

Social Movements, Political Goals and the May 1 Marches: Communicating Protest in Polysemic Media Environments*

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of patterns of representation of the May 1, 2006 “day without an immigrant” marches in three news genres by comparing their use of language to self-presentations by movement participants. We argue that the growing popularity of niche and opinion oriented news programming is leading to a bifurcation of news norms. Instead of a homogenous journalistic audience, movement participants who seek to “send a message” through mediated news venues are presented with a greater level of polysemic interpretations among journalists. We present three themes in our analysis of how activists and journalists discursively produced the May 1 actions through language use: economic impact, policy/rights, and law/order. We argue that journalists engaged with these themes differently in the three samples: the 297 daily newspaper front pages we analyzed portrayed a negotiated reading position, Lou Dobbs Tonight an oppositional reading position, and Democracy Now! a dominant reading position. We conclude by noting several implications for the study of political communication in the context of mass mediated political protest.

Introduction

It is well known that social movement actors face a paradox when it comes to media coverage; they must conform to the news values of conflict, novelty and personalization just to attract journalistic attention (Cook 1998; Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978), yet such tactical choices aimed at

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garnering coverage may exacerbate mainstream journalistic tendencies to frame social and political protest as deviant, illegitimate and threatening (Watkins 2001). This dynamic is further complicated by growth in media punditry and partisan-identified media figures and networks (Westin 2005; Coe et al. 2008), meaning that polarized reading positions receive greater media attention. Thus, it is vital for social movement activists and academics to consider the implications of polysemy in political actions both for journalistic coverage and audience reception.

By most measures the coordinated marches and demonstrations across the US on May 1, 2006¹ by supporters of immigrants' rights would be considered successful. Estimates put the number of participants over one million, and media coverage was extensive. One might conclude that the well-known "protest paradigm" (Chan and Lee 1984) did not apply in this case of media coverage of political and social protest. Far from being marginalized and overlooked, coverage of the protests dominated the front pages of newspapers across the US, and it was the lead story on national and local evening news. The expected negative portrayal of political protest did not materialize, as protesters were shown waving US flags, holding small children and smiling.

Closer examination of media texts revealed a more complex picture. Organizers had been frank about their goals for the coordinated nationwide marches and boycott efforts.² Their goals aligned with those considered typical for a social protest (McAdam 1996): first, to attract coverage and get their issues onto the media's agenda; second, to manage media coverage in order to avoid marginalization and negative framing; and third, to build internal movement identification, purpose and commitment among supporters. This study aimed to interrogate the first two goals, and to question whether attracting media coverage was sufficient to achieve additional stated goals of advancing the legislative agenda and avoiding negative framing of the

issue of immigration.

In order to study these questions, we examined primary documents from movement organizers, newspaper front pages gathered the day following the marches from newseum.org and transcripts of television coverage of the events of May 1 from two contrasting news and opinion sources. Using the perspective of discourse analysis, we asked whether the coverage of the marches appropriately aligned with the goals of movement organizers. We also asked what some of the consequences of multiple reading positions of political actions might be for social movement groups. The bifurcation of news norms in polarizing media outlets has created new challenges for political activists who seek to use the mass media to “send a message” through media coverage of their protest actions. Multiple reading positions present both an approach to communication theory, and an increasingly important consideration for movement practitioners.

Discursive Polysemy in Protest Coverage

In this discourse analysis of mass media texts, we are concerned with the discursive production of protest events and news texts, and their interpretation by journalists and pundits through media texts. We assume that these texts function not merely to transmit information but, in fact, circulate throughout a discourse community and work to define its values, legitimate its actors and, in the case of the news media, to act as a form of social control (Tichenor et al. 1980).

Objects in the world come to be known and understood primarily through language, and this knowledge in turn constitutes a form of power. ‘Discourse’ here is used in the Foucaultian (1980) sense to describe “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49). Our particular interest is in mass mediated discourse, as these texts are reproduced and circulated most widely through a society. Talbot (2007) suggests that, “for some sections of society, at least, the media have largely replaced older institutions ... as the primary source of

understanding the world” (3). Mass mediated texts are implicated in the production of representations (Hall 1997), and the legitimation of action (Van Leeuwen 2007; Rojo and van Dijk 1997). As Fairclough (1995) has argued, “media discourse should be regarded as the site of complex and often contradictory processes, including ideological processes” (47). Yet when dealing with explicitly political issues, audience reception of mass-mediated representations is neither a passive nor linear “receipt” of a message, as ideological and partisan commitments of audience members may lead them to ignore information that challenges their own firmly held beliefs (Arpan et al. 2006; Coe et al. 2008).

Thus, the role of the mass media in the production and reproduction of social control is augmented by many possible reading positions, complicating the notion of a universal audience previously presumed by media analysts and rhetorical scholars alike. A polysemous media environment draws from the rhetorical concept of polysemy, the quality of a text to possess multiple meanings or “unresolved contradictions” (Fiske 1986) that can be read from it. Those who have expanded the concept of polysemy from its most basic meaning (Condit 1989; Cloud 1992; Ceccarelli 1998) presume that a particular text or message has no one totalizing meaning (even when the creator’s intentions are documented) and that this presumption can guide scholars to a more heuristically rich understanding of how texts can be absorbed and utilized by audiences in ways that may complicate or challenge meanings intended by a text’s creators. Ceccarelli (1998) distinguishes three distinct types of polysemy: resistive reading, strategic ambiguity and hermeneutic depth. Resistive reading is audience-generated and called forth by polysemous terms in a text. Strategic ambiguity, on the other hand, is deliberately constructed by the author to enhance the persuasive capacity of a text for multiple audiences, while hermeneutic depth is used by a critic to draw audience attention to the complexity of a text.

Analysis of polysemy in media discourse involves distinctions regarding how polysemy may be determined, interpreted and evaluated, and what constitutes “success.” Cloud (1992) distinguishes divergent interpretations of meaning (for example, pro-amnesty groups may interpret visual images of protests as evidence of peaceful solidarity while anti-immigrant groups may interpret these images as disgruntled aliens) from polyvalence, or divergences in interpreting the way in which a text is valued (both pro-amnesty and anti-amnesty groups may see the crowds as similar in denotative make-up but may still disagree on how this text supports their worldviews). However, scholars have had difficulty clarifying what communicative “success” means, particularly within the context of polyvalence and audience reception. Parkin (1971) first established a typology of situated readings, organizing them into three categories: dominant, which upholds the status quo interpretation; oppositional, which superimposes on the message an interpretation which works in direct opposition; and negotiated, which decodes the broadest possible meaning of a message to find a middle ground. A number of other scholars (Morley 1980; Livingstone 1990; Philo 1990) further complicated this typology by pointing out that resistive reading positions were not necessarily subversive, but might reify dominant ideologies, with those controlling the means of production always providing the dominant reading. It is also critical to note the distinction between “dominant reading positions” and the intended meaning of producers, which can often be inverted when a marginalized political group seeks to promote a “message” that challenges the dominant political structure. Both Evans (1990) and Schultze et al. (1993) warn that researchers should take special care when assigning the labels “dominant” or “resistive” especially given recent trends towards the popularization of resistance. As Ceccarelli (1998) points out, context is a key component in determining how texts are actually received, noting that “It is sometimes the case that a resistive reading represents an

opposition that is harmful both to the rebels who initiate it and the larger social body” (409). Our study demonstrates that her key question, “Who benefits from this particular reading?” remains a critical one.

Ceccarelli (1998) concludes that while polysemy can help scholars be more attuned to resistive reception of texts, there cannot be endlessly deferred meaning. Audiences will eventually determine the interpretation of a text, and may form polyvalent judgments of that interpretation. Much of the recent work on framing (Brasted 2005; Entman 1991, 2004) has shown that journalistic audiences play an important role as interpreters of information, and work to fix the meaning of polysemous events (or texts) for a wider audience. Additionally, Barnhurst (2003) has illustrated that the move towards the “long journalism” style has prompted journalists to editorialize as part of their reporting, heightening their role as meaning-makers.

Scholarship on media effects has noted a similar complication in the ability to predict public response to a given political message (Moy and Pfau 2000; Price and Zaller 1993). While early research on media effects and agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar and Reeves 1997) tended to take a direct stimulus-response approach to audience reception, more recent work (Davis 2007) has posited multi-directional and socially constructed processes of meaning-making by a variety of mass media audiences, including policy makers and the general public. Although this study does not use the methods of media effects research, it draws upon the hypothesized relationship between message construction, message reception and interpretation that animates many media effects studies.

As well as producing the news, journalists constitute an important audience for those who seek to reach a wider public. In the case of political protest, journalists may be considered a primary audience for the message(s) created by activists, and activists have become increasingly

sophisticated in their understanding of that audience. Research on the "protest paradigm" (Chan and Lee 1984) has found that in those cases where activists have successfully achieved notice by the press, journalists focused more on protest tactics and less on issue coverage (Watkins 2001; Solomon 2000). While dramatic protest actions may garner media attention, that attention typically does not focus on the issues that precipitated the action (McCarthy et al. 1996; Smith et al. 2001). The general trend towards tactical framing and emphasis on deviance holds across most cases, but researchers have found that the valence of coverage may vary according to the degree of "deviance" exhibited by protesters (Boyle et al. 2004). A diversification of tactics and strategic use of "image events" as action strategies may influence visual and symbolic representation of protest actions in the media (DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Wall 2003), challenging earlier assumptions of a uniformly negative media framing of movement goals and protests (Waisbord and Peruzzotti 2009). However, research on media coverage of social movements has focused almost exclusively on traditional national and regional news coverage patterns, ignoring the periphery in favor of dominant news organizations (Couldry 2002). This study provides a corrective to that trend by focusing both on traditional journalistic venues and mass media punditry and opinion journalism in an increasingly fragmented media environment.

With the rhetorical concept of polysemy and the political communication concept of the "protest paradigm" in mind, we organized our study around two main research questions.

RQ1: How was the "protest paradigm" evident in mainstream journalistic coverage of the May 1 "Day Without An Immigrant" protests?

RQ2: What does journalistic audience reception of the text of the May 1 protests reveal about the role of polysemy in the interpretation of political protest actions?

Methods

This study examined three sets of texts related to the May 1, 2006 protests: documents produced by the social movement activists organizing the events of May 1; a corpus of 297 PDF files of newspaper front pages for May 2, 2006;³ and transcripts from two niche news and opinion television programs (Democracy Now!; Lou Dobbs Tonight). The social movement documents were collected from websites dedicated to organizing activities for the May 1 protests, including the organizing web sites immigrantsolidarity.org and NoHR4437.org.⁴ The 297 newspaper front pages were gathered from newseum.org, and constitute a large and broadly representative sample of US newspaper coverage of the events of May 1. They include national, regional and local newspapers from all 50 states. Participation in the newseum.org website is voluntary, and the 297 front pages represent all the US newspapers that elected to upload their front pages to the site for the day of May 2, 2006.⁵

In illustrating opposing reading positions we chose to look at two prominent news programs representing polarizing approaches to the issue of immigration: the television punditry of Lou Dobbs Tonight, and the television program Democracy Now! (DN). Although Dobbs is no longer with CNN, at the time of the 2006 marches he was one of the most prominent media critics of the immigrant rights movement, a position that frequently put him at odds with his mainstream cable network employers. DN broadcasts on over 800 community radio and public access TV stations, and is widely viewed as an important national level left-leaning political analysis program, covering issues and actions relevant to a range of progressive social movements. The transcript of the Democracy Now! broadcast for May 2, was obtained from www.democracynow.org, and the transcript of Lou Dobbs Tonight for May 1 was obtained from LexisNexis. Our selection of these texts was prompted by Ceccarelli's (1998) observation that:

If one wants to understand and describe accurately how actual audiences have

responded to a text with polysemous interpretations, then it is necessary to do more than a close reading of the text itself; one must conduct a close reading of the receptional evidence, with an eye toward the construal of message content by different interpretive communities (410).

We understand Lou Dobbs and Democracy Now! to represent two contrasting interpretive communities. We were interested in finding diverse perspectives that also gave comprehensive accounts of the protest. Dobbs and DN were exemplary in this regard.

A combination of close reading, qualitative discourse analysis and concordance analysis was used in analyzing all texts. First, close reading of the organizing documents of the May 1 marches by the authors identified two theme areas protesters wished to stress: ECONOMY and POLICY/RIGHTS. We also included a third theme of LAW/ORDER, based on our reading of the "protest paradigm" literature on media coverage of protests, and the organizers' clear intention to create a "peaceful" image for the protest action – a goal we identified as a response to journalistic norms. Each thematic area generated a number of associated keywords, all of which are listed in Table 1 below.

Once each thematic area had been constructed all occurrences of keywords were first counted to provide a general measure of their frequency, and then analyzed using concordance analysis to determine how each keyword was used in context across our three journalistic samples.⁶ Concordance analysis is a strategy for surfacing discursive patterns across a body of texts (Sinclair 1991), serving as a valuable bridge between quantitative and qualitative discourse analytical strategies (Baker 2006). When analyzing each keyword in its context, we drew on Fairclough (2003) and Cameron (2001) in identifying those participants, named actions, group labels or categories that were used in making them meaningful, and noted the absence of certain

Table 1. Count of Keyword Occurrence in Newspaper Front Pages, Lou Dobbs Tonight, and Democracy Now!

Theme	Keyword	Newspaper Front Pages	Lou Dobbs Tonight	Democracy Now!
ECONOMY	economy/economic	257	2	11
	boycott	670	35	23
POLICY/RIGHTS	legislation	60	5	1
	bill	35	9	10
	Sensenbrenner	2	3	6
	HR 4437	3	0	2
	human rights	1	0	0
	civil rights	9	1	1
	immigrants' rights	106	2	22
	Immigration reform	189	3	1
	amnesty	16	41	8
	LAW/ORDER	legal (immigrant/immigration)	9	1
illegal (immigrant/immigration)		235	20	0
"legal or illegal"		67	0	0
police		134	6	1
violence		0	0	0
undocumented		68	5	13

Note: The N for newspaper front pages was drawn from 297 daily newspaper front pages and the N for Lou Dobbs Tonight and Democracy Now! were drawn from one program transcript each.

keywords as significant. Ultimately, our analysis focused on the possible reading positions called forth by the inherent polysemy of the keywords and themes identified in the dataset.

Given the unusual nature of our sample, in which the primary text of the protests was encoded by a group that is not socially or politically dominant, we modified Parkin’s (1971) classification of reading positions. “Aligned” – rather than “dominant” – refers to a reading position that endorses the meanings of the message producers; “negotiated” refers to a reading position that acknowledges but does not completely endorse the meanings of the message producers; and “resistive” refers to a reading position that activates the polysemous potential in the text and presents a meaning counter to that of the message producers.

Encoding a Strategically Ambiguous Message

The situation confronting social movement organizers for immigrants' rights in May, 2006 closely resembled the rhetorical conditions of polysemy that Ceccarelli (1998) associates with strategic ambiguity: organizers needed to create an event that would simultaneously state their case to a friendly audience of supporters – thus building movement solidarity – and appeal to potentially hostile or indifferent members of the public. Facing a large, well-organized movement to restrict immigration, May 1 organizers had to walk a fine line between demonstrating immigrants' power and threatening mainstream US voters who were not predisposed to support the movement. They sought, for instance, to illustrate the economic importance of documented and undocumented workers, without activating the nativist claims that immigrants “steal American jobs.” We argue that these constraints led organizers to encode a degree of strategic ambiguity into the protests that also opened the message to multiple audience interpretations, including those hostile to the movement's goals.

Evidence for this claim was found in several documents created by social movement organizers and distributed via the web. Documents posted on the immigrantsolidarity.org web site encouraged participants to create visual representations of peaceful protest by wearing white, and demanding “full amnesty and dignity for the millions of undocumented workers presently in the US.”⁷ A call to action written by the May 25th Coalition included a long list of endorsers and told readers that “a new Civil Rights and workers' rights movement is on the rise,”⁸ indicating that organizers consciously sought to connect their goals to the historical analog of the Civil Rights movement. Organizers also promoted awareness of the oppositional discourses arrayed against their movement; the National Council of La Raza published a list of talking points to refute “Common myths about undocumented immigrants,” such as “undocumented immigrants

take jobs from Americans” and “the best way to stop undocumented migration is by increasing enforcement.”⁹ Protesters were encouraged to use terms that had positive associations for participants such as “amnesty” and “immigration reform.” In order to encode positive associations of family and stability, organizers sought to include children in the marches on May 1. They encouraged participants to display US flags in order to demonstrate American national identity to an audience that questioned immigrants’ loyalty to the US. These polysemous signifiers appear to have worked against popular acceptance of organizers’ intended meanings in some cases. In the sections that follow we examine some of the reasons for this mixed reception.

Negotiated Reading Position: The Story on the Front Pages

The May 1 events received significant levels of coverage, appearing on 93% of the daily newspaper front pages in our sample.¹⁰ Such widespread coverage demonstrated the movement’s success in getting their issue on the mainstream news agenda. However, a closer reading of how each thematic area was deployed in the texts revealed a negotiated reading position that partially supported the protesters’ goals, but also subtly undermined the legitimacy of their agenda.

The first theme area, ECONOMY, was indicated both by the words “economy” or “economics” and by the term “boycott,” which was the term organizers preferred for the events of May 1. Appearing 257 times in the dataset, the words “economy” and “economic” were consistently linked with terms that referred to “power” or “muscle,” as in the following examples:

Flexing their economic muscle in a nationwide boycott.¹¹

Although the protests caught the nation’s attention, the economic impact was mixed, as many immigrants heeded the call of some leaders not to jeopardize their jobs, and businesses adopted strategies to cope with absent employees.¹²

The day was designed to show the economic clout of the immigrant community and to oppose an immigration reform bill in congress that would impose stricter

controls on illegal immigration.¹³

In almost every single instance, the notion of “impact” or “clout” was linked with economic effect. These words of explicit power or force, typical of economic discourse in the US generally, may have multiple meanings for different audiences. The presence of unauthorized workers participating in the economy was a contentious point for many in the general audience, despite organizers’ goals of creating a nationwide perception of immigrants’ key role in the workforce. Economic influence linked so closely to words of power or force could also heighten the sense of implied threat in the protests.

Organizers wanted the word “boycott” to define the events of May 1, 2006 and in this they succeeded. The word itself appeared 670 times in the dataset, or an average of 2.25 times per front page. The following extracts exemplify its common use:

Although there was some evidence to suggest a few local immigrants were skipping work or school — part of the boycott’s plan to demonstrate how much immigrants contribute to their community — it could not be definitively attributed to the advocacy movement.¹⁴

The effect of the marches and boycotts was widespread, but far from uniform.¹⁵

Headlines often featured the word “boycott,” but use of the term often highlighted journalists’ tight focus on the relative success of protest tactics, rather than on the movement’s broader goals or solutions. The term “boycott” was most often linked to some sort of analysis of the “impact” it had either locally or nationally, with the clear implication that the presence or absence of some clear “impact” would indicate whether the effort succeeded or failed. The movement’s effort to frame May 1 as a “boycott” had deep roots in US political discourse, but those roots ultimately supported a reading position that allowed some audience members to evaluate the boycott as a failure. The move may also have fed the inevitable tactical discussion favored by journalists, at the expense of airing wider policy goals and issues. Much of the newspaper coverage of May 1

asked whether the marches themselves were a good tactic, but the most pressing policy issues that movement organizers sought to address were marginalized in press coverage.

The third theme consisted of keywords associated with the policy or rights-based goals of movement organizers: “amnesty,” “legislation,” “reform” and “immigrant rights.” Protest organizers wanted to achieve significant legislative action on reform of the US immigration system. They also sought to block the passage of H.R. 4437, which would have changed the category of immigration infractions from an administrative violation to a felony. Thus, there was a substantial focus on support for and opposition to specific policy proposals at the federal level. This tight focus on legislative goals did not, however, appear in the front page coverage of the May 1 protests to the degree that organizers had hoped they would.

The word “legislation” appeared only 60 times, and the word “bill” appeared only 35 times in reference to the immigration protests. The various examples, however, demonstrate an interesting phenomenon. Rather than naming the specific bills that concerned protest organizers, journalists used other constructions with the word “legislation” or “bill,” leaving a confused picture of the actual goals of the protesters. The following extracts demonstrate several different meanings that were common.

The rest of the nation rallied against heavy-handed immigration legislation being considered by Congress¹⁶

...to voice support of legislation that would grant legal status to the close to 12 million undocumented workers in the country¹⁷

...to show both support for immigration reform and opposition to legislation that would criminalize the actions of an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants¹⁸

On the question of legislative policy, which was central to the organizers’ goals, journalists offered only vague descriptions to guide the audience. Relatively few journalists even

correctly identified the main thrust of H.R. 4437, which proposed reclassifying immigration violations as felonies. Other journalists suggested (incorrectly) that the bill would require the deportation of all undocumented workers in the US. The range of descriptive terms applied to the bill – “tough,” “heavy-handed,” “reform,” “anti-immigration” – had nearly opposite meanings. “Reform” was the most ambiguous – and ultimately polysemous – term in media coverage, suggesting both laws that would restrict immigration and laws that would promote it.

The final keyword for the POLICY/RIGHTS theme was “immigrant rights.” This keyword was derived from the internal communications of the organizers, who stressed that their overall goal was to promote “immigrant rights.” Many of the individual groups that organized activities in locations across the country had the term “immigrant rights” in their titles, and many of these group titles appeared as sources of quotes in articles on the events of May 1. In total, the keyword appeared 106 times in the dataset, frequently in the captions of photographs of large crowds of protesters. It was by far the most prominent reference to any type of “rights.” The following example illustrates its appearance:

More than 4,000 people became brothers and sisters in rallies for immigrant rights across the Inland Empire¹⁹

The prominent linking of “rights” with the word “immigrant” may be seen as positive for the supporters of immigrants. However, the modifier “immigrant” introduces an exclusionary element into the discourse, and may confirm for the anti-immigrant movement that “immigrants” seek “special,” unjustified rights. In contrast to terms like “civil rights” or even “human rights,” which may be understood to apply universally, the term “immigrant rights” is particularly subject to multiple readings, some of which are counter to the preferred reading of social movement organizers. Without a clear discussion of policies, the meaning of “immigrant rights” remained ambiguous to the audience. The terms “civil rights” and “human rights” barely appeared in the

front pages dataset, although organizers sought to define their movement with those terms.

The theme of LAW/ORDER, indicated in our study by the keywords “police,” “legal,” and “illegal,” was based on the literature, which indicated that mainstream journalists often emphasize themes of police control and deviance in political protests. The keywords “legal” and “illegal” were most frequently used to modify the word “immigrant” or “immigration.” This was significant because the people most often identified as participants in the marches were usually also labeled “illegal.” Many organizers disliked the term “illegal immigrant(s),” countering with the claim that “No human being is illegal.” In the case of the May 1 marches, organizers’ preferred term, “undocumented immigrant(s)” appeared only 68 times, as opposed to 235 separate uses of “illegal immigrant” or “illegal immigration.” One of the most frequently reproduced quotes of a protest participant used a construction widely adopted by other speakers: “We are the backbone of what America is, legal or illegal; it doesn’t matter.”²⁰ We argue that the overwhelming adoption of the “legal” vs. “illegal” framework in journalistic writing about immigrants and immigration reform reinforced the perception of these categories as fixed rather than changeable, and definitive rather than arbitrary.

The word “police,” while appearing a total of 134 times in the dataset, functioned almost exclusively as the named source for crowd size estimates. In some instances, police were mentioned in conjunction with efforts to “keep the peace” or to quell potential violence, but these cases were the exception rather than the rule. The police and their role as instruments of control were not as prominent in our dataset as some of the literature suggested they might be.

Resistive and Aligned Reading Positions: Lou Dobbs Tonight and Democracy Now!

Lou Dobbs’ broadcast on May 1, 2006 was devoted almost entirely to coverage of the day’s

protest marches around the country. We understand Dobbs' reading of these events to be resistive because it contested the intentionally encoded meanings of the social movement organizers. Dobbs' broadcast also demonstrated polyvalence (Condit 1989), in which he presented an oppositional judgment of the protest actions while agreeing with some of their meanings. In this case, polyvalence is intertwined with the initial polysemous interpretation of the event as both a futile exercise and a threat.

Dobbs gave a great deal of attention to the ECONOMY theme, frequently using the organizers' term "boycott" to label the events of May 1. Dobbs' focus, however, was to define the "boycott" as a failure, as his opening statement shows:

But what the illegal alien lobby called the "Great American Boycott" did not materialize. It certainly did not paralyze most of our cities, as those organizers had hoped.²¹

The protests' lack of economic impact was reiterated throughout the broadcast, but the tactic of boycotting was also framed as disruptive through the enumeration of businesses closed due to the protests. Dobbs interpreted these closures as revealing "the industries that are most unlawfully hiring illegal aliens,"²² and thus hurting American workers. The protesters' goal of demonstrating the economic role of immigrants was presented clearly in Dobbs' show, mainly through footage of organizers and participants explaining the boycott's purpose. Although organizers' goals were clearly presented, the polyvalence of the ECONOMY theme was quite clear: the presence of large numbers of undocumented workers and their impact on the economy was a threat rather than an indicator of importance.

On the theme of POLICY/RIGHTS, Dobbs devoted a substantial amount of time to a discussion of legislative proposals for immigration reform, mainly during an interview with two Congressional representatives who supported reform efforts. Dobbs also featured video and audio clips of protest participants stating their policy goals:

This is very important. We don't want second-class citizenship, and we're not going to back down on that. We want full and equal rights, and there should be no less than that.²³

The polysemy of these claims to “rights,” however, was made clear as Dobbs and his reporters consistently referred to the “demands” of the “illegal alien lobby” for “full amnesty.” The words of one reporter reinforced the oppositional reading position: “An observer can almost forget this was a rally supporting illegal immigration were it not for the signs demanding amnesty.” The goals of participants and organizers are presented as an extreme version of “reform,” and contrasted with the goals of more “moderate” groups within the immigrant community. Dobbs also gave significant air time to counter-protests, which were represented by the group “You Don’t Speak for Me.” One guest characterized the protests and marches as “an insult and a slap in the face to every American...and to every immigrant who is here legally.” This perspective was largely absent from mainstream newspaper coverage of the protests.

Dobbs most frequently labeled the organizers the “pro-illegal alien lobby,” and referred to participants as “illegal aliens and their supporters.” In total, the word “illegal” appeared 78 times in the 7,983-word transcript. This frequency was largely due to the host’s allegation that the mainstream media conspicuously avoided the word “illegal” in their coverage. The following excerpt from the program’s introduction gives a sample of this talk:

Most major news organizations today chose to call illegal aliens "immigrants" in their coverage and to report on amnesty for illegal aliens as an issue of immigration rather than an issue of illegal immigration.²⁴

In our analysis, the word “illegal” is associated with the LAW/ORDER theme, and Dobb’s frequent use of the word correlated with his editorial concern over immigration law enforcement. Throughout the broadcast, Dobbs labeled participants as “supporters of illegal immigration,” and organizers as the “illegal alien lobby,” delegitimizing both the actions and the actors in the

marches by associating them with a condition of “illegality.” In one clip, Dobbs played a statement from one organizer explaining why protesters did not like the word “illegal”:

We don't like the term "illegal," because we don't think any human being can really be illegal. We know we use the term "undocumented".²⁵

Aside from this one reference, the organizers’ preferred term of “undocumented” did not appear in Dobbs’ broadcast.

Our analysis suggests one possible answer to the question of Dobbs’ popularity; as Ceccarelli’s (1998) work suggests, by activating the strategically ambiguous polysemous potential in the movement’s texts – in particular the May 1 protests – Dobbs was able to construct a resistive reading for his primary audience that both appealed to their previously held beliefs and was supported by his selection of evidence in the texts themselves.

Democracy Now!, (DN) on the other hand, presented a reading of the events of May 1 that was both diametrically opposed to Dobbs’, and distinct from the negotiated reading of mainstream newspapers. We interpreted DN’s reading to be broadly supportive of the goals of the protest organizers (the message producers), and thus we have called this an aligned reading position. DN’s coverage reduced the strategic ambiguity of the event by deepening the context and limiting the connotations that an audience could derive from otherwise polysemous messages.

The term “boycott” was prominent in DN’s coverage of the ECONOMY theme, appearing 27 times in the 8,521-word transcript. The term was used both as a noun and as a verb (participants “boycotted” businesses), and co-located frequently with positive evaluations of the tactic’s success. Important features of DN’s coverage included lengthy interviews with organizers of the May 1 protests and a discussion of the history of boycotts in US political

protests, enhancing the contextual coverage of the protests and increasing the frequency of organizers' preferred terms.

The most significant distinction in DN's coverage came in the reading of the POLICY/RIGHTS theme. DN's transcript mentioned H.R. 4437, the specific piece of legislation against which the protests were organized, six times in one broadcast, while the entire 297 front pages mentioned the bill only five times. In the DN broadcast, the bill's main effect was precisely explained and denounced, as in the following example from an interview with a protest participant: "It's a stupid idea to make it a felony for people who are undocumented here."²⁶ Several interviews with protest participants and organizers provided opportunities for articulation of the movement's legislative goals. The terms "civil rights," "immigrant rights," and "labor rights" were all used to describe the policy goals of the protests. Finally, an interview with protest organizers discussing the "future of the movement" contextualized the May 1 events as a broader social movement for immigrant rights. The specific attention to the present policy proposals and the socio-historical context of struggle on DN provided a less episodic treatment of the day of protest than the mainstream newspapers, and a more supportive reading than Dobbs.

On the theme of LAW/ORDER, DN used the word "illegal" only twice, once in the configuration "immigrant workers, both legal and illegal" and once as an adverb to describe a man who "came here illegally from Mexico five years ago." The movement's preferred term, "undocumented" appeared 13 times in the DN transcript, in contrast to the mainstream newspapers' and Dobbs' preference for "illegal." Given the dominance of the "legal" vs. "illegal" trope observed on the front pages, and the history of a "criminal" framing of undocumented immigrants noted by other scholars (Suro 2008; Benson 2010), the absence of this

frame is a strong indicator that DN's reading of the events of May 1 was supportive of the movement's goals. In the DN transcript, the word "police" only appeared once, as a source for crowd estimates. The peaceful nature of the protests and the large numbers of children in attendance was also a prominent feature of DN's coverage, as it was on the front pages and even in Dobbs' broadcast.

We found that the strategic ambiguity of organizers' preferred messages resulted in three discrete reading positions across our three samples. Both of our niche or opinion samples portrayed a much more detailed treatment of policy and legislative issues than mainstream newspapers, albeit from opposing perspectives. Both DN and Dobbs identified the May 1 events as part of a larger movement with clear legislative and policy goals that the front pages left vague. Both niche sources also positioned themselves as critics of mainstream news reporting, although much of what we found, particularly on Dobbs' show, was reminiscent of the newspapers' coverage: the emphasis on a tactical framing of the boycott events, a focus on symbolic and expressive goals and, in Dobbs' case, an amplified "criminal" framing of undocumented immigrants.

Our analysis highlights the difficulty in using the terms "dominant" or "oppositional/resistive," to denote reading positions when the primary text has been encoded by a marginalized group, and received by both mainstream and partisan journalistic audiences. Here, the message creators – organizers of the May 1 protests – challenged mainstream (or dominant) understandings of immigration, and the resistive reading proposed by Dobbs sought, in many ways, to strengthen the status quo of strict law enforcement and criminal framing of the undocumented. Polysemous terms the organizers employed in order to foster a broader, more sympathetic audience were utilized by ideologically opposed journalists to render a resistive

framing of the event. This case demonstrates the need for more careful examination and labeling of reading positions that fully consider both the perspective of the message creators, the wider hegemonic structure within which their message is created, and the possibility that reading positions presenting themselves as “subversive” reinforce the status quo.

Conclusion: The Challenges of Polysemy for Social Movements

Mass-mediated polysemy presents a difficult challenge for political activists who seek to use the mass media to broadcast their goals. Not only does the well-known “protest paradigm” operate against a full reflection of the political goals of social movements in mainstream journalistic accounts, but the potential for appropriation and repackaging of movement discourse by movement opponents may further complicate the persuasive appeal of social and political change. When the forces of the status quo are able to harness mass mediated punditry for the purpose of resisting any change – or for bringing about active regression – those who seek to alter existing power relationships and accomplish specific legislative goals must give more careful attention to the form and content of their political actions if they wish to avoid a hijacking of their discourse.

In response to RQ1, how was the “protest paradigm” evident in mainstream journalistic coverage of the May 1 “Day Without An Immigrant” protests?, we found that organizers of the May 1 protests were successful in overcoming some aspects of the “protest paradigm” in media coverage. The protests were large enough that it was nearly impossible for mainstream news organizations to ignore them, and organizers were able to control the portrayal of the marches and rallies as “peaceful” rather than violent by using specific visual elements to enhance the media’s reception of the protests as non-deviant. Such tactics as including many children in the marches, wearing white clothing and waving many US flags appear to have been an effective

way to gain positive news coverage. Front page stories, large headlines and many colorful photographs all displayed the size and importance of the marches. Thus, organizers could evaluate several of their discursive resources as effective counter-measures to the “protest paradigm,” and successful in reaching many of their expressive goals.

In other respects, however, the “protest paradigm” continued to be a powerful organizing principle in media coverage of the protests. Most significantly, organizers did not generate comprehensive coverage of their legislative goals in the mainstream press, or overcome the episodic and tactical framing of most reporting on political protest. Nor did they escape the trope of illegality that has driven coverage of immigration for decades (Suro 2008). In this instance, the force of the narrative structure in mainstream journalism’s coverage of immigration, identified by Benson (2010), remained impervious to organizers’ efforts to change the framing.

In response to RQ2, what does journalistic audience reception of the text of the May 1 protests reveal about the role of polysemy in the interpretation of political protest actions?, we concluded that movement organizers’ reliance on strategically ambiguous terms such as “immigration reform” and “amnesty,” left the protest actions vulnerable to oppositional punditry that generated a resistive reading in support of a reactionary agenda and issue frame. Framing the protest as a “boycott” was particularly problematic, as it strengthened journalists’ tendency to favor tactical frames and to determine “success” or “failure” in purely economic terms. Opponents of the movement could legitimately claim that a single-day boycott demonstrated little in the way of protesters’ power while still appealing to the fear of their large numbers. While historically an appealing tool in the repertoire of social movement tactics, in this case the boycott’s limited temporal reach also limited its utility as a vehicle to achieve organizers’ stated policy goals. Likewise, organizers’ decision to focus on multiple legislative agendas

simultaneously – support for comprehensive immigration reform and opposition to H.R. 4437 – complicated mainstream journalistic framing and blunted any possible clear policy focus for coverage of the protests.

The events of May 1, 2006 have become a powerful discursive resource for both advocates and opponents of immigration in the US. Activists continue to draw strength from reference to the day and its powerful message of unity and purpose, while opponents continue to invoke the implied threat of “hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants and their supporters” taking to the streets. By reading protest and activism not simply as a means to a particular material end but as polysemous discursive resources open to multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations, we hope our study will contribute to both scholarly and activist work on public argument. Through our examination of the protests’ reception via the journalistic audience we have shown that social movement activists, aware of “protest paradigm” constraints, can in some cases overcome these constraints to create a more positive expression of a movement’s identity in news texts. Such expressive tactics, however, did not provide sufficient narrative force to alter the dominant framing of the issue of immigration as a question of legal vs. illegal, or the episodic treatment of political protest unconnected to long-term, sustained political activism and change. Efforts to encode strategically ambiguous terms to give the movement wider appeal also provided, in our view, several opportunities for immigration restrictionists to construct persuasive oppositional interpretations of the events of May 1. In this case, the answer to Ceccarelli’s (1998) question, “who benefits from this particular reading?” (and its mainstream dissemination) is undoubtedly the nativist lobby.

While our study did not examine reception data from the general public, this would be the next logical step in order to extend scholarly understanding of the process of meaning-making

that takes place between message producers, journalistic audiences and the wider audience for those mass media texts. One other factor that our study was unable to examine was the role of the May 1, 2006 marches in building internal movement identification and mobilization. It is quite possible that the perceived success of the May 1 actions provided a significant boost to activism around the question of immigration reform, and may have enabled supporters to weather the legislative setbacks of 2007, as well as the sustained media presence of anti-immigrant activists. This would be a useful area for future studies to examine.

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Notes

¹ This paper is part of an ongoing collaborative project examining media coverage of the May 1, 2006 marches and protests. Participants in the group are: Amoshaun Toft, Louisa Edgerly, Renee Byrd, Jennifer Self and Crispin Thurlow. The contributions of all participants have enriched this paper and informed the analysis presented here. The authors express their appreciation for the work of all individuals involved. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

² Documents from groups responsible for organizing the May 1, 2006 marches support this statement, including the May 2, 2006 Call to Action! and a statement from the May 25th Coalition.

³ PDF files were originally identified by Crispin Thurlow, and were prepared with undergraduate research assistant Jennifer Sandberg.

⁴ Information about the 2006 events was distributed to participants primarily via two organizing websites: <http://www.immigrantsolidarity.org/Spring2006.html> and <http://www.NoHR4437.org>. These websites provided a significant site for the distribution of organizational materials, statements of policy goals and coordination of movement activities.

⁵ According to Editor and Publisher's Yearbook, in 2005 there were 1,452 daily newspapers in the US.

⁶ The authors merged the individual PDF files for keyword searches of all photograph captions, headlines and front page text. Each instance of a keyword's appearance was coded to answer the following questions: Is the topic of the article or the subject of the photograph the May 1 protests? Is the word used in a context that relates to the May 1 protests? Thus, the keyword search return "Bill" appearing in an article about the May 1 protests, but in

the context of a personal name would not be counted among the references to a legislative bill. Nor would we count a search return “bill” appearing in an article about a different legislative effort.

- ⁷ From the document “Call to Action” retrieved on February 4, 2007 from <http://www.immigrantsolidarity.org/Spring2006.html> .
- ⁸ May 25th Coalition. 2006. “We call for amnesty and full legalization.” Republished by Labor Standard, March 30, 2006. Retrieved from http://www.laborstandard.org/Immigrant_Rights/First_American_National_Strike.htm on August 9, 2010. While distributed here by a sympathetic website not dedicated primarily to organizing actions in Spring of 2006, the May 25th coalition call to action was among the most widely cited by protest sympathizers.
- ⁹ National Council of La Raza. 2006. “Common myths about undocumented immigrants.” Retrieved from www.immigrantsolidarity.org on August 9, 2010.
- ¹⁰ Front page data was coded by the first and second authors, and by project researchers Renee Byrd, Jennifer Self and Crispin Thurlow. A front page was coded as “including coverage” if it contained at least one article on the topic of the May Day protest marches.
- ¹¹ Gillian Flaccus, “Immigrants walk off their jobs, into streets to show economic clout,” Ventura County Star (AP), 2 May, 2006. This AP article by Gillian Flaccus was reproduced 53 times in our front pages data set, and phrases from the article were often used as headline or photo caption copy.
- ¹² Darryl Fears and Krissah Williams, “Boycott gives voice to illegal workers: The day’s impact on economy unclear,” The Washington Post, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹³ Carlos Villatoro, “On the march in St. Helena: More than 2,000 walk, chant in show of support for immigrants,” Napa Valley Register, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Alicia Petska, “Not quite in step: Local immigrants stay in background,” The News Virginian, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Paul Herrera, “Diners, homebuilders have difficulty finding helping hands,” The Press-Enterprise, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁶ David Irvin, “Area immigrants stand up for rights,” Montgomery Advertiser, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Ana M. Valdes and Pilar Ulibarri de Rivera, “On ‘day without,’ many speak out, take to the street,” The Palm Beach Post, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁸ AP photo caption, Rockford Register Star, 2 May, 2006.
- ¹⁹ Kelly Rush and Gina Tenorio, “Differences fade away at rallies,” Inland Valley Daily Bulletin, 2 May, 2006.
- ²⁰ Gillian Flaccus, “Immigrants walk off their jobs, into streets to show economic clout,” Ventura County Star (AP), 2 May, 2006.
- ²¹ CNN. May 1, 2006. Lou Dobbs Tonight. Transcript retrieved from Lexis Nexis on October 30, 2008.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Pacifica. May 2, 2006. Democracy Now! <<http://www.democracynow.org/shows/2006/5/2>> 2006, May 5.