**Framing Dissent: How The New York Times' Framed Occupy Wall Street**

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**Abstract:**

*This paper examines the news coverage of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. It asks the following questions. Did The New York Times highlight Occupy Wall Street’s main concerns and grievances about economic inequality and the financial crisis? How did journalists balance their attention to the substance of the movement with the conflict that emerged between city governments and protesters? Were news stories about substance and conflict likely to emerge at different times during the protest? To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis of articles in The New York Times during the early and late stages of the protest from September 17th, 2011 to November 30, 2011 of 179 articles. The results suggest that mass arrests during the movement’s early mobilization phase slowly captured the attention of journalists, but then the newspaper followed the clash between police and protesters quite closely, especially as the movement declined and faced threats of eviction. The results also demonstrate how news framing opportunities changed as the movement reached different stages of the issue attention cycle. In the early stages of the protest, as the movement grew exponentially, journalists focused on the movement’s economic grievances and the potential political solutions to economic inequality and unscrupulous behavior by major financial institutions. However, as the movement peaked, news attention and public interest shifted to the intensifying conflict between city officials and police on one side, and protesters on the other. The paper concludes with a discussion of how a protest’s organizational features might condition the amount and length of attention to the cause of the movement as well as protest strategies that can emerge after news organizations abandon the protesters’ preferred narratives about their message and cause.*

**Introduction**

When The New York Times dedicates extensive coverage to a social movement, it signals the national and often, international importance of that movement. The Gray Lady is the empress of the American newspaper business, widely considered the paper of record in the United States. For the most part, organizations that reach the front page of the Times, have asserted a commanding dominance over the national news agenda. A social movement that wants to captivate *The New York Times* must demonstrate a potential to shake up the existing political or economic order, dedication, persistence, and seriousness of purpose. In other words, The Times’ journalists would likely ignore the cause of a ragtag smattering of unorganized activists railing against some obscure injustice. Enter Occupy Wall Street.

 Though often displaying a considerable amount of dysfunction and a lack of coordination, The Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS hereafter) developed an unconventional, yet ambitious and incendiary political and economic reform agenda, including themes such as reducing economic inequality, taxing the rich, breaking up the big banks and financial institutions, and auditing or abolishing the Federal Reserve to mention a few. Its participants were as diverse as their demands and goals for the movement. Many of the Occupiers were engaging in politics and protest for the first time, an indication that disillusionment and disappointment with a previous generation of unsuccessful anti-war and anti-globalization protests had opened the way for inclusion, opportunity, renewal and hope.

At a glance, OWS offered a refreshing blend of novelty, boldness, provocation, and fierce contentiousness that had long been dormant in American protest movements. With a flexible organizational capacity to organize protest events spontaneously and inexpensively, OWS spread its reach both nationally and globally within its first two weeks of activity. Broad swaths of the American public; rural and urban; liberal and conservative; anarchists, libertarians, hippies, stock traders, anthropology graduate students, non-college educated unionized laborers, rappers, and folk singers took notice of the movement’s diffusion with social media buzz, dinner table chats and water cooler talk about the vibrant protests and the grievances of protesters: rising economic inequality, financial institutions run amok, and the corrupting influence of money on our political processes.

As the public grew keener to the audacious and inflammatory dialogue of the protesters, elites soon ratcheted up their rhetoric and further incited the movement’s fury with heated, visceral responses from pundits and politicians of all political persuasions about the legitimacy of the protesters’ grievances, their right to pitch tents in the middle of bustling urban cities, the squalor and filth in which the protesters lived, and the appropriate role of the police in maintaining law and order at the protests. Perhaps most importantly of all, the timing of the movement could not have been better. The protests were coalescing amidst unprecedented levels of economic inequality, exacerbated by the worst financial meltdown since The Great Depression, and a growing sense of disenchantment concerning the performance and responsiveness of the dominant political parties. The movement’s innovative tactics, rapid diffusion, powerful public and elite response, and brilliant timing all indicate OWS would be a particularly fascinating and attractive story for The Times’ reporters to dissect, interpret, and tell.

As if all these factors could not possibly resonate enough with journalists at The Times, there is also the factor of geographic convenience. *The New York Times* building is located just 3.5 miles from Zuccotti Park, a short fifteen-minute taxi ride away from where the Occupy Movement originated and held its headquarters. In the end, reporters at The New York Times did not have a good excuse to avoid at least poking around at the protest encampment.

Consequently, OWS did prove to be a gripping story and *The New York Times* devoted a substantial amount of its coverage to telling the story of the protest. This study examines how we can best make sense of *The New York Times* portrayal of Occupy Wall Street. It asks the following questions. Did the Times’ journalists highlight Occupy Wall Street protesters’ main issues and grievances about economic inequality and the financial crisis? How did journalists balance their attention to the substance of the movement with the conflict? Were news stories about substance and conflict likely to emerge at different times throughout the duration of the protest? This paper proceeds as follows.

First, I present the key theoretical concepts that help me interpret news and the Occupy movement. This includes work on journalistic norms, news routines, and media framing of protests which lead me to expect to find professional news outlets increased their attention to OWS after the conflict with city officials heightened and a dramatic surge in protester arrests took place.

Second, I present Anthony Downs’ (1972) issue attention cycle, which leads me to expect professional news outlets would adopt economic frames as the movement increased in size and peaked, followed by conflict frames as the movement failed to realize its goals and faced more resistance from city governments and police to clear their encampments. Following this theoretical exploration of Occupy Wall Street’s relationship to the news media, I describe the methods I used to test my expectations, which involve content analysis of *New York Times* articles.

In the results section, I present my findings, which show that mass arrests at the outset of the movement slowly captured the attention of *The New York Times*, but then the newspaper followed the clash between police and protesters quite closely, especially as the movement declined and faced threats of eviction and increasing arrests. The results also demonstrate how news framing opportunities changed as the movement reached different stages of the issue attention cycle. In the early stages of the protest, particularly as the movement was growing in size, journalists focused on the movement’s economic grievances and the potential solutions to economic inequality and a seemingly rigged financial system. However, as the movement peaked and failed to actualize specific goals and demands, news attention and public interest shifted to the intensifying conflict between city officials and police on one side, and protesters on the other. As winter approached, and the protest camps were cleared, news attention gradually dissipated altogether.

The results echo previous findings that protesters have a very narrow window of time to actualize demands and realize their goals before the public and officials get frustrated, hostile, bored, or all of the above. In the context of Occupy Movement, the daunting, nearly intractable, and sprawling challenges of reducing economic inequality or achieving reforms in the financial sector may have exacerbated the movement’s inability to sustain public interest and realize significant progress. The implications of this are explored further in the conclusion.

**Theoretical Issues**

**Journalistic Norms and Routines**

Scholars have noted that depictions of social movements in the news are for the most part, guided by journalists’ professional norms, rules, and values (Boykoff 2006; Oliver and Maney 2000; Shoemaker and Resse 1991). For example, the size and disruptiveness of a protest increases the probability of news coverage, as well as the proximity of the news event to the news organization (Oliver and Myers 2003; McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Mueller 1997). Most protests do not receive extensive coverage until they mobilize many participants. Though the Occupy Movement was relatively tame in the first week of mobilization, with just a few dozen protesters; the protest eventually grew in size and disruptiveness. By early October, thousands of protesters had converged into a formidable presence.

In addition to the size of a movement, which is often difficult to quantify at protests, studies have documented that news organizations are attracted to protests because of the news value of conflict or controversy (Oliver and Myers, 1999; Oliver and Maney, 2000). Accordingly, there was plenty of tension between local governments and the Occupy encampments that spanned the country, which journalists could easily package into dramatic, episodic stories about the protest. The conflict was relatively easy to quantify, at least in terms of protester arrests. At the beginning of October, over 700 protesters were arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge, drawing considerable media attention and catapulting the movement into the national spotlight. Headlines like “Some Cities Begin Cracking Down on ‘Occupy’ Protests”, “Across U.S., Demonstrators Face Arrests and Evictions”, and “200 Are Arrested as Protesters Clash with the Police” signal the strong newspaper focus on conflict between city officials and protesters (McKinley and Goodnough, 2011; Foderaro, 2011; Buckley, 2011).

The *New York Times* noted that the protesters’ conflict with city officials and police treatment of the protesters likely helped fuel more media attention. In a self-reflexive article, *Times* writer Brian Stelter said, “Press coverage, minimal in the first days of the occupation in New York, picked up after amateur video surfaced online showing a police officer using pepper spray on protesters. On several occasions, video of confrontations with the police, often filmed by the protesters, has propelled television coverage” (Stelter 2011). Given journalists’ propensity to cover protests that are large and disruptive, as well as the news media’s tendency for conflict framing, and the dramatic nature of clashes between Occupy protesters and police, there is a compelling reason to believe that conflict, in the form of protester arrests, drove the amount of Occupy related coverage. This leads to my first hypothesis:

**H1: Variation in the frequency of OWS stories was driven by variation in the number of arrests over time.**

**Framing of Protest Movements**

The representation of protesters’ grievances in the news media can determine whether a protest is successful at raising consciousness about a political problem and subsequently, mobilizing people to seek remedies (Cottle, 2008). The frames journalists use to organize news stories exert a strong influence on how the public perceives the issues and parties involved in a conflict, especially perceptions of the protesters (Boyle et al. 2012; McLeod and Detenber, 1999). Taken together, the literature suggests successful protests likely exhibit a strong capacity to engage the broader public by actively seeking a positive representation in the news. In other words, protests mobilize support by getting news organizations and ultimately the public to adopt their preferred framing.

Consequently, a variety of studies have documented news media frames that are likely to appear in protest coverage, including depictions of the substantive matters, especially the grievances of protesters (Boykoff, 2006; Harlow and Johnson, 2011), and frames emphasizing the conflict between protesters and institutional actors (Gamson and Wolsfeld, 1993; Boyle et al. 2005; Oliver and Maney, 2000; Oliver and Myers, 1999). In the case of OWS, there was an abundance of opportunities for these two types of frames: about the substance of the movement, more specifically, the economic grievances of protesters; and as previously mentioned, about the conflict between police and city officials on one hand and the protesters at the Occupy encampments on the other.

In terms of framing the substance of the movement, economic concerns were the prevailing common thread among the principal grievances of the protesters. There was a consistent, though often complicated and unfocused concern with economic inequality. While the scope of concerns about inequality was broad and vague, it was exemplified by the protesters’ “99% meme”. This shrewd framing of economic inequality led many pundits to magnify attention to the topic. As economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman put it, “Inequality is back in the news, thanks largely to Occupy Wall Street” (Krugman, 2011b). The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism observed the economy reclaimed its place atop of the news agenda in the first week of October 2011 due to a dramatic increase in attention to the OWS demonstrations (Holcomb, 2011).

While economic inequality was a central message of the protesters, their economic concerns reach beyond one single issue. Some protesters focused more on Wall St. greed and the bailouts; others on financial deregulation; some on unemployment and the lack of job opportunities for young people; and many simply exhibited a general hopelessness about the way capitalism works. The broad and evolving scope of economic concerns ironically provided many alternative approaches to news story telling but at the same time proved difficult for journalists to decipher. A *New York Times* headline signals this challenge for journalists: “Countless Grievances, One Thread: We’re Angry” (Lacey, 2011).

Economic inequality and anti-Wall St. sentiment were the common thread at encampments throughout the country, other themes like tax rates, foreclosures, unemployment, the decline of organized labor, stagnant wages, and poverty also mobilized protesters and garnered critical attention in the news coverage of the protests. As a consequence of OWS’ unfocused and complicated message, there is reason to believe the news media could have a difficult time conveying the economic concerns of the protesters.

While confusing grievances and subsequent news coverage about inequality sparked a complicated national conversation about the fairness of our economic system, the harsh official response to the protests also received a considerable amount of attention from news organizations. Unlike deciphering the complicated and nuanced grievances of the protesters, the conflict between local governments and the protesters was obvious and straightforward. Covering police clashes with protestors and the large volume of arrests provided sensational drama and allowed reporters to defer to authorities for event driven accounts of the protest.

 Overall, the economic concerns of the protesters and the conflict between city officials and the protesters were the most striking features that defined the movement and shaped the news narrative about the protest events. The economic grievances tied together the diverse group of protesters, which was embodied by the 99% meme. The economic message was timely and resonated in the broader public. Yet, the protesters’ tense, and sometimes violent showdowns with police and city officials were also a central part of Occupy Movement’s story. Cities’ open hostilities toward the movement led to many arrests and threats of eviction, which damaged protesters’ morale and played a pivotal role in the movement’s disappearance.

Given the timing and resonance of the protest’s message, as well as its dramatic conflict with cities across the country, journalists were going to frequently rely on economic and conflict frames to tell the story of the protest. Yet, as noted earlier, the protesters’ message about economic issues was often extremely unfocused and vague, which signals that the protesters’ ability to keep news attention on their core message might prove to be difficult. Adding to protesters’ woes, the level of conflict escalated as the protest dragged on and Occupiers faced evictions across the country, which implies conflict frames would emerge more as the movement disintegrated and lost control of its message. To explain when economic and conflict frames would be more likely to appear in *The New York Times* coverage, I invoke Anthony Downs’ (1972) “issue attention cycle”.

**Issue Attention Cycle**

Anthony Downs (1972) developed the concept of an issue attention cycle to highlight how specific issues surface and decline in news and public discourse in a cyclical pattern. Issues start in a latent phase, or as Downs puts it, ‘the pre-problem stage’, in which a political problem grows in magnitude, but largely remains unnoticed by the public until a dramatic series of events elicit news and public concern about the problem. This leads to ‘alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm’. In this stage, the public and news organizations have become aware of the problem and express enthusiasm and hope about the prospects of solving the problem or actions that could mitigate the problem. However, upon sorting out the potential solutions to a problem, collective euphoria fades and the public realizes the costs of “solving” a problem are high; there is often a gap between the problem and the solutions, which usually require some to make great sacrifices. As frustration mounts over the perceived intractability of an issue, intense public interest and media scrutiny decline and other competing issues shift attention away from the initial problem. Here, the issue enters a ‘post problem stage’, in which the issue is dormant, but might infrequently recapture the public’s attention as new, fresh efforts to solve the problem emerge.

In general, Occupy seems to conform to the issue attention cycle quite well. Inequality has been an underlying problem for several decades that previously received scant news attention and public interest. The financial crisis and Occupy protest shed the light on economic inequality and misbehavior in the financial sector. The protest contemplated various grievances, demands, goals and potential solutions. As the movement peaked, it realized the difficulty of changing the status quo. Coinciding with the mounting challenges of sustaining a large-scale social movement, the protest thinned and attention to the Occupy Movement and the issue of inequality faded, but has not disappeared entirely from the national discourse. The issue attention cycle is not only useful for explaining variation in news attention to Occupy Movement, it can also help explain when different frames of the protest are likely to emerge.

Previous work has shown that an issue’s place in the issue attention cycle can heavily influence the type of frames that arise in news coverage of an issue (Shih et al. 2008; Nisbet and Huge 2006). For example, in a study about the framing of stem cell research, Nisbet et al. (2003) found that in the early stages of issue development, news coverage of stem cell research focused on the theme of scientific uncertainty and research. In the later stages of issue development when media attention peaked, frames related to science decreased considerably and the more dramatic emphasis on conflict emerged. Similarly, Nisbet and Huge (2006) found limited evidence that dramatic and conflict frames rose in prominence as media attention to the debate about plant biotechnology picked up.

Concerning the news frames of interest in this study, economic and conflict frames, it is reasonable to expect that in line with previous studies; these two frames might emerge at different times in the development of the Occupy news story. During the ‘alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage’, which coincides with the movement’s initial mobilization and rapid increase in size, optimism about the movement’s potential impact was high. Protesters felt a sense of collective efficacy; they were materializing goals and organizing principles; they were committed and eager to “solve” the economic problems that invigorated their sense of purpose. At this time, journalists, intrigued by the novelty of the protest and its grievances, were sensitive to the articulable demands of the protesters. This leads to the following expectation:

**H2a: More economic frames would appear in the news coverage during the early stages of the protest.**

As protesters realized the daunting task of addressing the grievances that brought them together, the protesters’ sense of efficacy waned. Loose organizational principles revealed much dysfunction underneath the surface at the protest camps. As the movement failed to develop a cohesive agenda, it faced more institutional resistance from city governments. Police forces began to evict protesters from the public spaces they occupied and the movement unraveled. Journalists, perhaps tired of deciphering the scatterbrained economic concerns of the group turned to the more dramatic showdown between protesters and police over the protesters’ ensuing threat of eviction, which leads to my last hypothesis:

**H2b: More conflict frames would appear in the news coverage during the later stages of the protest.**

**Methods**

My approach to testing my hypotheses is a content analysis of New York Times (NYT hereafter) articles. I chose the NYT because it is the “paper of record” for the United States, adheres to traditional journalism norms and ethics, and it was in closest proximity to the most vibrant and disruptive encampment of the Occupy Movement. I examined ten weeks of coverage from September 17th, 2011 to November 30, 2011. I chose this period because it spans from the inception of the protests through the decline of the protests during which the police began to evict protesters from their encampments. Moreover, the ensuing cold of winter ensured that the protest camps would dwindle in numbers and lose the daily media attention they had previously garnered by early December.

To obtain NYT content, I performed a series of LEXIS-NEXIS searches. The search terms I used were “Occupy Wall Street” and “Occupy movement”. After eliminating by hand results that were not relevant to the protest, this search yielded 178 articles. I coded each article, employing Dedoose Version 4.5, which is a web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (Dedoose 2013). I coded the full content of each article, looking for discussion of conflict and of economic concerns.

Instead of coding for a single frame, which is typically extracted from the headline and the byline or first paragraph of a story, I used coding instructions to code for smaller elements of a story, which I refer to as passages. Passages varied in length from a line of text, to a few sentences, or even several paragraphs. To examine these passages, I used a deductive approach, in which I identified passages with the help of a coding scheme that contained criteria for what constituted economic and conflict passages. My criterion for economic passages were that the text emphasized the economic grievances of protesters including economic inequality, financial regulatory failure, outrage about government bailouts of banks, Wall St. greed, poverty, or unemployment. For conflict, my criterion was that the text had to discuss disagreement between government officials and protestors or the disagreement between police officials and protesters. I considered any reference to any of these economic or conflict elements of a story as a “passage”.

I used the coding of economic and conflict passages to make an inference about the overall frame of the article. Upon identifying all of the economic and conflict passages in an article, I used an algorithm to apply an overall frame to each article. The algorithm consisted of three thresholds for determining the frame. The first threshold was 50 percent. Articles only received a conflict or economic frame when more than half of the passages in the article were coded conflict or economic. Thus, when the number of conflict passages was greater than the number of economic passages in an article, I designated the article as having a *conflict frame*. When the number of economic passages was greater than the number of economic passages in an article, I designated the article as having an *economic frame*. For example, an article that contained four economic passages and two conflict passages would receive an economic frame. When the number of conflict and economic passages was equal, I designated the article as having a *mixed frame*. By providing a mixed frame category, I could more accurately account for framing elements that would otherwise be missed in a dichotomous coding scheme.

I relied on two additional thresholds to apply a frame to an article as well, 65% and 75%. Each of these thresholds increases the number of mixed frames. For example, a story with four conflict passages and three economic passages would be coded as a mixed frame with the 65% threshold because only 57% of the passages in the story are conflict passages. The logic of increasing the threshold to establish the overall frame is to account for articles in which there were obviously elements of both frames, but strictly applying a conflict or economic frame might not capture the nuance of different elements in a story. For example, under the 50% threshold a story with six economic passages and five conflict passages would receive an overall economic frame. By increasing the threshold to 65 percent or 75 percent, this would change the overall frame from an economic frame to a mixed frame to acknowledge that while the majority of passages were not coded as conflict, the number of conflict passages still comprise a noteworthy amount of the story.

Articles could only be coded as having an *economic frame*, a *conflict frame*, or *mixed frame*. If an article contained neither economic nor conflict passages, no frame was applied. To validate this technique, I also hand coded 20 articles for an overall frame based on title and lead paragraph. The correspondence between the hand-coded frame and the frame extracted from counting the passages for each article was 85%.

 The rationale behind using this deductive approach, which is premised on the notion that frames are really composed of smaller passages in a news story, is that merely extracting a frame from the title or first paragraph of a news story often misses critical elements and details of a story. Further, many stories include multiple interpretations of news events, making it difficult to justify coding a news story with a single frame. More specifically for this research, a small but significant number of stories contained features of both economic and conflict narratives. As sophisticated new content analysis software tools have become available, it has become much easier to code news content for passages and identify interesting patterns in a particular text. Using the qualitative analysis tool, Dedoose, I was able to account for these mixed stories and measure the exact balance of economic and conflict passages.

 An additionally crucial reason to use the deductive approach and assess frames from passages is to make the procedure for extracting frames from news articles transparent, unambiguous and replicable. By adhering to a clear formula for determining what qualifies as a particular frame, it reduces the probability that my coding procedure appears arbitrary. Using an interpretive approach would require more judgment in the coding process and raise doubts about whether the frames I have identified are quantifiable and robust. I feel confident that my technique is a thorough attempt to remove some subjectivity from the frame identification procedure.

To test for inter-coder reliability of this procedure, I used a few validation techniques. Five University of California, Santa Barbara undergraduate political science students were trained in the coding procedure and given a subsample for which each student had to apply the correct code (economic or conflict) to each passage. In the entire sample, there were 186 economic passages and 172 conflict passages. The students applied codes to 41 randomly selected passages. 21 of these were economic passages and 20 were conflict passages. This amounted to roughly 11% of the total amount of economic passages and 12% of the total amount of conflict passages in the overall sample. All of the pooled Cohen’s kappa’s were 1.00, meaning all of the coders tagged the passages in the reliability test exactly I had tagged them.

Feeling confident that the undergraduate coders knew the coding procedure, two of the undergraduate coders were selected to code 70 (39%) of the 178 articles I had already coded for economic and conflict passages. Using the 50% threshold I discussed above, I deduced the overall frame from the articles the undergraduates coded and compared the results with the frames I extracted from my own coding. The inter-coder reliability test yielded a Cohen’s kappa above .8 for both economic and conflict frames.

**Results**

**Volume of Coverage**

The solid line in Table 1 illustrates the rise and fall of The Times’ attention to the Occupy Movement. Between September 17th and November 30th of 2011 there were 178 articles, columns or editorials in The New York Times containing the phrase ‘Occupy Wall Street’ or ‘Occupy Movement’.

**[Table 1 Here]**

The movement was conceived in July by Canadian culture-jammers *Adbusters*, but did not occupy a physical space until September 17th, 2011. Though it has been estimated that over a thousand protesters converged on the park and pitched their tents within the first days of the movement, OWS received little coverage from The Times in the first week. On September 23rd, Ginia Bellafante (2011) wrote a dismissive piece, questioning the motives of the protests entitled ‘Gunning for Wall Street, With Faulty Aim’. From September 17th through the end of September, just four articles about OWS appeared in The New York Times. The lack of OWS coverage at the movement’s inception seems consistent with the idea that journalists approach protests with a heavy dose of skepticism until they reach a tipping point and become extremely disruptive.

To better understand how the disruptiveness of the protest shaped the Times coverage of Occupy, we can look at the data on arrests. By one count, there have been over 7500 arrests at Occupy protests in 122 different cities.[[2]](#footnote-2) The dotted line in Table 1 shows the number of arrests at OWS in New York over the first ten weeks of the protest. Over 1400 arrests took place in New York during this time span. About half of the arrests in New York occurred in the first two weeks of the protest, with a second peak in mid November. As Table 1 suggests, it took a lot of arrests at the outset of Occupy to gain the Times’ attention, with a lag of several weeks between the peak of arrests and the peak of attention from the Times. But later, during the November surge in arrests, with the Times already committed to Occupy as a news event, coverage surged immediately as arrests rose.

My first hypothesis stated that the number of stories would be driven by variation in the number of arrests. The results in Table 1 lend strong support to this hypothesis. Mounting strain between police and protesters was already evident when over a thousand protesters marched on September 30th to NYPD headquarters to voice discontent about the aggressive police tactics used during the first two weeks of OWS. This strain reached a boiling point the next day on October 1st, when police arrested approximately 700 protesters on a march across the Brooklyn Bridge that was blocking street traffic. This proved to be a pivotal moment for capturing the attention of The Times’ reporters. Stories about the showdown on the Brooklyn Bridge ensued rapidly.

The story had moved from the City/Metropolitan Desk to the National Desk with headlines such as ‘More Than 700 Arrested as Protesters Try to Cross Brooklyn Bridge’, ‘Police, Too, Release Videos Of Brooklyn Bridge Arrests’, ‘Citing Police Trap, Protesters File Suit’, and the very apropos ‘On Wall St., A Protest Matures’. Indeed, the protest was maturing; but that was an understatement. It was also growing in size. Corresponding with the movement’s growth, the Times coverage of Occupy was growing rapidly by the middle of October. While only 8 articles appeared over the first two weeks of coverage, there was about five times as many articles in the subsequent two weeks. From October 3 to October 18, there were 57 articles.

Coverage peaked the week of October 11, at 36 stories, with as many as 7 stories on October 15. Following that peak, as the solid line in Figure 1 shows, coverage declined steadily until the week of November 12, which featured 29 OWS stories, At this point there was still an average of about 3.5 stories per day, making Occupy a regular presence on the Times agenda. During this period in November, cities were beginning to elevate their rhetoric about evicting the protesters. This brewing confrontation reinvigorated the coverage and led to a second peak in news stories.

The second peak was followed by another decline to about 6 stories at the end of November. During this stage of the protest, the weather was beginning to dampen the conditions at the protest camps and many of the evictions across the country had already taken place. Very few protesters remained. Many of the prominent storylines about the protest had been exhausted as fall turned to winter.

Overall then, the story of the Times coverage, told in terms of sheer number of articles can be summarized as a slow and skeptical start, a quick rise, with two peaks spaced about a month apart, but with typically daily coverage over the whole two-month period until the end of November. Showing strong support for H1, the variation in the amount of coverage followed major confrontations between police and protesters at the movement’s inception, when protesters stormed the Brooklyn Bridge, and at the end of the protest, when police forces evicted protesters from the spaces they occupied. Beyond the sheer volume of coverage about the protest, it is also useful to look into the substance of the Times’ coverage to understand better the relationship between arrests and stories. Further, examining the substance of the coverage provides a test of my hypotheses about economic and conflict frames.

**Issue Attention Cycle**

H2a and H2b posited that economic frames would appear in the earlier stages of the protest while conflict frames would appear in the later stages of the protest. To see what the data say about these hypotheses, I plot the occurrence of economic frames and conflict frames over time. The results, which are shown in Table 2, indicate an interesting and somewhat unexpected story: at the outset, arrests eventually got the Times attention, but its journalists wrote substantive stories rather than simply conflict stories. Only after exhausting the economic stories did economic frames decline, and eventually fall behind conflict frames, especially during the November surge in protest arrests.

**[Table 2 Here]**

Until the end of the first week of October, OWS was still largely a local phenomenon. The message had not yet materialized into the catchy 99% meme and most of the protesters were just beginning to articulate their outrage. As Table 2 shows, in the first two weeks of the movement, no prevailing frame emerged in the coverage. However, by September 24th, dozens of arrests have taken place and the occupation was expanding. As noted above, a decisive moment took place on October 1st when approximately 700 protesters are arrested during a march on the Brooklyn Bridge.

The willingness of protesters to endure arrests, pepper spray and other heavy-handed police tactics demonstrated to reporters that the movement was dedicated and wanted to be taken seriously. Mass arrests appeared to be the tipping point for news attention and in its aftermath, the first dominant frame emerges. As the protest begins thriving by the middle of October, The New York Times started to delve deeply into the economic complaints that induced the protesters to choose Wall Street as the target of its indignation. The protesters called into question Wall Street’s role in the financial crisis, banks’ cozy relationships with regulators, dubious lending practices that exacerbated the housing crisis and widespread foreclosures.

There were two prominent perspectives on the protest’s economic grievances. One perspective that emerged early in the coverage from journalists like Ginia Bellafante, reporter for the Times’ Metropolitan Desk and financial columnist, Andrew Ross Sorkin, and David Brooks could generally be characterized as dismissiveness and hostility toward the protest; the dismissiveness took two forms.

First, journalists raised doubts about the seriousness of the cause. Both Bellafante and Sorkin used the term “street theater” in describing the flashy and sometimes outrageous tactics of the protesters (Bellafante 2011; Sorkin 2011). Bellafante fixated on some protesters’ outrageous costumes and dress. She also suggested the cause of the protests was “virtually impossible to decipher” and that protesters were “clamoring for nothing in particular to happen right away” (Bellafante 2011). David Brooks (2011) derisively wrote, “The Occupy Wall Street movement may look radical, but its members’ ideas are less radical than those you might hear at your average Rotary Club”.

Second, reporters conveyed skepticism about the protesters’ actual knowledge of the financial system and how the economy works. Bellafante (2011) insisted that the protesters had attempted to “pantomime progressivism rather than practice it knowledgably”. Sorkin (2011) wrote about a protester that had demanded a fairer tax regime but was unfamiliar with the proposed “Buffett Rule” which would raise income taxes on top earners. Upon noting the hypocrisy of protesters who were seen using a Bank of America A.T.M., he wittingly observed, “As much as this group [OWS] may want to get away from Wall Street and corporate America, it may be trapped by it.”

Doubts about OWS’ dedication and knowledge were coupled with a third feature in the dismissive stories; subtle hostility and more noticeable yet, some discomfort about the anti-Wall St. fervor of the protest. In one particularly enlightening exchange, Sorkin (2011) mused openly with a chief executive of a major bank about whether OWS posed “imminent personal danger” to Wall Street executives. This conversation alludes to the intimate and trusting relationships between The New York Times’ financial columnists and their powerful sources on Wall St. Further, it reveals an inconsistency in the attitudes of Wall Street toward the protesters.

On one hand, headlines like ‘In Private, Wall St. Bankers Dismiss Protesters as Unsophisticated’ indicate that executive on Wall Street did not take OWS seriously. On the other, they worried that the protesters could be quite a menacing and even violent threat to Wall Street’s business as usual and employees’ personal security. Andrew Ross Sorkin gives some indication that he did not see the movement as serious threat to the personal safety of bank CEOs. Nonetheless, he hinted the movement could become dangerous if “big banks and corporate America” didn’t “grapple with” the underlying message of the protests, “the financial crisis and the growing economic inequality gap” (Sorkin 2011). Grappling with these issues is a vague suggestion that ultimately falls short of explicitly recognizing big banks and corporate America might need to explain their role in exacerbating these problems and make reforms to their behavior. In the end, Sorkin and others were guarded about the movement’s legitimacy, strength of conviction and reform capabilities.

The other perspective about OWS was more supportive and encouraging; columnists like economist Paul Krugman and Nicholas Kristof even offered guidance about how the protesters could formalize demands and enact tangible reforms on Wall St. and in financial regulatory institutions. Both of these columnists saw the protests as legitimate and timely. Economist, Paul Krugman (2011a), wrote several op-eds defending the protesters’ indictment of Wall St. and offering advice about specific economic policy demands including investment in infrastructure and education, as well as improving the financial regulatory framework to reduce big banks’ capacity to engage in risky financial decisions. In ‘A Manifesto for Protesters’ Richard Beales et al. (2011) were unabashedly blunt about their enthusiasm for OWS, they wrote “make banks safer, and let them fail…name and shame fat cat salarymen…free legislators from special interests…and probably least realistic, change the United States’ two party system”.

In addition to reporters filling in the details of the protest’s economic agenda, the fallout resulting from the public’s indignation about bonuses and executive compensation became a topic of intense debate. Again, Krugman (2011a) provides a shrewd synopsis of this discussion, noting, “…the paychecks of the wizards of Wall Street were appropriate, we were told, because of the wonderful things they did. Somehow, however, that wonderfulness failed to trickle down to the rest of the nation -- and that was true even before the [financial] crisis”. This topic and other difficulties on Wall St. were also taken up in columns such as ‘The Bankers and the Revolutionaries’, ‘Painful Job Cuts Coming to Wall St.’, ‘At Top Colleges, Anti-Wall Street Fervor Complicates Campus Recruiting’, and Thomas Friedman’s op-ed ‘Did You Hear the One About the Bankers?’

Beyond the unscrupulous behavior of Wall Street, drawing attention to the broader dysfunction of the economy and long-term poverty were other common features of the stories with economic frames. There was a consistent, though often complicated and unfocused concern with economic inequality. While the scope of concerns about inequality was broad and vague, it was exemplified by the protesters’ “99% meme”.

The pithy 99% meme and the broader issue of economic inequality was a central message of the protesters. However, many related economic concerns reached beyond this particular issue. Some protesters demanded a tax on millionaires, often referred to in policy circles as ‘The Buffett Rule’. Headlines such as ‘Despite Protests, Cuomo Says He Will Not Extend a Tax Surcharge on Top Earners’ and ‘Events Erode Hope of a Tax Overhaul Before Election Day’ hinted at the difficulty of achieving tax reform. It makes sense that the newspaper would focus on taxes because reforming the tax code and tax rates for earners in the top income bracket has been on the political agenda for a long time and it is one example of a redistributive policy that can have a significant effect on the size and scope of economic inequality.

In addition to taxes, one of the most worn-out economic topics and clichéd campaign speech centerpieces was also a major thread in some stories, jobs. One of the earliest articles to surface in The Times that tried to document the reason why people had joined the movement, ‘Wall Street Occupiers, Protesting Till Whenever’, detailed how a lot of young protesters got involved because they were unemployed and wanted to shed light on the lack of job opportunities for young people and recent graduates (Kleinfield & Buckley 2011). ‘Protesters Against Wall Street: It’s obvious what they want. What took so long, and where are the nation’s leaders?’ echoed a similar sentiment.

Aside from inequality and traditional economic staples like taxes and jobs, many Occupiers could not verbalize their economic concerns in a concrete way. Some exhibited a general hopelessness about the way capitalism works. As N.R. Kleinfield and Cara Buckley (2011) phrased it, “Not all of [the Occupiers] can articulate exactly why they are here or what they want. Yet there is a conviction rippling through them that however the global economy works, it does not work for them”. Others espoused anti-corporate attitudes and concern about corporate greed. Ginia Bellafante (2011) talked about several protesters “fighting the legal doctrine of corporate personhood…” Mark Landler (2011) observed a protester with a sign that referred to the Chamber of Commerce as the “Chamber of Corporate Horrors”.

Some did not malign corporations or the market but simply wanted to see more ethical behavior of markets and financial institutions. A story about the global reach of the protest interviewed a protester from Berlin who affirmed “I have no problem with capitalism…but I find the way the financial system is functioning deeply unethical. We shouldn’t bail out the banks. We should bail out the people” (Buckley and Donadio 2011). Related to ethical concerns about the way the economy works, a few pointed to the moral failure of allowing poverty to persist. One article tried to capture this sentiment with a story about the homeless community joining the protests titled ‘Dissenting, or Seeking Shelter? Homeless Stake a Claim at Protests’ (Nagourney 2011). In sum, the protest had room for well-read activists with narrowly defined economic concerns as well as poorly informed newcomers who only faintly perceived a sense of economic injustice that tied the protesters together. The New York Times tailored its economic stories to capture the viewpoints of both types of Occupiers. Moreover, it should also be obvious by now that there was nuance and depth in the numerous economic stories that appeared during the newspaper’s coverage of OWS.

By the end of October, many of the economic themes previously discussed had been explored thoroughly. As Table 2 illustrates, economic frames sharply declined in November. In fact, three-quarters of the stories with economic frames appeared in the first six weeks of the protest from September 17th to November 3rd. Table 3 shows the number of economic and conflict frames in the first five weeks of the movement, leading up to the movement’s zenith, and the following five weeks of the movement, during which it steadily declined.

**[Table 3 Here]**

The results in Table 3 offer support to the idea that different frames emerge at different stages of the issue attention cycle. In the early part of the protest, during the alarmed discovery stage, substance dominated the coverage. This confirms my expectations in H2a, which predicted economic frames would dominate in the earliest stages of the protest. 48 economic frames emerged in the coverage during the early phase of the protest. However, after the movement’s peak, number of economic frames declined by almost 40% in late October and November. As the number of economic stories tapered off and declined approaching the end of October, city government officials grew increasingly concerned about the condition of the park.

The article ‘Tidying Up, Pre-emptively, But Showdown May Loom’ recounted the protesters efforts to clean up their garbage to avoid harassment from city officials. Despite their determination, New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and the property manager of the park protesters had occupied amplified their rhetoric about evicting the protesters because of concerns about the sanitary conditions in the park and the general disruptiveness of the protests to the life of residents around the park. The protesters successfully avoided eviction throughout October as chronicled in ‘Calls Flood In; City Backs Off; Protesters Stay’ but a future confrontation seemed inevitable.

In November, the conflict narrative, which had already surfaced a few times before in the coverage, eventually replaced economic issues as the dominant storyline about the protest. This is consistent with my expectation in H2b, that conflict frames would dominate the news coverage as the movement peaked and declined. The standoff between city officials and protesters over the protesters’ tenuous status camping in cities across the country became the overwhelming theme of the news coverage. Many cities across the country were becoming openly hostile to Occupy movement.

In late October, headlines like ‘Some Cities Begin Cracking Down on ‘Occupy’ Protests’ appeared and described major arrests at Occupy Atlanta and plans for eviction in places like Rhode Island and Chicago (McKinley and Goodnough 2011). Arrests at the various Occupy encampments had a complex effect on the ebb and flow of economic and conflict framing. Obviously, widespread arrests of protesters would produce conflict framing with the sensational drama reporters thrive on. But, as indicated earlier, a substantial number of arrests were needed to reach the tipping point for much of the attention to the protest’s economic grievances.

The complex relationship between arrests and frames seems to suggest that arrests drove news attention at the peak of the movement in October, when its agenda took shape and at the nadir of the movement in late November, when the eviction and implosion of OWS took place. Clearly, exogenous events related to arrests, like the pepper spraying incident in September and the serious injury of an Iraq War Veteran in Oakland who was struck by a police launched tear gas canister in October, which was chronicled in ‘Outrage Over Veteran Injured at ‘Occupy’ Protest’ also spurred more conflict frames in the coverage.

The gradual shift in focus from substance, the economic concerns of the protest and the movement’s growth, to conflict are a typical feature of how news framing fluctuates in an issue attention cycle. As the movement increased its size and formulated the problem, the newspaper delved into Occupy Movement’s origins and appeared cautiously optimistic about the protest’s potential to materialize political and economic reforms. However, when it became clear that the protesters could not organize well beyond the confines of their encampments, public support declined and the narrative shifted. At the same time, elite and official scrutiny intensified as stories emerged about drug use, crime, and sanitation problems, leading to more conflict frames in the coverage, which detailed cities’ eviction push and looming showdowns.

As Table 3 shows, the number of conflict frames increased by about 42% during weeks 6 through 10 of the protest. Almost two-thirds of the conflict stories appeared in the month of November. By the middle of the month, there was a story about police arresting protesters or evicting camps almost everyday. This finding lends the strongest support to H2b. Just when the movement had peaked, it recognized that initiating economic reforms would prove to be difficult and any potential attempts at change the existing order would face institutional resistance from those in power.

A few headlines capture the looming institutional resistance such as, ‘Police in Denver Move on Protesters’, ‘Police Clear Occupy Oakland Encampment, but Protesters Return’, ‘As the Police Moved In, the Word Went Out: ‘It’s Happening’’, and ‘Across U.S., Demonstrators Face Arrests and Evictions’. On November 15th, NYPD officers cleared Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, where protesters had been sleeping in the early hours of the morning. Reporters followed the decisive eviction with two headlines that hinted the park’s owners and the mayor may have won the showdown, ‘City Reopens Park After Protesters Are Evicted’ and ‘Where Protesters Camped, a Placid Scene for Now’.

As November faded and the weather dampened the mood at occupations around the country, The Times continued to report on the desperate struggle of the protesters to hold their encampments and resist forceful evictions by police. But as the protest marked its two-month anniversary on November 17th, it was clear that the gesture was mostly symbolic and most Occupiers could sense their days were numbered. As David Carr simply put it, “[after the Zuccotti Park eviction and evictions in other cities] it is inevitable that Occupy Wall Street will eventually become more of an idea than a place” (2011).

Carr and others reflected on what the movement’s larger significance was as well as how its physical dissolution would impact its future legacy. As coverage waned and focused on life after the occupation in late November and December, OWS had reached the end of the issue attention cycle. Despite an ambitious and sprawling agenda, the movement itself would not be able to tackle many of the issues it wanted to. In the end, OWS could not withstand the harassment of unsympathetic city officials.

**Conclusion**

 Occupy Wall Street was an innovative social movement with a strong presence, fierceness, and ownership of a hard-hitting issue. The movement’s message about the urgent need to reduce economic inequality, draw attention to Wall Street’s lack of moral righteousness in its financial dealings, and efforts to create a fairer market that works for everybody, rich or poor, were all ideas that resonated in the media and in the broader public because these themes embodied the core symptoms of our economic malaise and had previously been so lacking in our public discourse. It is unsurprising that the movement stimulated so much attention to such causes.

However, despite having a timely set of causes, the movement was also unorganized, contradictory, complicated, and rife with conflicts at many levels. Internally, participants in the movement battled over how to build an agenda, organize activities and work with the hostile institutions in power. Externally, the movement did not desire to meet threats of violent repression from police with its own violence, leading to a one-sided contest where authorities held the upper hand. The once lofty expectations of the protest were difficult to reconcile with the reality on the ground; changing the status quo requires more than big dreams, a mobilization and a prolonged occupation, it requires bargaining, practical solutions and institutional cooperation.

Protests only have so much time to materialize demands and realize goals before the euphoria wears off and patience grows thin. The public and government officials quickly get frustrated, hostile, bored, or all of the above. In the context of the Occupy Movement, the formidable and sprawling challenges of reducing economic inequality or achieving reforms in the financial sector may have exacerbated the movement’s inability to sustain public interest and realize significant progress. Journalists could only follow and amplify the economic concerns of the protesters until that thread of the story had been exhausted at length. As the protesters lost their grip on the media narrative, attention to the protest turned toward the more unsavory aspects of the protest and to the dramatic elements of conflict that unraveled the protest. This loss of narrative control echoes previous findings that protests have a difficult time maintaining control over the messages that construct the reality of the protest (Smith et al. 2001; Boykoff 2006).

For protesters, the elusiveness of narrative control signals that a movement must amplify a simple and cohesive message when the window of opportunity is open to be successful. For Occupy Movement, the 99% slogan was pithy and effective, up to a point. Wise, savvy protests realize that in the bigger picture, more pressing concerns loom than winning the framing battle. The real challenge for a protest is to find creative and sustainable ways to address a problem after public attention has faded. The Occupy Movement has long since abandoned its physical occupation, but it still has a pulse and communities of activists remain vigilant and attentive to the protest’s initial cause both online and offline.

 For scholars, Occupy Movement reminds us that the politics of protest and resistance are alive and well in the United States. Protests continue to shape our national discourse and push the boundaries of what is politically possible. What made Occupy Movement exciting in a number of respects is that it embodies an emerging trend in the politics of contention and global economic discontent, the rise of technologically savvy, flexible, event driven, and non-hierarchical social movements. There is a potentially rich opportunity for scholars to examine how the dynamics of a movement’s leadership, organizational features, and tactics shape the public discourse about a protest movement.

Do movements like OWS with non-hierarchical organizational dynamics have more or less success than hierarchical movements at eliciting favorable news coverage? Do protests that institutionalize and engage in electoral politics like The Tea Party stay in the news longer than vehemently anti-establishment movements like OWS? Similarly, as the gatekeeping capacity of the traditional press examined in this article has eroded, new opportunities have opened up the way for alternative forms of journalism to play a stronger role in how movements are framed and understood in the public. Examining whether citizen journalism and other alternative forms of journalism affect the dynamics of the issue attention cycle and the frames that emerge in different stages of a protest could also make us reconsider how news attention and frames evolve over time.

**Appendix**

Table 1: Arrests of Protesters at OWS in New York and Number of New York Times Stories about OWS



Figure 2: Arrests of Protesters at OWS in New York and News Frames in New York Times OWS Stories



Table 3: Number of Frames in the Early and Late Stages of the Protest

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1. University of California—Santa Barbara [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OccupyArrests.com has collected arrest counts only of “confirmed arrests specific to Occupy Events”. The website posts links to news articles that corroborate the numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)