

FRAMING FERGUSON: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ST. LOUIS NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE FERGUSON PROTESTS

Joe Guskowski

Laura Johnston, Project Chair

Abstract

The killing of black teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014 sparked protests that thrust the St. Louis suburb into the national media spotlight. Since then, similar protests in the wake of police killings of black people have taken place across in the country.

As these protests are increasingly a subject of news coverage, and racial injustice becomes part of the national conversation, it becomes crucial to step back and examine precisely how the media is covering these events. The way in which media covers a protest can define a movement's public perception and eventual success. And past research has shown that news tends to frame protests in a way that marginalize protesters in the interest of the status quo using a set of techniques known as the protest paradigm.

This study sought to determine how three St. Louis news outlets framed the protests in Ferguson over the course of four weeks in August and November 2014. A content analysis of 42 online news stories— 14 each from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the St. Louis Beacon/St. Louis Public Radio, and the St. Louis American — was conducted to measure to what extent those outlets employed the protest paradigm to frame the Ferguson protests.

The results show clear differences between the coverage of the Post-Dispatch and Beacon on one hand and the American on the other, with the two more mainstream outlets adopting a more balanced approach that framed the events as a conflict between

protesters and police. The American, which has a primarily African-American audience, employed frames that were more critical of law enforcement and sympathetic towards protesters.

This study confirms research that has shown that a publication's ideology has an effect on how it frames protests. Though it represents a small sample of the coverage of the protests, it provides several points of significance that could serve as jumping off points for further research in this area.