig. 1 above that the results of positive, negative, or neutral framing follows the same general trend as the thematic versus episodic framing results. *The Washington Post* and *The Oregonian* are majority positive, *Willamette Week* is a little above 50% positive, and *Fox News* is in the majority negative. This result implies that the more thematic the articles are, in general the more positive towards the movement they will be, whereas the more episodic they are the more negative they are likely to be. Interestingly, all of the outlets produced a range between 21-29% of neutral articles and the majority was either concentrated in the positive or negative categories.

Certain types of frames (of the eight distinct frames discussed above) were more likely to also be coded as portraying a negative frame overall. Confrontation, division, and radical frames constituted the majority of those coded as negative. For radically framed articles in particular, all

but two articles were coded as negative. Conversely, progress and personal narrative frames were most likely to be coded as positive.

Throughout the coding process two distinct aspects of the articles were discovered as being important for understanding the overall framing of the article as either positive, negative, or neutral. Firstly, there is the matter of the sources used in the article. As discussed previously, McLeod (1995, 6) uncovered how quotes from police or government officials, and the use of the protesters' intended opponents as sources, is more prominently favored in news stories while protestors are often not even interviewed. Throughout the coding process in this study, it was determined that articles that were positive more often included members of the movement as sources in the article, whereas negative articles followed the method described by McLeod and mostly included government or "elite" sources. Neutral articles tended to include very few sources or balanced the inclusion of members of the abolition movement and government officials as sources.

For example, an article by Associated Press (2020) (posted on *The Washington Post* website) titled "*US prison populations down 8% amid coronavirus outbreak*" include the following as sources: a former prisoner, a professor emeritus at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a spokeswoman for the Prison Policy Initiative, and a senior research analyst at the Sentencing Project. Including sources that are on the side of advocating for the rights of prisoners lead to content in the article by Associated Press (2020) like this:

Nazgol Ghandnoosh, a senior research analyst at the Sentencing Project, a group that advocates for sentencing reform, said that while the prison population decreases are a step in the right direction, she is disappointed by the numbers. Even if the COVID-19 release policies work as intended, they might not lower the prison population enough because states often exclude violent offenders from such releases, Ghandnoosh said.

"Even though we are sending too many people to prison and keeping them there too long, and even though research shows people who are older have the highest risk from COVID-19 and the lowest risk of recidivism, we are still not letting them out," Ghandnoosh said.

Using Ghandnoosh, and others of a similar mindset, as the sources for this article allows the author to present the perspective that "we are sending too many people to prison and keeping them there too long" as an incontrovertible fact, therefore giving the overall impression of legitimizing those working towards prison abolition. On the other hand, there is the example of

an article by Brown (2021) that uses two sources against abolition (City Council President Bruce Harrell and Democratic Cleveland Mayor-elect Justin Bibb) to convey the opposite:

Earlier this week, Democratic Cleveland Mayor-elect Justin Bibb blasted the messaging of defunding the police. "Let me say this loud and clear – the charter amendment is not about defunding the police. ‘Defund the police’ is the worst label in American political history."

From the title and subtitle of this article (*“Defund the police’ loses big in Democratic cities nationwide: Voters from Seattle to Minneapolis to New York voted on issues of law and order”*), to the use of only government officials as sources, the author has the effect of conveying the abolition movement through a negative frame.

Finally, the second technique that was important in conveying the overall framing of an article involved the final line of the article. As this is the final impression that the reader is left with, the final line is crucial for understanding the type of overall framing conveyed by the author. For example, the above quote from the article by Brown (2021) is actually the final line of the article. No matter what beliefs about the abolition movement a reader might already hold, a final line like *“‘Defund the police’ is the worst label in American political history”* is bound to leave an impression, and a negative one at that. To provide another example, there is this final line from an article by Eadens (2021):

The 400 cases Rosenblum is referring to, however, were included in the Supreme Court decision because the cases were in the appeals process. Clinton and other advocates for prison reform argue that while Rosenblum doesn’t have the direct power to apply the law retroactively, or make final decision about application, she can refuse to defend the cases or concede retroactivity.

In this article, the author is reporting on a recent tweet by Chelsea Clinton in which she encourages Oregon’s attorney general Ellen Rosenblum to allow retrials for Oregonians convicted by non unanimous juries. Rosenblum counters that retrials are underway in nearly 400 cases but the author provides the above additional context about those 400 cases. This final line, while not as emotional as the negative example, leaves the reader with the impression that Rosenblum is attempting to appear that she is doing more than she is, and ultimately legitimizes Clinton’s position (which is in line with the abolition movement) that more needs to be done.

To return back to the original research question: What framing techniques are used by the media to report on the police and prison abolition movement? After discussion of the results, it can be concluded that eight distinct media frames were utilized in the reporting on the abolition movement: division, confrontation, informational, progress, radical, protest, personal narrative, and celebrity. In addition, results were discovered as to the thematic and episodic framing of the articles as well as the implications of all of these dynamics in terms of the overall positive, negative, or neutral framing of the articles towards the abolition movement.

RQ2: How does the framing differ when comparing local (Portland, Oregon) versus national media?

In the local media (*Willamette Week* and *The Oregonian*), the most prevalent frames were division and confrontation whereas the most common frames in the national media (*The Washington Post* and *Fox News*) were division and informational. While division was prominent regardless of location, the reason why confrontation was more prominent in the local media was that protests in Portland persisted for at least 100 consecutive nights. Therefore, much more of the news coverage in Oregon focused on conflict between protesters versus police, as well as politicians versus police, as the protests continued. In contrast, the national media likely included more informational articles because there was a need to explain to the wider national audience, especially those living in areas where protests were not occurring, the context and background behind the reinvigorated national conversation around police and prisons.

Interestingly, the personal narrative frame was only ever used in the local publications. This is likely due to the fact that local journalists and readers both would have greater interest in a story focused on a member of the community.

Outlet	Focus on police	Focus on prisons	Focus on general criminal justice reform
The Washington Post	62.50%	29.20%	8.33%
Fox News	39.13%	30.43%	30.43%
Willamette Week	83.33%	4.16%	12.50%
The Oregonian	67.85%	25%	7.14%

Fig 2. A table representing results around the percentage of articles that focused on police reform/abolition versus prison reform/abolition versus general criminal justice reform per outlet.

Additionally, the local media was much more likely to focus on the police aspect of the police and prison abolition movement, with 83.33% of articles from *Willamette Week* and 67.85% of articles from *The Oregonian* focusing primarily on issues surrounding police. This is compared to only 4.16% of articles from *Willamette Week* and 25% of articles from *The Oregonian* focusing on issues surrounding prisons. Again, this is likely due to the fact that Portland as a community was so focused on protests against police following the killing of George Floyd. In the local media, almost all explicit references to “abolition”, “abolish”, or “abolitionists” were about police abolition, specifically.

Comparatively, 62.5% of articles from *The Washington Post* focused on police while 29.2% focused on prisons, and 39.13% of articles from *Fox News* focused on police while 30.43% focused on prisons. While all outlets focused on police more, the difference between the focus on police versus prisons is much more stark in the local media. In the national media, particularly with *Fox News*, there is more of an even spread between the two topics.

RQ3: How does the framing change when comparing liberal versus conservative media?

For the liberal-leaning outlet *The Washington Post*, the top three news frames used were informational, division, and progress. For the other liberal-leaning outlet, *Willamette Week*, the top three news frames were confrontation, division, and personal narrative. While *Willamette Week* focused more on confrontation due to the reasons already discussed above (the impact of the 100 consecutive nights of protest on the city), there are similarities between these two outlets in that they both include the general positive frames of progress and personal narrative. On the other hand, the radical and celebrity news frames do not appear at all in the liberal media. This implies that liberal media is less interested in portraying the news through extremist actions and actors, or through elite actors.

For the conservative-leaning outlet *Fox News*, the top three news frames used were division, radical, and confrontation. In the other conservative-leaning outlet, *The Oregonian*, the top three news frames were division, confrontation, and progress. This points to an interesting finding involving the different “brands” of conservatism that these two outlets represent. *Fox News*, well-known for its extreme stances, naturally includes the radical frame as one of the most prominent surrounding prison and police abolition. On the other hand, *The Oregonian* seems to

represent a more moderate version of conservatism, one that does not mind reporting on news of progress in the abolition movement. It is worth noting that the progress, protest, and personal narrative frames – all of which tend to frame the abolition movement in a more positive light – do not appear in any *Fox News* articles.

While the division frame is common to all four outlets, it is also worth noting that the liberal outlets never present the division as inherently negative but rather all of the articles coded as division in *The Washington Post* or *Willamette Week* were also coded as having a positive or neutral framing overall. Conversely, division articles from *Fox News* and *The Oregonian* did also include overall negatively framed articles in their mix, although the majority of those negative articles occurred in the *Fox News* sample.

There are a few additional dynamics, all that work to inform the overall framing of an article, that are important to discuss at this point. Firstly, as seen in Fig. 2, *Fox News* had the most even spread of articles in terms of focus on police, prisons, or general criminal justice reform, among all of the outlets which leads to a discussion of how the different outlets used the terms “abolition”, “abolish”, and “abolitionists”.

While all articles in the sample were reporting on some aspect related to the police and prison abolition movement, this could encompass a range of different topics (i.e. defunding the police, reforming the sentencing of minors, abolishing the death penalty, coverage of protests, reforming treatment of prisoners, etc.) and only a small sample of articles explicitly used the terms “abolition”, “abolish”, and “abolitionists”. This, in and of itself, is an interesting finding and points to the continued reluctance of the media to use a term that may still be seen as radical or polarizing, or may not be commonly understood by the general public.

The Washington Post used at least one of the terms in only 29.2% of articles and, importantly, never in direct reference to the police and prison abolition movement. Instead, the terms were used in connection with reports about attempts to pass the Abolition Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing the death penalty or life sentences for minors, or abolishing youth prisons. An example by Kisiel (2021):

Penal labor, prison labor camps and convict-leasing programs represent the legacy of bondage that we are grappling with today. The Abolition Amendment seeks to “finish the job” of the 13th Amendment, outlawing slavery once and for all.

While passage of the Abolition Amendment would certainly be on the agenda of the prison abolition movement, no direct reference to the movement is made in such terms.

Conversely, use of the terms “abolition”, “abolish”, and “abolitionists” in the *Fox News* articles were almost always in reference to police or prison abolition with one of the terms appearing in 56.52% of all of the *Fox News* articles. This implies that *Fox News* is more comfortable with using terms despite, or perhaps, because of their radical or polarizing nature. Due to *Fox News*’s reputation, it is likely that they are intentionally using the terms more in order to rile up their audience against the abolition movement.

There was another phenomenon related to this that was present only in the *Fox News* articles: articles that solely focused on the emergence of police and/or prison abolition courses at various academic institutions. For example, an article by Casiano (2021) illustrates how *Fox News* articles often used the “abolition” term:

"Bard College is attempting to do with prison abolition the exact same thing colleges did with the defund the police movement: Take a radical idea, plant it on college campuses, and then weaponize young adults to push it into the mainstream. Bard College, like so many schools before it, is becoming the public relations department for far-left fringe concepts," Campus Reform Fellow Angela Morabito told Fox News.

In this case, the abolition movement is portrayed to be “radical”, a “weapon”, and “fringe”, all of which have negative connotations. This representation is in-keeping with the tendency by *Fox News* to portray the abolition movement more negatively than any other outlet in the study.

For *Willamette Week* and *The Oregonian*, the terms “abolition”, “abolish”, and “abolitionists” were used a relatively similar amount of times (33.33% for *Willamette Week* and 28.57% for *The Oregonian*) and in similar ways. That is, for these outlets almost all explicit use of these terms were in reference to police abolition. Again, this is in-keeping with previous results that illustrate the focus in local media on the police aspect of the abolition movement. A memorable article from *The Oregonian* by Rambo (2020) titled “*Defunding the Portland police: The local abolition movement, explained*” shows a typical use of the terms:

While talks of abolition have just started to burst into mainstream dialogue, abolitionists have been working for decades, and even centuries, to dismantle the criminal justice system or reduce its scope.

Going even further back, Azubuike and Sinclair draw a through-line from police and prison abolition to abolitionists fighting against slavery. Abolitionists argue policing enforces white supremacy and oppression deeply rooted in the nation's history.

However, this example from *Willamette Week*, in an article by Yau (2021), titled “*Activists Set Portland Police Union Hall on Fire*” illustrates the more charged use of the term in this outlet, likely due to the previously discussed focus on confrontation due to protests:

Since last summer, the union's building has been a regular target of police abolitionists, who seek to damage it in what they call "direct actions."

But the protests for the same goals now have shifted to much smaller numbers of abolitionist and anti-fascist demonstrators targeting police buildings in much faster actions.

The next dynamic that is important to discuss is the strategic use of quotation marks and how they are used differently by liberal versus conservative outlets. To reiterate from the literature review section, according to McLeod (1995, 6) journalists may strategically use quotation marks to convey skepticism or the illegitimacy of a protest. Because this finding has already been established in the research of media coverage of social movements, the use of quotation marks (not for direct quotations, but rather the strategic use of quotation marks) was coded in this research study.

While there was not a significant difference in *how often* strategic quotation marks were used between liberal and conservative outlets, there was a difference on *how* they were used. For example, *Fox News* used strategic quotation marks in 65.21% of all articles – the highest out of all outlets – and, as described by McLeod, were mostly used to undermine expertise, imply vagueness or skepticism, or emphasize the use of a specific term. In this article by Keene (2021), strategic quotation marks are actually used specifically around the term abolition, both in the title of the article (“*Democratic committee’s new hire supports 'abolition' of police, says abolishing ICE is her 'life's mission'*”) and in the content of the article:

RaeAnn Ensworth was recently hired by the DCCC to serve as an email and SMS strategist starting next month, but the new hire has posted several disparaging tweets about law enforcement, including calling for the "abolition" of police.

Because quotation marks are never used around the term abolition in the other outlets, it can be concluded that the use of the quotation marks here implies skepticism over the validity of

the term, therefore delegitimizing the abolition movement. On the other hand, strategic use of quotation marks by *Willamette Week* (used in 62.5% of articles) was mostly used to emphasize specific terms, such as in this article by Smith (2021) when “identity-obscuring clothing called ‘black bloc’ or ‘bloc,’” is described. The use of quotes around terms like “black bloc” are recurring across multiple *Willamette Week* articles. This use of quotation marks lacks the emotionality of *Fox News*’s use because instead of using quotes to refer to an entire social movement, *Willamette Week* is using them to emphasize an item of clothing referred to by a specific name.

Finally, it is important to reiterate two more findings specific to *Fox News*. As already established, while *Fox News* and *The Oregonian* were the conservative-leaning outlets in the sample, the findings show that in many cases the devices, tactics, and framing used by *The Oregonian* actually align more with the liberal-leaning outlets. This finding reveals that either *Fox News* is an outlier in its particular brand of conservatism or perhaps that “conservatism” in Oregon is more moderate/liberal than in other parts of the country. With this in mind, it is worth reiterating that *Fox News* articles were the most episodic and the most negative, illustrating that the more conservative an outlet is, the more likely they are to portray the abolition movement negatively.

RQ4: How has the framing changed over time from June 2020 through December 2021?

Overall, the most prominent frames of division and confrontation were seen throughout the articles regardless of the timeframe of the articles. However, two results in terms of framing changing over time did emerge from the study. Firstly, the protest frame only occurred in the first half of the timeframe, never the last half. This is likely due to the media and general public’s greater willingness to engage with the demands of protesters when the protests first began. In addition, it could be due to the fact that there is more need to inform the public about protester motivation when the protests first began. Secondly, the celebrity frame mostly occurred in the second half of the timeframe. This could be due to celebrities getting more involved in the issue over time, as public consciousness around an issue grows, or to the fact that journalists want to continue engaging with the issue but are running out of “new angles” and so turn to celebrity comments to make reporting feel fresh and new.

Conclusions

Broadly speaking, the results discovered in the pursuit of these four research questions reveal the most prominent news frames currently applied to the police and prison abolition movement. In particular, frames of division and confrontation. Understanding how a social movement is framed by the media is essential because, as stated by Seguin (2016, 1000), “On a national level, actors not already central to a political conflict are likely to get their information about an SMO through the news media”.

In addition, the results reveal that location did have an impact on the news frames used. Due to the extremely newsworthy events of more than 100 consecutive nights of protests against police brutality, local media included more focus on the confrontation frame. Meanwhile, national media focused more on the informational frame to explain the movement to the general public. Finally, the results showed that while there were differences between the news frames used by liberal and conservative media, reports from *The Oregonian* were more likely to be aligned with the liberal outlets and *Fox News* was the outlier in terms of conservative bias.

In looking back at the literature review section, we can now discuss how the results of this study either uphold or recontextualize previous research in this field. One of the most prevalent concepts to media coverage of social movements is that of the protest paradigm, described by Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 414) as a “well-established line of research support[ing] the theoretical position that protests that challenge the existing norms or status quo are routinely marginalized in media coverage”. The current study reveals that this paradigm is still prevalent, with the news frames of division and confrontation being the most common in the sample. Whether or not the articles portray the abolition movement in general as positive, negative, or neutral, division and confrontation are inherently marginalizing, presenting the abolition issue as one full of strife and conflict. Overall, the “deviance” of protesters was upheld by the media through the emphasis on violence via these division and confrontation frames.

It is important to reiterate that in the analysis of articles about prison reform, Cecil (2019, 8) found that, “these articles remind readers that what makes these reform discussions unique, and perhaps newsworthy, is that both sides of the political realm are working together”. If anything, this current study has found that the opposite is true for the topic of abolition, with the most common news frame found being that of division. Not only is this division between political parties but within them as well. This points to the essential differences between reform

and abolition: while many can agree on the need for reform, there is not the same consensus towards the need for abolition, and the media representations confirm and perpetuate this division.

Many of the specific news frames from previous research were discovered in this current study. The confrontation and protest frames, as described by Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie (2019, 417) were certainly present, as well as the “rights” frame articulated by the same researchers (in this study the rights frame was collapsed with other similar frames into the “progress” frame).

Interestingly, in comparison to previous research, the current study found much more evidence for thematic reporting than expected. Previous research showed that media tends to cover social movements episodically (Kilgo, Mourao, and Sylvie 2019, 417), but that some reporting on prison reform was starting to shift towards more thematic reporting (Cecil 2019, 12). If anything, this study showed that this trend towards thematic reporting of social movements, at least for the abolition movement, is continuing considering the fact that most of the outlets trended toward thematic articles.

This prevalence on thematic articles, as well as the discovery of information, protest, progress, and personal narrative frames in the sample, however, could indicate a growing trend of support for the abolition movement in the media. As a reminder, Kilgo and Mourão (2021, 18) discovered “that debate-framed coverage has a small but significant impact on increasing support for and identification with protesters and criticism toward the police. However, delegitimizing frames can have devastating effects for protesters, further marginalizing their ideas and forcing them to escalate tactics, which in turn can be used to justify protest repression efforts”. While delegitimization and marginalization was still certainly dominant, it cannot be undermined that legitimizing frames were found in roughly a third (35.35%) of the sample. As the national conversation around the need to reform systems of justice and punishment in the United States continues, this could represent another shift in the protest paradigm and perhaps over time legitimizing frames will become more and more present.

Finally, it should be noted that in looking back at the report by The Opportunity Agenda, it can be understood how much progress has been made in how criminal justice reform is discussed in the media. According to The Opportunity Agenda (2014), “the narrative being communicated is incomplete...the links between mass incarceration, police policy, racial bias, and poverty are not receiving enough media attention to move the public discourse in the

direction of more fundamental reforms”. Now, eight years later, it is safe to say that while these links can always be emphasized more, the intersection of mass incarceration, police interactions, and racial bias is front-and-center in the media coverage due to the initial impetus for the reinvigoration of the modern abolition movement: the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a Minneapolis police officer.

What does all of this mean for the police and prison abolition movement? A social movement that involves completely reimagining systems of justice and punishment that have persisted for hundreds of years will probably always be seen as a radical movement, but that doesn't mean it can't also be seen as a legitimate movement. The continued prominence of the protest paradigm, and of the division and confrontation frames, shows that the general public associates the abolition movement as one of violence, strife, and conflict. However, increased thematic reporting, as well as a smaller but significant amount of reports with progress, personal narrative, and informational framing, should give the abolition movement hope. If the movement wants to succeed, and favorable media coverage would certainly be a huge help in that success, it seems that the movement should focus on developing relationships with journalists who are interested in profiling members of the movement, writing informational pieces about the context of the movement, and reporting on the progress the movement has made toward its ambitious goals.

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Appendix

Protocol for Understanding Framing of Police and Prison Abolition News Coverage

1. Article Code:
2. Title of article:
3. Subtitle (if applicable):
4. Date of article:
5. Length of article:
6. News Outlet:
 - a. *The Washington Post*
 - b. *Fox News*
 - c. *Willamette Week*
 - d. *The Oregonian*
7. Describe the subject matter of the article.
8. What aspect of broader criminal justice (i.e. police, prisons, etc.) is the focus of this article?
Explain.
9. Is the word “abolition”, “abolish”, or “abolitionists” specifically mentioned? Describe the context.
10. Describe the sources used in the article.
11. Did the author utilize quotation marks around any words other than direct quotations?
 - a. Yes (record examples).
 - b. No
12. Describe the prominent news frame used in the article.
13. Describe evidence for the prominent news frame.
14. Does the article portray the issue thematically or episodically? Explain.
15. Overall, is the framing of the PIC abolition movement... Explain the choice.
 - a. Positive:
 - b. Negative:
 - c. Neutral:
16. Include miscellaneous notes here.

Codebook for Protocol

Category	Instructions
Article code:	Letter and number code assigned by researcher
Title of article:	Include full title of article
Subtitle of article:	Include article subtitle, if applicable
Date of article:	Include date in the following format: DD/MM/YYYY
Length of article:	Number of words in this particular article
News Outlet:	Highlight the corresponding news outlet
Describe the subject matter of the article.	Describe what the overall subject matter of the article is (i.e. in what way is it relevant to the police and prison abolition movement? What specifically is the author reporting on?)
What aspect of broader criminal justice (i.e. police, prisons, etc.) is the focus of this article? Explain.	Describe in a phrase or 1-2 sentences which aspect of the abolition movement is the most prominent in this article: police, prisons, or aspects of general criminal justice (i.e. court proceedings, policy, etc.)
Is the word “abolition”, “abolish”, or “abolitionists” specifically mentioned? Describe the context.	If the terms “abolition”, “abolish”, or “abolitionists” are used, explain the context in which the term is used. What specifically are the words referring to (i.e. police abolition, prison abolition, or another use of the term such as abolishing the death penalty or other such uses).
Describe the sources used in the article.	Describe the sources used and/or quoted in the article (i.e. are they government officials? Activists? From some other group?)
Did the author utilize quotation marks around any words other than direct quotations?	Record Yes if the author used quotation marks around anything other than a direct quotation. Record the words and phrases that were placed in quotations and the context for quotation use. Record No if the author only used quotation marks for direct quotes.
Describe the prominent news frame used in the article.	Frames are 1-2 word descriptors that describe the overall lens utilized by the text. Frames may include such descriptors as “riot” “idealistic” “violence” “policy.” As this research is following an inductive process, no framing categories will be

	pre-set. Rather, categories will be created and consolidated throughout the coding process.
Describe evidence for the prominent news frame.	Include headlines, key phrases, quotes, and other relevant one to three sentences that help explain the framing.
Does the article portray the issue thematically or episodically? Explain.	<p>Thematic = information contextualizes issue or problem, focus on developments/trends/conditions</p> <p>Episodic = focus on specific event, episode, concrete issue</p> <p>Describe the choice and provide evidence to support the choice.</p>
Overall, is the framing of the PIC abolition movement... Explain the choice.	
Positive	Descriptors of the movement include words that mostly have positive connotations.
Negative	Descriptors of the movement include words that mostly have negative connotations.
Neutral	Descriptors of the movement include words that are difficult to discern to connotation of, or both positive and negative descriptors are used.
Miscellaneous	Insert any other notes relevant to the study.