

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond the protest paradigm: Four types of news coverage and America's most prominent social movement organizations

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Funding information

National Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: SES-1657872

Abstract

What determines the quality of coverage received by social movement organizations when they appear extensively in the news? Research on the news coverage of social movement organizations is dominated by case studies supporting the “protest paradigm,” which argues that journalists portray movement activists trivially and negatively when covering protest. However, movement organizations often make long-running news for many different reasons, mainly not protest. We argue that some of this extensive news will lead to worse coverage—in terms of substance and sentiment—notably when the main action covered involves violence. Extensive coverage centered on other actions, however, notably politically assertive action, will tend to produce “good news” in these dimensions. We analyze the news of the twentieth century's 100 most-covered U.S. movement organizations in their biggest news year in four national newspapers. Topic models indicate that these organizations were mainly covered for actions other than nonviolent protest, including politically assertive action, strikes, civic action, investigations, trials, and violence. Natural language processing analyses and hand-coding show that their news also varied widely in sentiment and substance. Employing qualitative comparative analyses, we find that the main action behind news strongly influences its quality, and there may be several news paradigms for movement organizations.

KEYWORDS

legitimacy, news media, political sociology, social movements

What determines the quality of coverage received by social movement organizations when they appear extensively in the news? These organizations, which represent social movements, or groups seeking to promote or prevent social and political change, seek attention in the news for many reasons: to amplify their demands, transmit favorable images of groups they represent, win support, highlight new social problems, and influence political agendas (Banerjee, 2013; Ferree et al., 2002; Koopmans, 2004; Vliegenthart et al., 2005). For social movement organizations to get favorable results, however, the news must do more than just mention them and their events. The news must transmit their demands to inform influential third parties

and provide favorable coverage to win their sympathy (Lipsky, 1968). However, research, typically based on case studies, focuses on protest (reviews in Amenta et al., 2017; Caren et al., 2020) and often shows that mainstream news coverage of it hinders activists and their causes (Davenport, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod, 2007).

The explanation often supplied for this unhelpful news is the “protest paradigm” (McLeod, 2007; review in McCurdy, 2012), a template reporters may use to cover protest, or non-institutional collective action designed to draw attention to a social movement. Coverage using this template hinders activists' campaigns, as it foregrounds the perspective of politicians and police (Fishman, 1980) rather than

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the frames of the activists and focuses on the event itself, treating protest “episodically” rather than “thematically” (Iyengar, 1991). In short, news coverage adhering to the protest paradigm ignores the demands, issues, and grievances of social movement activists—covering them without substance—and portrays them in a negative light.

However, recent research finds that social movement organizations, also known as “challengers” (Gamson, 1990), are covered in the news more frequently while engaged in action other than protest (King & Nelson, 2023) and are often covered for long periods for specific reasons (Amenta et al., 2019). Challengers’ main newsworthy activities range widely from initiatives to strikes, from civic action to violence. That opens the prospect that challengers’ long-running news for these different reasons might be better, or even worse, than the news of the protest paradigm. Because some challengers are viewed as almost synonymous with their movement and constituency, such as the National Rifle Association for the gun rights and the AARP for the senior rights, their news can influence the public profile of entire movements and groups.

We argue that the long-running news of challengers is likely to be better or worse than expected by the protest paradigm, and why a challenger makes long-running news shapes how it gets covered in that news. Although challengers face legitimacy deficits in politics and with the news media, we argue that some actions that animate long-running coverage will decrease their deficits and yield reasonably good news, indicating their demands and portraying them sympathetically. Other reasons for extensive coverage will increase these deficits and will bring news that is worse than envisioned by the protest paradigm. Specifically, violent action, trials, and investigations will bring bad news for challengers—news with little substance and negative tone—whereas politically assertive action, including political campaigns and electoral action, will bring them relatively good news. In contrast, we expect challengers in the news for strikes to yield substantive coverage with a negative tone, whereas challengers in the news for civic action will be covered with a favorable tone, but little substance. In contrast to the protest paradigm, we expect challengers making major news for nonviolent protests, such as direct actions, occupations, or boycotts, to fall somewhere in the middle of this news spectrum.

To appraise these arguments, we analyze the news coverage of the twentieth century’s 100 most prominent U.S. social movement and advocacy organizations in their most prominent year. The news attention of these challengers not only accounts for most news mentions of movement organizations, but it also provides wide variation in why and how movement organizations made news. We first uncover the reasons that these organizations made big news—the main action behind it—during these key moments through topic modeling of 49,750 articles in four national newspapers. To measure their sentiment, we employ valence analyses through natural language processing. To measure their substance, we hand code 342 articles from a sample of 48 organizations, seven of which were in the news for two modal actions. We then assess six hypotheses about why the organizations are covered differently with qualitative comparative analyses (QCA). QCA can address and appraise the impact of the

main actions behind the news on the quality of the news organizations received, as well as to identify whether these determinants are modified by other, potentially influential, conditions. These analyses show, as expected, that why organizations made big news shaped how they were covered. Indeed, we find that there are several action-based paradigms for movement when they make major news. In contrast, organizations making big news for nonviolent protest do not yield a clear news paradigm.

FOUR KINDS OF NEWS FOR MOVEMENT ACTORS

News coverage is important for social movement organizations and a key cultural consequence of them (Amenta & Polletta, 2019; Earl, 2004), as they seek to intervene in public discourse and political debates. How they are covered matters. But their news coverage is unlike their promotional or social media content and is instead generated externally. Choices regarding their news treatment are made by journalists in professional news organizations, and movement actors have no direct control over them, as is also the case for government policy or business decisions. In analyses, many scholars have found that challengers are often trivially or negatively portrayed in the news, as per the protest paradigm (Bennett, 2007; Brown & Harlow, 2019; Davenport, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; Rohlinger, 2007; Smith et al., 2001; Sobieraj, 2011). However, others find movement actors being covered substantively (Amenta et al., 2012; Ferree et al., 2002; Kutz-Flamenbaum et al., 2012; Snow et al., 2007).

We engage this issue and advance beyond prior work in several ways. We go beyond case studies of specific movements, organizations, or events by analyzing the treatment of the movement organizations that made the greatest public impressions in U.S. history when they made them. Although most social movement research addresses progressive challengers during the second half of the twentieth century (Amenta & Caren, 2022), here we analyze left and right challengers across the century. We also examine these challengers acting in a far greater variety of ways than just protests. In addition, we examine four news sources, supplementing the often-used *New York Times* (see reviews in Amenta et al., 2017; Caren et al., 2020; Earl et al., 2004) with the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*. In addition, we analyze both substance and sentiment in news coverage. Each has key impacts on movement organizations and their causes, and constituents—and these qualities may diverge in news treatments.

Movement actors attempt to insert into the public sphere new political issues, new ways of thinking about old ones, innovative solutions to issues, and images of their constituents as deserving and their organizations as legitimate. A key part of this process is getting their frames in the news, and a central frame element is a “demand”—also known as a “prescription” (Benford & Snow, 2000) or “claim” (Tilly, 1999). The airing of demands is crucial for movement actors in public contests over meaning (Ferree et al., 2002; Koopmans, 2004), and we see them as being at the center of the substance that

challengers may gain in news. The tone of news discussions also matters for activists (Rohlinger, 2007; Smith et al., 2001); messages are more persuasive when the messengers are portrayed favorably (O’Keefe, 2015; Wouters, 2015). But substance and sentiment may not always work together in the news and divide the potential results of challengers’ news coverage into four potential modal types of treatment.

The first is what we are calling “bad news”—articles about movement actors that ignore their demands and portray them negatively (see the bottom left of Figure 1). Tilly (1999) argues that social movement actors typically need to display “worthiness” to be influential, but bad news does the opposite. This sort of news is a “collective bad,” providing discursive setbacks for challengers’ missions and organizations. Bad news is expected by the protest paradigm. To give an example: A *Los Angeles Times* article about the seizure of the South Dakota hamlet Wounded Knee by the American Indian Movement brought bad news (“Wounded Knee: The Months Only Deepen Division,” May 5, 1973). It focused on violence and featured many disparaging quotes from Native Americans as well as political leaders, without any indication of why the town was taken. This was not a one-off article; it appeared in the midst of extensive bad news about this organization and situation.

However, it is possible for movement actors to do well on both dimensions and gain what we call “good news” (see Figure 1). Here challengers are treated with substance and positive sentiment. These accounts engage movement actors’ issues and views, report their demands and claims, portray activists in a non-disparaging way, and often quote movement leaders and treat them seriously as political players (Jasper, 2006). Good news best transmits activists’ messages through the public sphere—aiding them in bids for political and

social change (Koopmans, 2004). “Women to Make Fight for Child Labor Law,” the *New York Times* (September 14, 1924), for instance, transmitted good news in a report about a conference of the League of Women Voters. The article indicated that a drive to pass the “child labor amendment” would be its chief work that year and the organization was presented positively. This campaign continued to make similarly good news.

Two other types of coverage have different balances of substance and sentiment (they appear in the off-diagonal spaces of Figure 1). We refer to articles that address the substantive demands of organizations but portray them in a negative tone as “hard news.” It is hard in the standard journalist sense of being highly factual, in reporting what organizations want. It is also hard, however, on the organizations, as they are treated unsympathetically. Such news is not entirely unfortunate; in amplifying challengers’ demands and issues it raises awareness (Banaszak & Ondercin, 2016). This type of news is analogous to receiving “concessions,” as identified by scholars of the political consequences of movements (Gamson, 1990). The *New York Times* article “Truce Rejected by Seattle Guild” (July 8, 1937) provides an example. It reported that the American Newspaper Guild wanted fired workers reinstated and to be recognized as the bargaining agent. But the guild was portrayed as being intransigent, having “rejected a compromise proposal offered by the management” and having in the process drawn the ire of Seattle’s mayor. This strike was featured along these lines in many additional news stories.

The fourth type, “soft news,” does the opposite. Movement actors are treated trivially, with their demands omitted, but they are depicted positively. They may be treated as a kind of color story, as reporters might cover a concert, fair, or a community event

		Sentiment	
		Unfavorable	Favorable
Substance	High	HARD NEWS [Strikes]	GOOD NEWS [Assertive Political Action]
	Low	BAD NEWS [Trials and Investigations] [Violent Action]	SOFT NEWS [Civic Action]

FIGURE 1 Four types of news, and expectations for types of news for challengers’ modal actions. The ideal types of news are indicated in bold. The news coverage expectations for different movement organizations’ actions are indicated by [brackets]. Organizations in the news for nonviolent protest are expected to be covered in ways that would appear near the center of the figure, scoring in the middle on both substance and sentiment and having no modal type of coverage.

(Sobieraj, 2011, pp. 74–76). This type of treatment is analogous to “failed” action: challengers use resources but do not make much of an impact on public discourse (Gamson, 1990). In the article “Displays Are Now Being Built for A.A.U.W. Show” (*Washington Post*, December 30, 1939), the American Association of University Women was given a soft news treatment. The group was lauded for planning an exhibit with the uplifting theme of “tomorrow’s citizen.” The article noted that some social problems, like crime, were to be addressed. But the piece published nothing about what the AAUW might want to see done about it. A series of similar events made similarly soft news.

MOVEMENT ACTORS AND THE QUALITY OF THEIR NEWS COVERAGE

Working from the literatures on the external consequences of social movements (Earl, 2004; Gamson, 1990; King, 2008), sociology of organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995), and social organization of the news (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 2002; Tuchman, 1978), we argue that movement actors’ treatment in the news is connected mainly to their political legitimacy deficits, as they play out in the values and routines of news organizations. Definitions of legitimacy in the sociology of organizations focus on the assumptions that an entity and its actions are appropriate in a socially constructed system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Challengers typically lack legitimacy in democratic political processes in the view of journalists, especially in comparison with elected officials. This matters because politics is central to news organizations’ news values, missions, identities, and business models (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Schudson, 2002), and the organizational focus of newsgathering is institutionalized political activity (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). In democracies, elected officials and political parties are seen by journalists as the most effective and pragmatic political actors and as central to the workings of institutionalized political processes, which include policy making and elections. Journalists act as gatekeepers but view themselves as impartial referees, “balancing” the two main sides of issues (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). But they mainly balance the views of the major political parties when they disagree, which has been called “the sphere of legitimate controversy” (Hallin, 1984)—and which usually excludes movement actors.

Movement organizations engage in action, make claims, and have characteristics that produce legitimacy deficits with journalists, who view them as marginal players in political processes. Lacking the official sanctioning gained by elected representatives or political parties, movement organizations appear to news organizations as also relatively lacking in moral legitimacy as political representatives. They cannot make public policy, typically do not supply candidates for office, and usually do not even officially represent the groups they claim to speak for (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Skocpol, 2003). Moreover, the frames promoted by movement actors typically fall outside the socially dominant ones and the

sphere of legitimate controversy (Bail, 2012), with marginalized groups most likely to receive delegitimizing coverage (Brown & Harlow, 2019). In addition, challengers often seek influence with non-institutional action (McAdam, 1999), which journalists often view as less morally legitimate in democracies, where citizens have recourse to elections. What is more, movement actors are only rarely politically effective (Giugni, 2007) and so are viewed by journalists also as marginal political newsmakers. In short, movement organizations are typically seen by journalists as standing outside the regulatory scheme connected to elected and party officials, less worthy representatives than elected officials, working outside legitimate discourse, and often engaged in morally suspect and ineffective political action.

It is possible, however, for social movement organizations to influence their legitimacy deficits and thus the quality of their news coverage. Key among these influences, we argue, are their actions. The action that draws news directly influences both movement actors’ legitimacy deficits and the quality of their news coverage. As we discuss below, one route to greater legitimacy and more favorable news is to mimic the actions of institutional political actors, especially through regulated democratic practices, and other types of action may also produce good news. However, we argue that some actions when covered extensively will increase legitimacy deficits and produce news that is worse than the protest paradigm. Indeed, we see different types of action leading to specific sorts of news paradigms. However, the exception is long-term nonviolent protest, which, in contrast to the protest paradigm, we expect to produce inconsistent and varied coverage for challengers engaged in it.

We discuss the hypothesized drivers of bad news first. We argue that *violent action* initiated by activists increases the legitimacy deficits of movement actors in every way (see Figure 1). In democracies, journalists will tend to view violent activists as immoral, ineffective, and incomprehensible as legitimate political activity. We expect strings of coverage based on such action to yield bad news (Wasow, 2020). Movement actors are also often highly newsworthy while being *acted on* by state officials—which we also expect will increase their legitimacy deficits and yield bad news. Two central ways of being acted upon by state officials are when movement activists come under *official investigation* (Seguin et al., 2023), notably by Congress, and when movement leaders are placed *on trial* for criminal charges (Cunningham, 2013). When these events yield long-running news stories, movement actors will be placed on the defensive and be portrayed more as objects than subjects in articles, crowding out substance (Amenta et al., 2012). These accounts will usually also portray movement actors in a disparaging way, as politically suspect or criminals (Boykoff, 2007; Davenport, 2010). In the context of these actions, we expect news coverage to be negative on both dimensions, with little that favorable organizational characteristics or contexts might do to change it.

In contrast, *politically assertive action*, in which movement actors directly engage politics, contesting the prerogatives of institutional political actors through institutional political processes,

is expected to provide the best news treatment for challengers (Amenta, 2006). When movement actors make progress in challenging the prerogatives of elected and appointed officials, we expect the news to take them seriously. These actions will put them on the radar of reporters assigned to political beats, and these actions will be seen as novel but also within standard political practices (see Figure 1). We identify three main types of politically assertive action that are likely to induce long-running news: legislative *campaigns*, including initiatives, referendums, and law-challenging litigation, *electioneering*, or intervening in political contests, and running candidates for office in *third parties*. Movement and advocacy organizations often launch campaigns to promote new political or policy proposals or in opposition to proposed legislation (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Initiatives led by movement actors that make it onto the ballot will make them one of the journalistically relevant sides in a political debate, and major court cases will do the same (Barkan, 1980; McCammon & McGrath, 2015). In electioneering, organizations support favorable candidates and oppose unfavorable ones over a specific set of issues, often reinforcing report cards of their legislative records or position statements with electoral mobilization. In addition, many movements form their own parties (Schwartz, 2006), often over specific issues, such as Prohibition, peace, or ecology. When they appear in the news, we expect that they transmit their views on their issues.

Two types of action leading to long news are expected by us to tend toward opposed or “off-diagonal” mixes of substance and sentiment in their news. We expect substantive but unfavorable treatment—hard news—when challengers are covered extensively during *strikes* (see Figure 1). Strikes apply sanctions on targets and play on the balancing norms of journalism (Schudson, 2011); the demands of the organizations, typically unions, will almost always constitute a relevant side of the story. And, typically, they will be juxtaposed to their corporate targets rather than law enforcement. However, strikes often cause disruption for other citizens, whom journalists often see as their audience, and so we expect that the organizations would not be treated sympathetically in the news (see also Isaac et al., 2022).

In contrast, we expect organizations winning attention for broad-based *civic action* and engagement to gain the opposite sort of coverage: soft news that is positive in tone but lacking substance. Civic action has been studied mainly in the context of voluntary organizations (Sampson et al., 2005; Skocpol, 2003) and post-suffrage women's organizations (Goss, 2020), which have often pressed for public-spirited causes, such as good government or electoral participation, and held meetings headlined by speakers discussing topical issues. We expect news about civic engagement to be mainly sympathetic to movement actors; it is undertaken in legitimated forums and is not unruly. But because it also happens outside political institutions and is remote from politics, it will not usually be seen as effective, and demands will not frequently be transmitted, especially given the organizations' often-passive role in the process.

Nonviolent *protest* is closely associated with social movements and is viewed by the protest paradigm as yielding bad news. However, when compared to the range of news possible for challengers, we expect the long-running coverage of it to fall somewhere in the middle in terms of substance and sentiment. Nonviolent protest is less unsettling than violent action and so would be less likely to be covered negatively. And although protest is not as legitimate as electoral activity, it is viewed as a right in democracies, and claims made through it may be taken seriously. Here again, we are focused on sustained action and news, which may provide greater opportunities for favorable coverage than one-off events. Different types of protest action may lead to long running coverage, and here we examine three: *occupations* and large gatherings, *direct action* designed to enforce or test existing laws, and *boycotts*, which employ sanctions, typically against economic targets (Amenta et al., 2019; King, 2011).

However, scholars who have examined the impact of social movements on institutions find that it typically takes additional favorable internal or external conditions for movement actors to have highly positive influences (Amenta, 2006; Bartley & Child, 2014; Dixon et al., 2016), and we expect the same for news. These additional boosts may include favorable characteristics of the organizations, negative characteristics of their targets, or favorable political contexts, news sources, or article types (see reviews in Amenta et al., 2017; Caren et al., 2020). The more closely movement actors resemble institutional political actors in organizational form, we argue, the more likely they are to be covered substantively and favorably. Challengers with legitimacy-enhancing features, such as membership (Gans, 1979; Skocpol, 2003) or formal organizations (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Rohlinger, 2014), would be likely to be covered with more substance and more sympathetically. In contrast, minority- and student-based organizations are often considered less legitimate (Davenport, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; Kilgo & Summer, 2019). Businesses may provide better targets than elected political officials (King, 2011). Aspects of news articles and news organizations may also influence challengers' news quality. When movement organizations “initiate” or prompt news attention, versus simply appearing in articles mainly about something else, have produced more substantive attention (Amenta et al., 2012) and may also promote more favorable tones. More liberal news organizations more frequently cover progressive movement actors (Kriesi et al., 1992; Oliver & Maney, 2000) and may provide more favorable news; conservative papers may do so for challengers of the right. As for political contexts, having a partisan regime in power (Amenta et al., 2019) may lead to more favorable news.

This discussion prompts the following hypotheses about the news coverage of organizations that make major news. In each case but the first, we expect aspects of the organization or the context in which it challenges to potentially modify the influence of action on the quality of news coverage for an organization. Each hypothesis refers to actions that prompt extensive news, not one-off articles.

Hypothesis 1. Violent action and being acted on, as through trials and investigations, will produce for high-profile movement organizations non-substantive coverage with negative sentiment: bad news.

Hypothesis 2. Politically assertive action—campaigns, electioneering, and third-party action—will tend to yield substantive coverage and positive sentiment for high-profile organizations: good news.

Hypothesis 3. Strikes will tend to yield for high-profile movement organizations substantive coverage but with negative sentiment: hard news.

Hypothesis 4. Civic action for high-profile movement organizations will tend to produce non-substantive coverage but with positive sentiment: soft news.

Hypothesis 5. Nonviolent protests—occupations and major marches, direct action, and boycotts—will tend to yield coverage for high-profile movement organizations that falls in the middle of each dimension.

Hypothesis 6. Movement actors may require favorable organizational characteristics or external conditions, or both, to gain good news.

DATA AND METHODS

We appraise these hypotheses with data from the Political Organizations in the News (PONs) project, which includes all articles in which national social movement and advocacy organizations appeared across the twentieth century in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *L.A. Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* (Amenta & Caren, 2022). PONs includes 1522 organizations and more than one million article mentions of movement organizations. From it, we first identify each organization that received extensive news coverage in any year of the century. We use as cutoffs 200 or more mentions in articles in a calendar year and ranking among the top 15 movement organizations in the news that year. Through 1918, however, when there was much less news coverage, we lower the bar to 100 mentions and the organization being ranked among the top ten. Altogether 100 organizations reached this high level of newsworthiness. These were often “critical discourse moments” (Gamson, 1992) that defined not just these organizations, but also their causes and constituents in the public sphere. About a quarter of them were often newsworthy, with ten or more such years, whereas about a third had only 1 year of high attention; most had three or fewer. For challengers that were frequently extensively newsworthy, we examine the year when they most often appeared on front pages. These organizations range across many different issues, forms, and

periods, making it possible to identify patterns that might be missed in more truncated data sets.

Importantly, these organizations varied widely in terms of the main actions behind their news coverage. To identify the modal action behind an organization's coverage in each year, we ran topic models to summarize main themes and make broad comparisons (Nelson, 2020). They were fit using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm in the Python scikit-learn library (see Blei et al., 2003; Evans & Aceves, 2016; Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013). After running models with the number of topics ranging from five to ten, we found that eight topics allowed us to identify the modal action and issues with the highest degree of topic coherence. For instance, if the organization was in the news most significantly for a strike, the word “strike” invariably appeared among the eight topics, and the number of articles connected to those topics accounted for the plurality of articles. Similarly, organizations under congressional investigation had “investigation” or “house” among their most prevalent topics. We also inspected the headlines of the articles identified by the models regarding the topics to confirm findings and read articles deemed most “relevant” to these terms through ProQuest. In nine instances, topic models and analyses showed that organizations made major news for two modal actions. That yielded 109 organization-year-actions of news coverage for analysis (for details, see Appendix S1).

Each main action behind news attention is well represented. Politically assertive action was the main impetus to news in 51 of these instances (see Table 1). Legislative campaigns constituted the most frequent motivation for coverage, with 27 cases, and a dozen each for electioneering activity and third-party organizations. Civic action and engagement drove eight organizations' biggest-news years, and 19 years of great news attention revolved around strikes. There were 13 focusing on nonviolent protest, with occupations or large marches bringing major news attention for eight movement organizations, three for direct action, and two for boycotts. Movement organizations also made a year's worth of big news 13 times in ways associated with being acted on—nine for investigations and four for trials. Eight of the nine organizations with two modal actions behind newsworthiness were in the news for being acted on. Finally, violence drove news attention for four organizations.

To estimate the positive or negative sentiment in articles about the organizations during their years of attention, we employ the VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning) algorithm on the texts of the articles (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014). The algorithm is sensitive to both polarity (positive/negative) and intensity (strength) of emotion. It relies on a manually created sentiment dictionary to estimate the valence of words, with negatively coded words, such as “abhorrent” or “tragedy,” having negative values and positively coded words, such as “greatest” or “perfectly,” having positive values. Within each category, words are also coded based on their intensity, with “best,” for example, being higher ranked than “good,” and the algorithm adjusts for negations. Although this algorithm is often used on Twitter data, we adjusted the lexicon. We removed terms that describe the action

TABLE 1 Main types of action behind the news coverage of 100 extensively covered social movement organizations in their most extensive year of news.

Main reason	Specific action	Number (coded)	Organization (and most extensive year of news)
Assertive Action	Campaign	27 (9)	<i>League of American Wheelmen 1900</i> ; Grand Army of the Republic 1902; National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage 1914; National American Woman Suffrage Association 1917; <i>American Defense Society 1918</i> ; <i>League of Women Voters 1924</i> ; <i>Anti-Saloon League 1926</i> ; American Farm Bureau Federation 1932; American Legion 1932; Veterans of Foreign Wars 1935; American Liberty League 1936; <i>Ham and Eggs 1939</i> ; American Youth Congress 1940; America First Committee 1941; Committee to Defend American by Aiding the Allies 1941; American Veterans Committee 1946; NAACP 1963; <i>Moral Majority 1981</i> ; National Education Association 1983; Amnesty International 1988; American Civil Liberties Union 1988; <i>National Resources Defense Council 1990</i> ; Sierra Club 1990; <i>Planned Parenthood 1992</i> ; American Association of Retired Persons 1995; Human Rights Watch 1998; National Rifle Association 1999
	Electioneering	12 (5)	Citizens Union 1901; Congressional Union 1916; <i>National Security League 1918</i> ; <i>Ku Klux Klan (Second) 1924</i> ; Association Against the Prohibition Amendment 1930; Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform 1932; National Union for Social Justice 1936; <i>Townsend Plan 1936</i> ; <i>Americans for Democratic Action 1952</i> ; John Birch Society 1964; National Organization for Women 1984; <i>Christian Coalition 1996</i>
	Third party	12 (5)	Populist Party 1900; Independence League 1906; <i>Progressive Party (Roosevelt) 1912</i> ; End Poverty in California 1934; Union Party 1936; <i>Farmer-Labor Party 1936</i> ; <i>American Labor Party 1938</i> ; <i>Progressive Party (Wallace) 1948</i> ; States' Rights Democratic Party 1948; <i>American Independent Party 1968</i> ; Peace and Freedom Party 1968; Reform Party 1996
Civic Action		8 (4)	National Civic Federation 1902; <i>Women's Christian Temperance Union 1931</i> ; <i>General Federation of Women's Clubs 1935</i> ; PTA 1935; National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs 1935; International Ladies Garment Workers Union 1938; <i>American Association of University Women 1939</i> ; <i>National Audubon Society 1991</i>
Strikes		19 (7)	<i>Industrial Workers of the World 1912</i> ; Actors Equity Association 1919; Congress of Industrial Organizations 1937; <i>American Newspaper Guild 1937</i> ; <i>United Auto Workers 1937</i> ; American Federation of Labor 1941; United Mine Workers 1943; Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen 1946; <i>International Typographical Union 1948</i> ; United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers 1949; <i>International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union 1949</i> ; AFL-CIO 1957; <i>United Steelworkers 1959</i> ; Screen Actors Guild 1960; International Machinists and Aerospace Workers 1966; <i>Major League Baseball Players Association 1981</i> ; Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization 1981; National Football League Players Association 1982; Writers Guild of America 1988
Protest	Direct action	3 (2)	<i>Greenpeace 1989</i> ; <i>Operation Rescue 1989</i> ; AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power 1991
	Occupations, marches	8 (7)	<i>Bonus Army 1932</i> ; <i>Free Speech Movement 1965</i> ; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee 1966; National Urban League 1968; <i>Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1968</i> ; <i>Students for a Democratic Society 1969</i> ; <i>American Indian Movement 1973</i> ; Anti-Defamation League 1995; <i>Nation of Islam 1995</i>
	Boycotts	2 (2)	<i>Congress of Racial Equality 1964</i> ; <i>United Farm Workers 1973</i>
Acted On	Investigation	9 (7)	<i>German-American Alliance 1918</i> ; <i>Anti-Saloon League 1926</i> ; <i>Townsend Plan 1936</i> ; <i>German American Bund 1939</i> ; <i>Progressive Party (Wallace) 1948</i> ; Communist Party 1950; <i>Teamsters 1957</i> ; <i>Ku Klux Klan (Third) 1965</i> ; <i>Students for a Democratic Society 1969</i>
	Trial	4 (3)	<i>Black Legion 1936</i> ; <i>German American Bund 1939</i> ; <i>Black Panther Party 1970</i> ; <i>Operation Rescue 1989</i>
Violence		4 (4)	<i>Ku Klux Klan (Second) 1924</i> ; <i>Black Panther Party 1970</i> ; <i>Jewish Defense League 1971</i> ; <i>American Indian Movement 1973</i>

Note: Organizations in bold were in the news for two main reasons. Organizations in italics were coded for substance.

(such as “strike” or “protest”) and words of recent origin or ones whose meaning changed over time (like “fantastic”). We obtained the sentiment score of a text by summing up the intensity of each word in the text, then normalizing the score to be between -1 and 1 using an alpha that approximates the maximum expected value. We generated sentiment scores for each organization-year-action

as follows: After computing the sentiment for each text, we estimated the proportion of all text for each organization-year associated with the relevant movement topic. We then averaged the sentiment score for the text associated with a topic. Then we calculated the weighted mean for each organization in the year analyzed, weighted by the proportion of text related to the topics

about the organization's modal action (for more details and examples, see Appendix S1).

To address substance, we hand-coded articles in a sample of about half, 55, of the 109 organization-year-actions. To gain a more complete representation of the different types of action behind coverage, we oversampled the cases with fewer modal actions and when cases included two main types of action expected to yield different types of news. For the 27 organizations in the news for campaigns, nine were sampled, with five each sampled of the 12 organizations newsworthy for electioneering and for third parties (see Table 1). Of the 19 unions having their biggest news year for strikes, seven were sampled, and four of the eight for civic action. Seven of the nine organizations in the news for investigations were sampled and coded, as most were also newsworthy for another main reason. Three of the four organizations in the news for trials were sampled and coded, as were each of the four organizations in the news for violent action. As for nonviolent protest, 11 of the 13 were coded to gain at least two instances of each subtype and because of the importance of protest in the literature.

For each of the 55 organization-year-actions examined in detail, we sampled eight articles, searching by specifying the organization and keywords connected to the modal action from the topic models (such as strike, trial, violence, election, or inquiry). After results were returned by ProQuest in order of "relevance," the articles were chosen for coding if their headlines seemed to indicate that the story would be about the modal action. We sought to include at least one article from each newspaper, select front-page articles when possible, and not use the same bylined author more than once. About 72% of the articles were about the main action, but if the initial eight articles did not return at least five relevant ones for an organization-year-action, as it did in eight cases, we resampled until five were gained. This resulted in 342 articles. We then coded the relevant articles for whether an organization or its representatives were able

to transmit a demand aimed at a target, and how much of the article was devoted to demands. Also coded was the target and who or what initiated the coverage. (The first and third authors did all the coding and agreed on 93% or better on all codes.) We rely on these hand-coded cases in the analyses of substance.

We examine the 55 organization-year-actions through QCA (Ragin, 2008), a set-theoretic method that can identify configurations of causes specified to yield influence for social movements and has often been used in such research (Amenta et al., 2012; Bartley & Child, 2014; Dixon et al., 2016). Social movement actors are generally understood to be lacking in power, and in "mediation" models these actors are argued to be highly influential only when several favorable conditions coincide (Giugni, 2007; King, 2008), some internal to actors and some external. Here we examine whether the influence of the main action behind a challenger's news coverage on its quality is mediated by organizational characteristics, aspects of the news, or political contexts that might promote better news treatment. Also, we expect that there will be multiple causal recipes for the different types of news. In addition, different subtypes of action behind news may yield different news. QCA works well to address these sorts of theoretical claims and empirical possibilities (Ragin, 1987).

NEWS COVERAGE QUALITY AND QCA

We begin by examining the overall patterns in the quality of news for the organizations with different actions behind their coverage. Here we take the average of each of the 55 organization-year-actions and array them according to the substance (as measured by the demands that appear in the coded sample) and sentiment (VADER scores) in their news treatment. The results largely support the expectations in the first five hypotheses (see Figure 2).

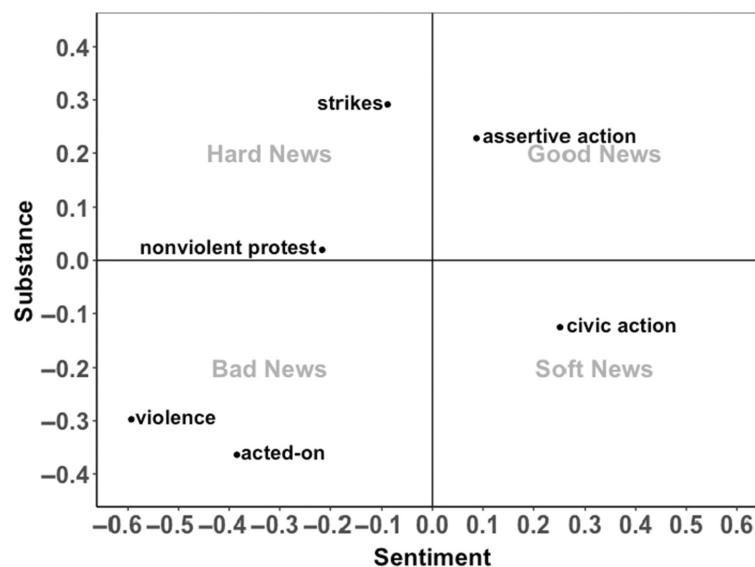


FIGURE 2 The substance and sentiment of organizations in news for six types of modal action, with four news types. Substance and sentiment scores are normalized by subtracting the overall means.

For the first hypothesis, violent action and being acted on provides very bad news for the organizations covered in those contexts. By contrast, organizations involved in politically assertive action receive the best news. Similarly, organizations in the news mainly for strikes tended to gain hard news, as expected, and those in the news for civic action similarly tended to gain soft news. Finally, organizations mainly in the news for nonviolent protest land in between these others, as expected, though on the borderline of hard news and bad news.

QCA can go beyond these big-picture findings by identifying the combinations of conditions that lead consistently to outcomes of interest. Notably, following other studies and Hypothesis 6, we expect that it will take combinations of favorable conditions consistently to yield good news, including favorable organizational features, news contexts, or political contexts. We employ crisp-set analyses, with measures scoring one or zero (Ragin, 2008), as many of the key causal measures are categorical, based on the 55 movement-year cases, and for ease of presentation. We rely on medians to produce the cutoff points. A measure scores one for *high substance* if half or more of its coded articles have demands in them, which 28 cases do. A case scores one for *positive sentiment* if its coverage that year has a VADER score that similarly ranks among the top 28 cases. *Bad news* is defined as having neither high substance nor positive sentiment and is represented by 16 cases. *Good news* is defined as scoring high on both metrics and has 17 cases. *Soft news* combines positive sentiment with a lack of high substance, whereas *hard news* includes high substance with a lack of positive sentiment. There are 11 cases of each.

First among the causal measures are the modal actions behind the news. We examine first when organizations were in the news for *violent action* or being *acted on*. Each is expected to draw bad news in itself. Next, we examine politically *assertive* action and the different subtypes of it: *campaigns*, *electioneering*, and *third-party* action, which are expected under some conditions to bring good news. The next are *strikes* and *civic* action, expected to be associated with hard and soft news, respectively. We also examine nonviolent *protest* and its different forms—*occupations* and marches, *direct actions*, and *boycotts*. We examine several measures that might mediate these influences. One organizational characteristic is *membership*, which we expect to increase legitimacy. A second characteristic is whether the organization is *minority-* or *student-*based, which is expected to work in the opposite direction. This measure identifies seven organizations, including the United Farm Workers, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee among others. We also examined whether most of the coded articles were *initiated* by the organization's action, which is expected to promote more favorable news. We examined as well whether the action occurred in the *post-1950* period, during which news became increasingly professionalized and may also promote better news for challengers. Although we also examined measures of *formal organization*, *business opponent*, *partisan regimes*, and the *political slant* of the newspaper, none of these

figured in any causal combination, and we do not discuss them below (results not shown). We provide QCA's "intermediate" results (Ragin, 2008), which incorporate theoretical assumptions for empirically missing rows. In all analyses, we employ both the QCA 4.0 application (Ragin & Davey, 2024) and the R package for QCA (Thiem & Duşa, 2013) (for preliminary results on substance and sentiment, see Appendix S1).

We turn to the main results. Bad news is expected to be generated simply. As per Hypothesis 1, we expect that it will result from an organization's long-running appearance in the news for violence or being acted on, without any qualifying conditions. And that is what the QCA shows (see Table 2). The results are based on truth table rows that score high on "consistency" with the outcome, with consistency meaning the percentage of cases that exhibit the outcome. This is a measure of goodness of fit, with a standard of around 80% frequently employed to identify a consistent row (Ragin, 2008; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) (for the truth tables and preliminary analyses, see Appendix S1). Minimizing the consistent truth table rows provide two main solution terms, also known as "recipes." Analyses indicate that each measure is sufficient to produce bad news, with a consistency rate of 93%. The overall solution, including both solution terms, has an "outcome coverage" level of 81%. In QCA, outcome coverage indicates the percentage of the outcome set that overlaps with a recipe or an entire solution; it measures the proportion of the positive outcomes the solution terms account for. (Because the action types are mutually exclusive, the outcome coverage in every result is "unique.") Although the protest paradigm would expect nonviolent protest to generate bad news, entering this measure does not yield any additional recipes (not shown). In short, violent action and being acted on consistently supplies bad news, and nonviolent protest does not.

The potential drivers of good news are expected to be more complicated. We expect that organizations in the news for politically assertive action will lead to it, but in the context of other favorable conditions for challengers' news. It is also possible that, under some favorable conditions, organizations making major news for other actions might also yield good news. We start by including the individual measures of assertive action—*campaigns*, *electioneering*, and *third parties*—and the measure of initiated coverage. The results indicate that organizations in the news for campaigns and electioneering drive good news, but not for third party action. Campaigns by themselves yield good news, and, when the coverage is mainly initiated by the organization, electioneering, does as well (see Table 2). The overall solution accounts for 65% of the cases of good news, at an 85% level of consistency. However, third party activity did not appear in any solution. We then examined whether organizations engaged in other actions, with the aid of favorable conditions, would also produce good news. We added strikes, along with the measure of post-1950, a combination that was associated with positive sentiment. The combination of strikes and the presence of post-1950 is also consistently connected to good news and adds another 12 percentage points to the coverage, while the overall solution is at an 87% level of consistency. Preliminary analyses showed that among

TABLE 2 Qualitative comparative analyses results for the outcomes bad news, good news, hard news, and soft news, with selected causal measures.

Solution term	Consistency	Coverage
Bad news		
With violence and acted on		
VIOLENCE	1.000	0.250
ACTED ON	0.900	0.562
Total	0.929	0.812
With subtypes of protest and minority- or student-based organization		
VIOLENCE	1.000	0.250
ACTED ON	0.900	0.562
BOYCOTTS×minority/student	1.000	0.062
Total	0.933	0.875
Good news		
With campaign, electioneering, and initiated		
CAMPAIGN	0.778	0.412
ELECTIONEERING×INITIATED	1.000	0.235
Total	0.846	0.647
With strikes and post-1950		
CAMPAIGN	0.778	0.412
ELECTIONEERING×INITIATED	0.235	0.235
STRIKES×POST1950	1.000	0.118
Total	0.867	0.765
With occupations and minority- or student-based organization		
CAMPAIGN	0.778	0.412
ELECTIONEERING×INITIATED	1.000	0.235
STRIKES×POST1950	1.000	0.118
OCCUPATIONS×INITIATED ×minority/student	1.000	0.059
Total	0.875	0.824
Hard news		
STRIKES×INITIATED×post1950	0.800	0.364
BOYCOTTS×MINORITY/STUDENT	1.000	0.091
DIRECT ACTION×minority/student	1.000	0.182
Total	0.875	0.636
Soft news		
CIVIC ACTION	0.750	0.364
THIRD PARTY	0.800	0.273
Total	0.778	0.636

Note: Causal measures in CAPITAL letters indicate their presence, whereas measures in lower case indicate their absence. See the text for definitions of solution term, consistency and coverage and the measures.

the three nonviolent protest types, occupations and marches drove both high substance and positive sentiment in the context of the *absence* of the minority/student measure (see Appendix S1). When we add these measures, a combination that includes the presence of the occupations and initiated measures and the absence of minority or student organization, also produced good news, adding another six percentage points to the outcome coverage. The overall solution has a level of consistency of 88%.

As for “hard news”—coverage with substance but negative valence—we expect strikes to produce it, as per Hypothesis 3. But we also examine organizations covered in the context of some nonviolent protest action, which might also yield hard news for them. Analyses that include the measures of strikes, direct action, and boycotts, with the minority/student and the post-1950 measures provide recipes for hard news (see Table 2). In each one, the modal action is modified by other conditions, with strikes combining with

the absence of the post-1950 measure. Two other recipes appear, one with direct action and the absence of the minority/student measure, and another with boycotts combining with the presence of minority/student, to cover another 9%. All in all, the solution covers 64% of the outcome, with strike recipe accounting for 36% of it.

As for soft news—which combines a lack of substance with positive valence—we expect, as per Hypothesis 4, that challengers newsworthy for civic action are most likely to receive this type of coverage. Previously, however, analyses indicated that organizations covered in the context of third-party elections were treated with positive sentiment but little substance (see Appendix S1). In a QCA with these two measures, each alone is consistently connected to soft news, and the overall solution with these terms is 78% consistent with the outcome of soft news and covers 64% of the cases (see Table 2).

In short, the QCA results strongly support the hypotheses, though with some reservations. The results regarding bad news support Hypothesis 1 without qualification. Organizations making big news for violent action and being acted on gained bad news. Politically assertive action is also tied to good news that combines high substance with positive sentiment, as expected in Hypothesis 2. For good news to appear consistently, moreover, required mediating factors, as expected by Hypothesis 6. There was also support for Hypothesis 3 regarding strikes producing hard news for organizations covered in that context, though the results hold only for the first half of the century. There was strong support for Hypothesis 4; organizations making big news for civic action routinely received soft news.

Some divergences from expectations, however, are worth a closer look. Hypothesis 2 must be modified to indicate that movement actors gaining news as third parties were mainly treated in the soft news mode. Possibly that is because the parties sampled were not focused on a single issue. Seeking to gain broad support in the manner of the major parties, they may have been covered similarly, mainly regarding electoral strategies and candidates' personalities (Dalton et al., 1998), or possibly as their roles as spoilers to one of the main parties in "horse-race" news. In the second half of the century, moreover, strikes were covered in the good news mode, suggesting a modification of Hypothesis 3. That may be due to changes in the news media, which in this period sought further to question authority, including workers' corporate opponents, or possibly because of the institutionalization and legal backing of strikes. With these modifications, only six of 44 organization-actions are incorrectly identified by the QCA, though the six are not very far off from expectations (see Appendix S1 for scatter plots and discussion).

As for long-running news of nonviolent protest, the news of these organizations fell in between the types, as per Hypothesis 5, but in opposition to the protest paradigm (see Figure 2). Of the 11 cases, only three cases were bad news, and only two were of soft news. There were five cases of hard news, the modal type, and one of good news (see Appendix S1). The eight organizations in the news for occupations and marches had representatives in each of the four categories. The results suggest that there may be

more opportunities for substantive coverage than positive tone in long-running protest news. The results also reinforce findings that student- and minority-based organizations often get covered more unfavorably (Davenport, 2010; Gitlin, 1980) and caution against generalizing the results of news about these organizations to other organizations making major news for similar actions.

CONCLUSION

Social movement organizations have often appeared in waves or cascades of news coverage or in explosive news treatment (Amenta et al., 2019; Boydston, 2013; Seguin, 2016), which can define the organization, their constituents, and their issues. But these challengers can be covered in vastly different ways during these cascades, ranging from "good news" that transmits their views of issues respectfully to the "bad news" that is negative in tone and lacks substance and can discredit organizations, constituents, and causes. What drives the quality of news coverage when these challengers make major news? We have argued that social movement actors suffer from legitimacy deficits with respect to politics and the news, and that the main actions behind organizations' appearances in extensive news coverage will influence both these deficits and the quality of their news treatment. The coverage of politically assertive action that challenges the prerogatives of institutional political actors engages democratic politics, reduces legitimacy deficits, and provides the best chance for movement organizations to gain good news. By contrast, organizations covered for trials or congressional investigation or for violent action increase their legitimacy deficits and are expected to receive bad news. When strikes drive big news, we expect organizations will gain substantive, but negatively tinged treatment: "hard news." In contrast, civic action will generate "soft news" coverage—sympathetic to the organization but trivial in content. In short, we expect there to be several different news paradigms of movement organization coverage when they make major news.

To address these claims, we analyzed the substance and sentiment in the news coverage of the 100 most-prominent U.S. social movement organizations—which account for the bulk of the attention to movement organizations in the twentieth century—in their most prominent news years, in four national newspapers. We employed techniques ranging from coding individual articles to natural language process analyses. We found that they were in the news for each type of action. Through QCA, we found that the types of action strongly influenced the quality of news. Organizations covered in the context of violence or being acted upon in investigations and trials was enough to yield consistently bad news, as expected. The news of strikes was generally hard, and the news surrounding civic action was usually soft. In the years movement actors were in the news for politically assertive action, they were mainly covered in the good news mode. One type of assertive action, electioneering, needed to combine with favorable news characteristics to generate consistently good news. Another type, third party runs, however, was mainly covered as soft news. Finally, the coverage of nonviolent

protest veered from the expectations of the protest paradigm, falling in the middle in terms of substance and sentiment, with the different types of protest being covered in each type of news. In short, for challengers, political assertive action, strikes, civic action, and violence and being acted on all had news paradigms, and nonviolent protest did not.

The study has limitations. We address only the most highly covered organizations in 1-year snapshots when they were most newsworthy. The actions behind news attention may not have the same effects on the quality of news for challengers that receive less news attention than the ones here did. Also, we focus only on organizations that made big news, and it seems likely that the coverage of 1-day and smaller protests will still often be treated with the protest paradigm. In addition, we address national and professional news outlets, and results may differ when movement actors are covered by local, regional, or partisan news organizations (Davenport, 2010; Rafail et al., 2019; Rohlinger et al., 2012). Moreover, U.S. national news organizations conform to the “liberal” model, dominated by private corporations, rather than publicly funded or party-based ones (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which may produce different movement news. The results are also likely to be different when U.S. news covers social movement actors in other countries, especially ones that are not allied or not democratic.

In addition, in this century, the news context has also been transformed. The main changes include the decline of the print news media and their conversion to digital delivery, along with the rise of Fox News and right-wing disinformation media, 24-h cable news channels, the internet, and social media (Benkler et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015), with these media becoming increasingly interconnected. Yet national news organizations remain the central institutions of newsgathering, have become more important among professional news media with the even greater decline of local news, still work by similar procedures (Usher, 2014), and set the agenda for television network news. Their articles are amplified by websites and social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015). Movement news has influenced recent European political agendas (Vliegthart et al., 2016), the mobilization of the Tea Party (Banerjee, 2013) and Dutch environmental organizations (Vliegthart et al., 2005), and the discursive impact of Occupy Wall Street (Gaby & Caren, 2016). There has been extensive news coverage of organizations associated with the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the far right, with the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers being covered extensively through trials. And although movement actors have many more opportunities for publicity by way of social media, they continue to seek attention from the prestige press, given its wide circulation among elites, its amplification properties, and its legitimacy-conferring advantages.

Our findings suggest that it is important to analyze not just protest but all the different ways that movement organizations appear in the news and other media. Recent computational text analyses indicate that movement actors are covered in the news media far more extensively outside the collective action events that scholars have focused on (King & Nelson, 2023). Although news attention

matters for many movement outcomes, moreover, most likely only some types of news coverage will promote the further mobilization of challengers, the discussion of their issues in the public sphere, their influence over the political agenda, and their impact on cultural outcomes. Some news is likely to work in the opposite direction, with bad news probably being especially harmful. Many organizations, and their constituents and causes, fell on hard times in the wake of high-profile investigations and trials, including the German-American Alliance during the First World War, the Communist Party and Teamsters in the 1950s, the Ku Klux Klan in the mid-1960s, and the Black Panther Party in the 1970s.

The analyses and findings also suggest several avenues for future research. More scholarly attention needs to be paid to the treatment in the news of challengers for the many reasons that they make news. As we have seen, most of their news is not about protest. Also, most of the news that movement organizations made in the twentieth century came through extensive runs of news, not from one-off protests. It is worth extending the analyses both to other major years of news, to see whether the paradigms hold good, as well as to analyze the quality of news in individual articles. The riddle of why strikes in this sample received better coverage in the latter half of the century should be followed up by analyses of the many times that organizations made major news by way of strikes. The quality of long-running coverage of nonviolent protest also needs further study; it varied more greatly in its treatment than the other types of challenger action. Future research should also address the downstream influences of the quality of news attention that challengers receive when they make major news. It likely influences the fates of organizations that receive it, public opinion, political agendas, and public discourse surrounding their issues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Charles Ragin, Karen Cerulo, four anonymous reviewers, and the editors for their helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation grant SES-1657872.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data analyzed and Appendix S1 can be found here: <https://osf.io/wd4ze/>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.