

Rethinking the Protest Paradigm: Media Kettling in the Television Coverage of the 2019 Chilean Uprising

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Although the “protest paradigm” remains the default analytical framework in mediated protest studies, recent scholarship has questioned its explanatory capacity, particularly in light of changes to collective action and the increasing criminalization of protests. We advance these discussions by analyzing 361 reports on the 2019 Chilean uprising aired on both a private and a public broadcasting station, using television coverage as a heuristic device. Drawing on Chan and Lee’s original argument describing the existence of several protest paradigms, as well as debates on policing demonstrations, we propose that 2 paradigms were at play in the coverage: an “antagonistic” one, which delegitimizes and marginalizes dissent, and a “paternalistic” one, which celebrates “good” protesters and “well-behaved” collective action. These paradigms echo developments in policing protests, with journalists manufacturing what we call *media kettling*, a type of coverage that celebrates the right to protest but severely restricts collective action.

Keywords: protests, television, protest paradigm, violence, peaceful demonstrations, Chile

On the evening of October 18, 2019, Chilean television newscasts screened images of chaos and protests in Santiago, the capital city. Subway stations were set on fire, stores were looted, demonstrators clashed with the police, and massive amounts of “*cacerolazos*” (banging pots and pans)

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Date submitted: 2024-04-12

¹ The authors would like to thank Claudia Lagos, Lilie Chouliaraki, Bart Cammaerts, Simon Cottle, Andy Williams, Claudia Mellado, and Lee Edwards for their valuable comments on earlier drafts and ideas of this article. This study received funding from Chile’s National Agency for Research and Development (ANID) through the Millennium Science Initiative Program - NCS2021_063 and ANID-Fondecyt 11201140.

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loudly expressed discontent. The protests were triggered by an increase in public transportation fares but soon targeted broader issues, such as the cost of living, corruption, and inequality. Surprised by the size and scale of the uprising, the center-right administration of President Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency. However, the demonstrations quickly spread across the country, marking the start of the 2019–20 “*estallido social*” (Spanish for “social outburst”), the biggest episode of dissent in Chile in over three decades.

The protests gradually faded out toward the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. They were a chaotic process consisting of peaceful and disruptive actions, many of which prompted intense police repression and—for the first time since Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship—the deployment of the army (Somma, 2021). Grievances were generally portrayed as valid (Canales, 2022), but politicians, journalists, and experts voiced concern about the damaging actions of many demonstrators, as well as the extent to which the police or army should respond. It is noteworthy that the significance and consequences of the uprising are still discussed. For some, “October” was a popular revolt against neoliberalism, deficient public services, and abuse by those in power (Canales, 2022). For others, it was the eruption of a violent mob, with former president Piñera claiming in 2023 that the uprising was a “non-traditional coup d’état,” driven by “anarcho-terrorists” who employed “brutal” and “irrational” violence (Montes, 2023, paras. 2–3).

At the core of these discussions lies deeper matters expressed in other settings (e.g., Doran, 2017; Harlow & Brown, 2023; Zlobina & Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018): the legitimacy of specific protest forms, the criminalization of collective action, and the mediation of unrest. Although a significant number of Chileans took to the streets—including 1.2 million in downtown Santiago on October 25, 2019, in what was called “Chile’s biggest march”—an even larger number experienced the uprising in and through the media, especially on digital platforms and television (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Kleis Nielsen, 2020). Hence, the media was a major field where “the discursive battle about what is defined as ‘peaceful’ and what as ‘illegal’ or ‘violent’” (Terwindt, 2014, p. 165) took place. Crucially, while scholars have examined how social media and newspapers covered the demonstrations (e.g., García-Perdomo, Magaña, Hernández-Rodríguez, & Ventín-Sánchez, 2024; Harlow & Bachmann, 2024; Proust & Saldaña, 2022), they have paid less attention to television. This is an important shortcoming. Television was the most watched (Newman et al., 2020), but also the most criticized legacy media in Chile at the time, as evidenced by its low evaluation in polls (Grassau et al., 2019) and trending social media hashtags, such as #latelemiente (“television lies”) and #apagalatele (“turn off your TV”; Luna, Toro, & Valenzuela, 2022).

Criticisms aimed at television coverage of the uprising echo the concerns raised by the “protest paradigm,” an analytical perspective that holds that journalists delegitimize collective action by stressing violence, sidelining grievances, and giving voice to authorities instead of demonstrators (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Proposed in the 1980s, the protest paradigm remains the default position to examine news coverage of unrest (Harlow & Brown, 2023), including the 2019 uprising (e.g., García-Perdomo et al., 2024; Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Notwithstanding its functionality, we argue that the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the paradigm need to be reassessed, partly because collective action and state responses to protests have become more complex. Nowadays, demonstrators rely on a broader set of tactics, both legal and illegal (della Porta, 2023), whereas authorities claim to protect the right to

protest while simultaneously criminalizing it (Doran, 2017; Watts, 2020). In this shifting environment, studies have noted that frames traditionally associated with the protest paradigm fail to capture important portions of news coverage (e.g., Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Our argument therefore echoes recent calls to interrogate journalistic dynamics that legitimize or delegitimize protests beyond binary, deterministic, and static perspectives (e.g., Harlow & Brown, 2023; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Kyriakidou & Olivás Osuna, 2017).

Drawing on an analysis of 361 news reports aired on television during the first week of the uprising on a private and a state-owned station, we examine (1) to what extent Chilean television newscasts adhered to the protest paradigm; (2) to what extent they deviated from it; and (3) the implications that these potential deviations may have for a retheorization of the protest paradigm. We scrutinize these questions through inductive and deductive stages of content analysis, sensitive to contextual and contingent features. Following Chan and Lee's (1984) original argument describing the existence of *several* paradigms of protest news coverage, as well as the work of della Porta and Reiter (1998) on policing demonstrations, we propose that two paradigms were at play in Chilean television: the classic, "antagonistic" one, which delegitimizes collective action by stressing violence and damage, and the "paternalistic" one, which celebrates law-abiding expressions of protest and distinguishes between "good" and "bad" demonstrators. Crucially, we argue that the paternalistic paradigm operates as what we call *media kettling*—a type of coverage that recognizes grievances and celebrates the right to protest, but in severely restricted ways.

Repertoires of Contention and Containment: Protesters' Tactics and State Responses

Amid declining levels of traditional political participation, such as party or trade union membership, protests have become a key channel for citizens to make their demands visible. Protests are considered a cornerstone of contemporary democracy, with political elites discussing the "right to protest" as an essential component of civic life (Wall, 2024, p. 1381). Notwithstanding this apparent support, governments usually undermine dissent, calling for consensus and the protection of the status quo, while severely restricting protests under the argument of preventing crime and maintaining public order (Doran, 2017; Watts, 2020). Consequently, authorities—and increasingly activists themselves—hold that protests are valid political expressions as long as demonstrators are "nonviolent" or behave "peacefully" (Murdie & Purser, 2017).

However, as Butler (2020) observes, the meaning of concepts such as "violence" or "nonviolence" is disputed. Perceptions about the legality and legitimacy of protests depend on contingent factors, such as political opportunities, grievances, tactics, and activists' ability to attract and sustain attention (Cammaerts, 2024; Zlobina & Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018). These disputes are partly underpinned by the shifting nature of collective action and state responses to it. In the last few decades, the *repertoires of contention* by demonstrators have expanded, relying not only on marches, boycotts, and strikes, but also on symbolic tactics and digital self-mediation (della Porta, 2023). At the same time, the repression, control, and management of protests—termed by us as *repertoires of containment*—have become more elaborate. As della Porta and Reiter (1998) observed, during the 1960s and 1970s, authorities and the police exercised "antagonistic" tactics based on repression and escalated force. Since the 1980s, they have incorporated

“paternalistic” practices such as negotiation, space management, and tolerance for minor law-breaking, as well as nonlethal weapons, preventive arrests, and increased surveillance. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that “paternalistic” policing benefits collective action. Demonstrations arranged in coordination with the police can be easily neutralized and ignored (Gillham, 2011), while containment tactics based on dialogue may be disguised attempts at surveillance and control (Gilmore, Jackson, & Monk, 2019).

The ambivalence of what constitutes legal and/or legitimate dissent is nonetheless exploited by those in power. In Latin America, for example, some states—including Chile—have historically labeled collective action a threat to national stability and security, criminalized dissent by curbing citizens’ rights, rendered civil disobedience illegal, and granted impunity to police officers accused of human rights abuses (Doran, 2017). In the case of the 2019 uprising, President Piñera said in an infamous speech that the country was “at war” against a powerful and relentless enemy (Somma, 2021, p. 586). He therefore framed the uprising as criminal acts to be contained through curfews, repression, and the restriction of basic rights such as assembly or movement.

However, it is significant that Piñera stated in that same speech that Chileans had the right to protest (Redacción Prensa Presidencia, 2019). Hence, in Chile and elsewhere, governments navigate the tension between guaranteeing and criminalizing collective action by categorizing, legally and discursively, protesters into two groups. On the one hand, they identify *contained* or “good” protesters—typically older individuals described as “workers” or “family people”—who allegedly have clear, noble goals, negotiate in advance with the police, and rely on legal and predictable tactics. On the other hand, they talk about *transgressive* or “bad” protesters—typically younger people, portrayed as vandals without political agendas—who rely on illegal and disruptive actions (della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Gilmore et al., 2019). These categorizations corroborate Butler’s (2020) observation that the state monopoly on violence “depends upon a naming practice, one that often dissimulates violence as legal coercion” (p. 6) and confirm the significance of examining whether the media perpetuate or challenge the naming practices of dissent by those in power.

Collective Action in Legacy Media: Rethinking the Protest Paradigm

Media portrayals of protests are key to enhancing or undermining collective action because they have consequences for protesters’ tactics, audiences’ perceptions, and state responses (Brown & Mourão, 2021; Rovira Sancho, 2013). The “protest paradigm” remains the default position of analysis in the field of mediated protest (Harlow & Brown, 2023). Chan and Lee (1984) originally proposed this concept when examining newspaper coverage of protests in Hong Kong. They described paradigms as “a ‘metaphysical’ world view or a gestalt that defines the entities of concern, indicates to journalists where to look (and where not to look), and informs them about what to discover” (Chan & Lee, 1984, p. 187). While these authors discussed journalistic paradigms in plural, a point we come back to later, the most extensively used approach draws on the work of McLeod and Hertog (1999), who identified a “protest paradigm”—in the singular. According to them, the paradigm is an implicit journalistic pattern that perpetuates the status quo by ignoring grievances, accentuating authorities’ voices, and portraying demonstrators as deviants. The paradigm is underpinned by frames, which they define as “the application of a ‘narrative

structure' that journalists use to assemble facts, quote assertions and other information into a new story" (McLeod & Hertog, 1999, p. 312).

Although McLeod and Hertog (1999) originally suggested five frames (*riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, *protest*, and *debate*), subsequent studies (e.g., Brown & Harlow, 2019; Wouters, 2015) hold that journalists apply the paradigm through four frames: (1) *riot*, stressing the disruption, destruction, and violence initiated by protesters; (2) *confrontation*, focusing on conflicts between demonstrators and the police, the state, or the media; (3) *spectacle*, emphasizing the odd or carnivalesque atmosphere of demonstrations, and (4) *debate*, centering on grievances and goals. The first three are understood as delegitimizing devices that highlight spectacle and sensationalism and underscore specific issues through "episodic" news. Conversely, the less frequent *debate* emerges as a legitimizing frame, with "thematic" news that addresses broader societal trends, explains grievances, and gives voice to protesters.

The protest paradigm remains a useful analytical framework. In a succinct and measurable way, it grasps a set of patterns employed by news media to marginalize collective action and protect the status quo. Notwithstanding its strengths, its theoretical and methodological assumptions need to be revisited to extend its usefulness. We highlight four criticisms. First, the paradigm is highly normative. It presumes that an emphasis on violence and disruption distorts the supposedly peaceful nature of collective action and *necessarily* leads to delegitimization (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). That notion overlooks the contingent relationship between dissent and disruption. Activists—as part of their repertoires of contention—may strategically act outside the law, supporting a "logic of damage" (della Porta & Diani, 2006), while governments—as part of their repertoires of containment—may use the excuse of violence to justify police abuse and civil rights restrictions (Doran, 2017). Moreover, although citizens generally consider violent protests less legitimate, they occasionally perceive them as efficient and even justifiable (Zlobina & Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018).

Second, studies drawing on the protest paradigm often depict protest news coverage statically, emphasizing the frequency of stories that fit within a frame rather than narrative variations (Cottle, 2008). Analyses show that when news coverage of protests stretches over time, journalists may provide context and incorporate protesters' voices (Mourão, Brown, & Sylvie, 2021). Third, although the protest paradigm was coined in the study of protests in Hong Kong (Chan & Lee, 1984), subsequent debates focused predominantly on Western examples. Scholars have nonetheless observed that, in non-Western settings, legacy media do not always protect the status quo (Shahin, Zheng, Sturm, & Fadnis, 2016). In addition, the prevalence of specific frames is socially contingent (Harlow, Brown, Salaverría, & García-Perdomo, 2020), and support for either peaceful or violent protests varies according to a society's past (Murdie & Purser, 2017).

Fourth, studies of protest news coverage have largely examined newspapers, which are used as proxies for "traditional media." Less attention has been paid to television (Robertson, Chirioiu, & Ceder, 2019), which in cases such as Chile, remains a highly popular albeit controversial media (Orchard & Fergnani, 2023). Additionally, its characteristics may have implications for how protests are covered. Although televisual features such as the simplification of messages, reliance on images, personalization, and focus on immediate events seem to favor the protest paradigm (García-Perdomo et al., 2024; Rovira

Sancho, 2013), studies have noted that newscasts—especially those by public broadcasters—do not always align with it, with reports examining grievances driving collective action (Wouters, 2015). These four critiques therefore point to a need for nuanced theoretical and methodological approaches sensitive to the context of collective action and to the greater complexity of contemporary repertoires of contention and containment (for similar points, see Harlow & Brown, 2023).

Methods: Updating Analyses of Protest News Coverage

We focused on two stations: Mega and Televisión Nacional de Chile (TVN). Mega is privately owned, and in 2019, its newscast was the most watched in Chile; TVN is the state-owned broadcaster (although funded through advertising and occasional state support), whose newscast occupied the fourth position in free-to-air television (Newman et al., 2020). They were selected for two reasons. First, both were heavily criticized, with demonstrations taking place outside their headquarters (García-Perdomo et al., 2024). Second, studies in other settings (e.g., Wouters, 2013) have noted differences in protest coverage by public and commercial broadcasters, with the former adopting fewer delegitimizing frames.

We accessed the coverage on a paid news database (NexNews) using relevant keywords including “*protestas*” (protests), “*manifestaciones*” (demonstrations), “*marchas*” (marches), and “*cacerolazos*” (banging pots and pans). To make the study manageable, we focused on the first week of coverage, from October 18 to October 25, since, following Chan and Lee (1984), this permits the examination of early reactions to an abrupt and contested episode of unrest. The chosen timespan includes the outbreak of protests and stretches until the day when 1.2 million people took to the streets in what we referred to earlier as “Chile’s biggest march.” We centered on reports shown during the flagship evening newscasts (8:30 p.m.–10:30 p.m.), which summarized the most important events of the day.

The coverage began as an uninterrupted flow of stories. After repeated viewings, we determined coherent news reports focused on one topic or event and led by one reporter or anchor as *units of analysis*. We identified three types: “packaged stories,” that is, prerecorded reports with edited images and a voice narration; “live segments,” which included on-site dispatches and live interviews with a reporter on location; and “comments from the studio,” that is, segments where anchors discussed unfolding events, sometimes with visual support. These units of analysis had varying lengths, with a mean of 5 minutes: 161 were less than 4 minutes, 182 lasted between 4 and 9 minutes, and 18 ran between 9 and 28 minutes. The final data set amounted to $N = 361$ ($n = 209$ for TVN and $n = 156$ for Mega).

In line with previous works (e.g., Robertson et al., 2019), a mixed-methods approach was adopted with rounds of inductive and deductive analysis. Two authors systematically measured audio and images through a quantitative content analysis, with several rounds of training and codebook adjustments. The departure points were the four story frames that studies drawing on the protest paradigm usually employ, namely *riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate* (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). However, as reported by other studies on the 2019 uprising (e.g., Proust & Saldaña, 2022), these frames did not capture what we encountered. Only three of them were identified: *riot*, *confrontation*, and *debate*, whereas *spectacle* was absent. Consequently, following a round of inductive analysis, we added two new frames: (1) *peaceful demonstration*, which referred to expressions of dissent narrated by journalists and/or sources as law-

abiding or “peaceful,” and (2) *police abuse*, which looked at debates or denunciations of police brutality and abuse.²

Echoing McLeod and Hertog (1999), we found that most units of analysis encompassed more than a single frame. This was unrelated to their length. Packaged stories of 5 minutes, which addressed the causes of the uprising, were sometimes more complex than a 28-minute live coverage of a speech. We therefore measured all five frames within each unit of analysis as a co-occurrence, identifying their presence or absence, while also determining a *dominant frame* that assessed the one with more airtime and was therefore most prevalent within each story.

The protest paradigm criticizes whoever gets to have a voice, arguing that news organizations overemphasize official viewpoints (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Consequently, in line with other studies (e.g., Cammaerts, 2024; Robertson et al., 2019), we examined how different voices, defined after several inductive rounds, were distributed: (1) *political*, namely representatives of the government, state, and opposition; (2) *police/army*, that is, members of the security forces; (3) *experts*, such as academics, members of think tanks, or NGOs; (4) *private voices*, that is, corporate actors who commented on businesses or the economy; and (5) *citizens*, namely individuals interviewed as representatives of the people, who may or may not sympathize with the protests.³

Other measured variables were *temporal frame*, which distinguished between “episodic” and “thematic” news; whether the *protesters* or the *police/army* were portrayed as responsible for violence; and *story format*, whether the units of analysis were packaged stories, comments from the studio, or live dispatches. We calculated intercoder reliability (ICR) on 10% of the sample, reaching an overall 95% agreement and a Krippendorff’s alpha of .86 (Table 1).

² Although police brutality and abuses have been understudied in the protest paradigm (Harlow & Brown, 2023), these were widely reported in Chile, especially in social and independent media (Luna et al., 2022).

³ We originally intended to distinguish between protesters and bystanders, but the all-encompassing nature of the uprising made this distinction impossible.

Table 1. Main Variables and ICR.

Variable	Agreement (%)	Krippendorff's Alpha
<i>Dominant frame (riot / confrontation / police abuse / peaceful demonstration / debate)</i>	91.1	.85
<i>Riot (as co-occurrence)</i>	91.1	.76
<i>Confrontation (as co-occurrence)</i>	91.1	.80
<i>Police abuse (as co-occurrence)</i>	95.6	.72
<i>Peaceful demonstration (as co-occurrence)</i>	86.7	.73
<i>Debate (as co-occurrence)</i>	84.4	.67
<i>Temporal frame (thematic/episodic)</i>	95.6	.87
<i>Story format (packaged stories / comments from studio / live dispatches)</i>	97.8	.96
<i>Protesters as source of violence</i>	91.1	.81
<i>Police/army as source of violence</i>	95.6	.77
<i>Political voices</i>	100.0	1.0
<i>Police/army voices</i>	100.0	1.0
<i>Expert voices</i>	97.8	.89
<i>Private voices</i>	100.0	1.0
<i>Citizen voices</i>	100.0	1.0

Drawing on Seawright and Gerring (2008), we qualitatively analyzed a subsample of reports from both stations, choosing stories that were “typical” cases of the five frames ($n = 38$). We examined the production, reproduction, and contestation of meanings, relationships, and hierarchies, identifying legitimizing and delegitimizing perspectives about protests and police responses by anchors, reporters, and sources. We accounted for tensions between visual and aural content, as well as co-occurrent frames. Below, we consolidate these quantitative and qualitative findings, identifying an emergent pattern in the mediation of changing repertoires of contention and containment on Chilean television—a pattern that advances theoretical debates on the protest paradigm.

Findings: From Irrational Rioters to Well-Behaved Demonstrators

Adherence to the Protest Paradigm

The first objective was to examine the extent to which Chilean newscasts adhered to the protest paradigm. Our initial approach seemed to confirm some adherence. Measured as exclusionary categories, frames that negatively depicted demonstrations accounted for more than half of all cases: *riot* was the dominant frame in 52.1% ($n = 188$) of the units of analysis, while *confrontation* prevailed in 7.5% ($n = 27$). It should, however, be noted that a significant number of reports were less delegitimizing: 18.3% ($n = 66$) featured *debate*, 17.1% ($n = 62$) emphasized *peaceful demonstration*, and 5% ($n = 18$) centered on *police abuse*. We report the findings of Mega and TVN together (Table 2) because, unlike other settings (Wouters, 2013), we did not find significant differences between private and public broadcasters.

Table 2. Dominant Frames Measured as Exclusionary Categories.

Dominant Frame	Proportion of Units of Analysis (%)	Number of Reports (n)
<i>Riot</i>	52.1	188
<i>Confrontation</i>	7.5	27
<i>Debate</i>	18.3	66
<i>Peaceful demonstration</i>	17.1	62
<i>Police abuse</i>	5.0	18
Total	100.0	361

In addition, 60.4% ($n = 218$) of stories consistently portrayed demonstrators as responsible for violence, in comparison with 28% ($n = 101$) blaming the police or the army. Statistics confirmed an association between the dominant frame and whether protesters ($\chi^2 = 134,557, p < .001$; *Cramer's V* = .611) or the police ($\chi^2 = 118,45, p < .001$; *Cramer's V* = .573) were portrayed as behaving violently. Significantly, 80.3% ($n = 151$) of *riot* reports blamed demonstrators, in contrast to 17.6% ($n = 33$) that accused the police or army, and 2.1% ($n = 4$) which condemned both. Relatedly, although 92.6% ($n = 25$) of *confrontation* stories blamed both demonstrators and the police, the remaining 7.4% ($n = 2$) focused on demonstrators only.

Echoing the tenets of the protest paradigm (McLeod & Hertog, 1999), the coverage was predominantly episodic (81.2%, $n = 293$) rather than thematic (18.8%, $n = 68$). Chi-square and *Cramer's V* tests confirmed a significant association between episodic or thematic reports and dominant frames ($\chi^2 = 151.771, p < .001$; *Cramer's V* = .648). Concretely, more than half of the episodic news items (60.1%, $n = 176$) were about riots, crime, or disruption, while a similar proportion of thematic stories (66.2%, $n = 45$) were about debate. In addition, most reports were live segments (53.5%, $n = 193$), followed by comments from the studio (21.3%, $n = 77$) and packaged stories (25.2%, $n = 91$). Of these, both live coverage and studio comments were largely episodic (99%, $n = 191$ and 81.8%, $n = 63$, respectively), and packaged stories were primarily thematic (57.1%, $n = 52$). The data therefore confirm that the coverage by Mega and TVN was an extended cycle of episodic and mostly delegitimizing breaking news centered on specific events rather than grievances and possible solutions.

Our qualitative analysis observed that this live, event-oriented, delegitimizing coverage was often structured around images of fire, barricades, destruction, and clashes between protesters and police. Reporters sometimes followed police patrols, representing them as agents of law and order or as victims of criminals. Newscasts often split their screens, displaying up to four parallel scenarios, while also repeating images in loops. These visual strategies may have been intended to keep the viewers' attention but gave visibility to the most disruptive aspects of collective action, overemphasizing chaos and damage. Although reporters often limited themselves to describing events on-site, news anchors—as in other Latin American countries (Rovira Sancho, 2013)—expressed shock, anger, or sadness. For example, on the very first day of coverage, TVN anchors voiced these commentaries when the police were attacked in a peripheral neighborhood of Santiago:

The images we see are shocking. We see how the protesters totally lose rationality and sanity, forgetting that two human beings are in that car, police officers who are being attacked by stones with unusual violence. Some protesters manage to notice and stop them, before things get totally out of hand, as unfortunately our colleagues are finding as they report from different parts of the city. (TVN, 2019a, 00:05:52–00:06:18)

As noted in the description above, emotional and interpretative interventions were commonly accompanied by chaotic images underlining a delegitimizing narrative. In the same vein, on the second day of coverage, the opening greeting from an anchor in Mega was “Impossible to say good evening” (Mega, 2019a, 00:00:53–00:00:55). These comments show that anchors embraced the authorities’ perspectives toward the unfolding demonstrations, calling to deflect conflict and respect law and order. On the third day of coverage, the anchors at Mega maintained a similar position:

We have many people tuned in, watching and accessing information from our screen. And once again we call for calm, to respect the curfew as the authorities have requested, and reflect personally on this situation. I believe that there is a common feeling among us all: the feeling of anguish and uncertainty [. . .] What we do in the next few hours, the next few weeks, to restore calm and security in our city depends on us. (Mega, 2019b, 00:00:07–00:00:43)

Statements like these associate demonstrations with disorder, commotion, and deviation from “normal” behaviors. The emphasis on violence, destruction, and forceful police intervention, therefore, aligns with previous studies on the coverage of the Chilean uprising in newspapers and social media (García-Perdomo et al., 2024; Harlow & Bachmann, 2024; Proust & Saldaña, 2022). Moreover, they appear to confirm that Mega and TVN adhered to the protest paradigm by antagonizing collective action through emphasizing violence and disruption. However, a closer look at the data suggests a more nuanced picture.

“I Wish All Demonstrations Were Like This”: “Good” and “Bad” Protesters

As discussed earlier, studies drawing on the protest paradigm usually overlook the possibility of variations (Cottle, 2008). Consequently, our second aim consisted of scrutinizing potential deviations in the coverage. Three significant variations caught our attention. First, delegitimizing *dominant frames*, particularly *riot*, decreased over time (Figure 1). On the first day, *riot* amounted to 78.6% ($n = 33$) of units of analysis, followed by *confrontation* with 11.9% ($n = 5$). Although both frames were the bulk of the first four days, on the last examined day, *riot* dropped to 16.4% ($n = 10$) and *confrontation* to 3.3% ($n = 2$). Conversely, *peaceful demonstration* was only at 4.8% ($n = 2$) on October 18, growing to 42.6% ($n = 26$) by October 25. This finding echoes studies noting that, although the protest paradigm dominates at the beginning of protest cycles, it may decrease over time (e.g., Mourão et al., 2021).

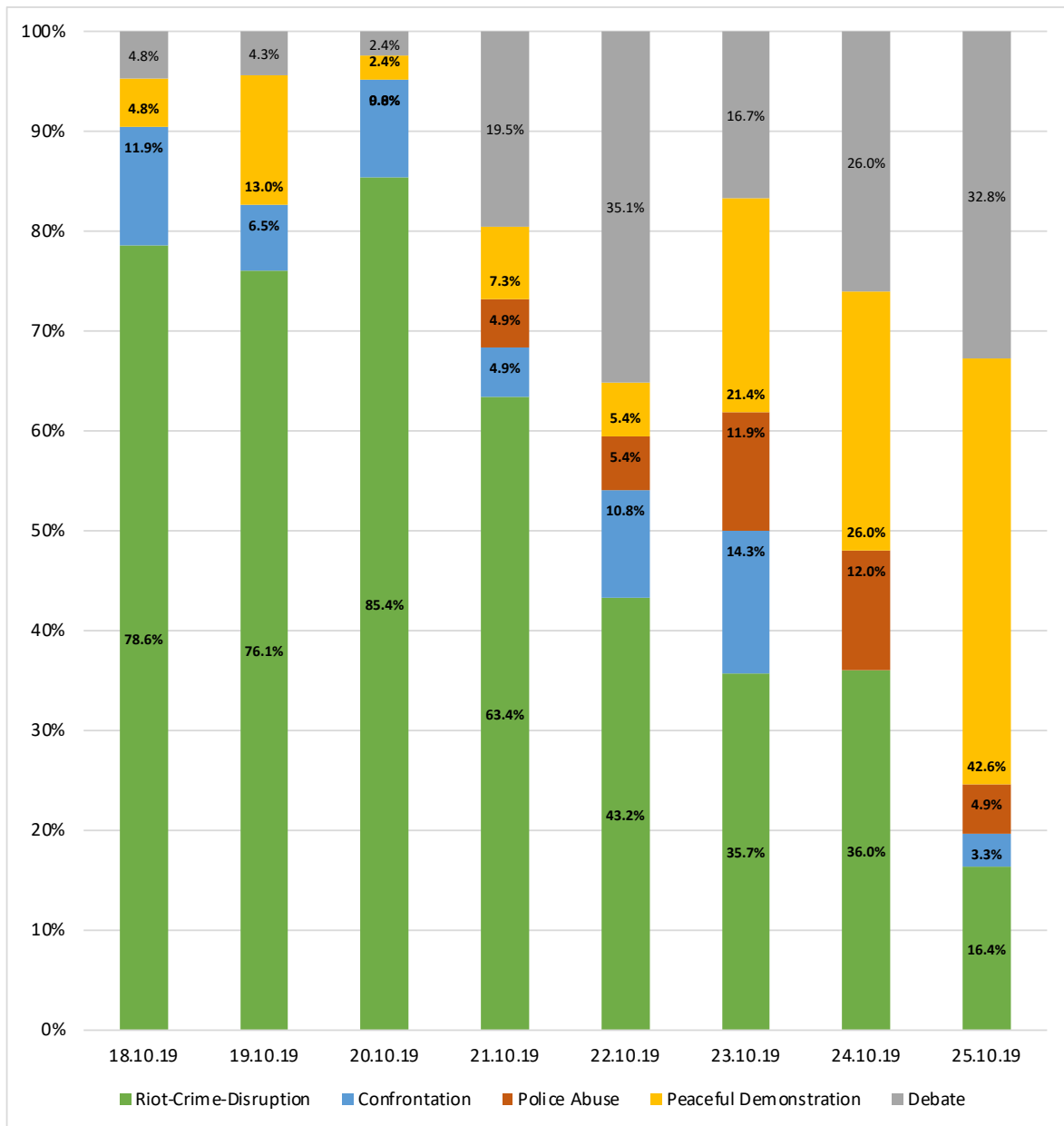


Figure 1. Shifts in dominant frames categorized by date.

In our qualitative analysis, we observed that the change was partly in response to the fluctuating nature of the protests. News reports of the first three to four days corresponded to some of the most disruptive events of the uprising, such as the damage done to subway stations in Santiago; the looting of supermarkets and stores; confrontations between the police and protesters (and occasionally between

protesters and other citizens); the imposition of curfews; the unprecedented deployment of the army; and the early reactions of authorities, which included President Piñera's infamous speech that the country was "at war." In subsequent days, however, news stories covered grievances and, as detailed below, "peaceful demonstrations," especially in some more well-off areas of Santiago. The coverage of the examined week culminated with reports on "Chile's biggest march," an event applauded by most politicians, including Piñera (Landaeta & Herrero, 2021, pp. 100–101). Echoing these views, reporters for both Mega and TVN depicted the march as an expression of democracy and national unity and deliberately overlooked parallel disruptive or damaging incidents to avoid tarnishing what they called a "celebratory" and "peaceful" occurrence.

A second significant variation referred to the distribution of voices. Literature on the protest paradigm holds that news media stress the viewpoints of authorities and ignore demonstrators (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Yet our analysis found something different. Although the coverage started with anchors and reporters providing running commentary, a greater number of voices were incorporated throughout the week. Citizens were the most prevalent, included in almost a third of the segments aired on average (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Voices Throughout the Week.

Voice Type	18.10	19.10	20.10	21.10	22.10	23.10	24.10	25.10	Average Proportion
<i>Political</i>	4.8%	6.5%	17.1%	19.5%	27.0%	28.6%	38.0%	29.5%	21.4%
<i>Police/army</i>	7.1%	8.7%	7.3%	9.8%	8.1%	11.9%	22.0%	4.9%	10.0%
<i>Expert</i>	0%	0%	0%	9.8%	8.1%	21.4%	20.0%	27.9%	10.9%
<i>Private</i>	0%	2.2%	4.9%	9.8%	10.8%	4.8%	20.0%	13.1%	8.2%
<i>Citizen</i>	14.3%	17.4%	34.1%	29.3%	24.3%	40.5%	30.0%	39.3%	28.7%

% corresponds to proportion of stories that each day included a specific type of voice

Our qualitative analysis noted that these citizen voices were crucial to challenging delegitimizing journalistic frames. Some of their statements supported disruptive actions that drew attention to grievances through a "logic of damage" (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 173), as in the following case: "I didn't see anything [about the looting and burning of a car dealership], but it was good [. . .] If there is no destruction, nobody listens to us" (TVN, 2019b, 00:04:44–00:04:58). Similarly, another citizen stated three days later:

It has been horrible [the burning of subway stations], but I feel it is also a form of demonstration that will attract attention and will be heard in some way, because peaceful demonstrations have been held several times and have not been heard. (TVN, 2019c, 00:05:24–00:05:46)

As these quotations demonstrate, there were on-screen disputes between journalists and citizens from an early stage. These disputes also happened off-screen, with social media hashtags accusing television stations of lying, protests taking place outside Mega's and TVN's headquarters, and reporters being harassed on the streets (Luna et al., 2022; Orchard & Fergnani, 2023). Anchors and reporters likely incorporated nuance into their narratives partly because of these criticisms, and the coverage evolved from a crime story to a socio-political one. Hence, echoing other settings (Wouters, 2015), reports increasingly featured debate as the dominant frame (4.8%, $n = 2$, on October 18 to 32.8%, $n = 20$, on October 25). These debate stories

were structured around citizen testimonials communicating grievances such as low salaries, lack of opportunities, and exploitation, with the viewpoints of experts and politicians validating their demands.

A third related variation referred to the increasing number of reports about police abuse. Over the first three days of coverage, reporters followed the police, portraying them as guarantors of law and order. However, on October 21, a small number of stories (4.9%, $n = 2$), drawing on social media images and testimonies from victims and NGO representatives, reported accusations of illegal arrests, police brutality, and abuse. These continued in subsequent days, reaching a peak of 12% ($n = 6$) on October 24. We observed that of a total of $N = 18$ identified news about police abuse, 83.3% ($n = 15$) described the police or army as the main source of violence, and 16.7% ($n = 3$) blamed both security forces and demonstrators.

Evidence of further complexity emerged when measuring frames as co-occurrences. Although 77.6% ($n = 280$) of reports included mentions—not only as a dominant frame—of *riot*, 51.8% ($n = 187$) incorporated *peaceful demonstration* within the same story. In other words, more than half of the units of analysis stressed that, to some extent, the uprising had both violent and nonviolent, or disruptive and nondisruptive, elements. We observed this pattern in more detail in our qualitative analysis. Anchors and reporters developed a discursive binary strikingly similar to how police around the world categorize demonstrators (e.g., della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Gilmore et al., 2019), distinguishing between well-behaved citizens taking part in legitimate demonstrations vis-à-vis irrational rioters who only want destruction. Consequently, several reports held that Chileans had the right to protest—and demand changes to the status quo—only if they did it “peacefully.” Images and voiceovers represented these peaceful demonstrations as daylight gatherings characterized by “good” behavior and artistic expressions, attended by elderly and children alike, and with playful, emotional encounters with the police, who told protesters to “behave themselves.” Newscasts even displayed a countdown clock to mark the start of the curfew, urging people to go home at the “appropriate” time. Some stories explicitly stated that peaceful demonstrations were ideal expressions of collective action, as in this report from the city of Viña del Mar:

Reporter: Nearly 30,000 people happily marched this morning [. . .] in complete calm and joy to express their solidarity with this movement that has manifested throughout the country [. . .] They had moments of dialogue with the armed forces, but no destruction, not a single stone, evidencing unity among them. Most people who demonstrated were families [. . .]

Anchor: I wish all demonstrations were like this. (TVN, 2019d, 00:00:23–00:06:30)

As illustrated by the above case, journalists associated peaceful demonstrations with values such as unity, dialogue, democracy, and reconciliation, and portrayed them as the “correct” way of channeling demands. We, however, observed that, on occasions, legitimizing voiceovers were in tension with visuals of fire, barricades, deserted streets, and police and army patrols. This tension stressed the dichotomy between “ideal” demonstrations narrated by journalists vis-à-vis the violence on screens. It is noteworthy that many of these peaceful protests were reported from Ñuñoa, a middle-class neighborhood in Santiago that over time became stereotyped as “woke” (Radovic, 2021). This gave rise to another set of citizens’ responses, which questioned the visibility of peaceful protests and the absence of journalists in underserved

neighborhoods, as in the following statement: “Now they [journalists] come when the supermarket has caught fire. We called them, I don’t know how many times. Three full days of looting and they never came” (Mega, 2019c, 00:01:16–00:01:22). This was followed by another testimonial, which directly criticized the focus on Ñuñoa:

Why doesn’t television come and show what it’s like around here? It only shows the marches from Ñuñoa Square, where nothing happens, everything is quiet, [people are] banging their little pots, but here it’s a disaster my friend, and nobody comes. (Mega, 2019c, 00:02:29–00:02:42)

Hence, news stories legitimized spaces already socially legitimized, where collective action and dissent took the form of peaceful, civilized gatherings. Meanwhile, in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, stories often revolved around looting and confrontations, with citizen sources oscillating between extending support to the causes behind protests and demanding greater security. Despite the ambivalence and dynamism of the coverage, we can nonetheless identify a clear trajectory, from an antagonistic journalistic emphasis on deviant and disruptive behaviors, toward a more paternalistic tone, which celebrated *some* demonstrations as exemplary expressions of democracy and social cohesion.

Rethorizing the Protest Paradigm: Antagonism, Paternalism, and “Media Kettling”

In this article, we examined eight days of prime-time television coverage of Chile’s 2019 uprising by a public and private station. We stated three objectives: (1) identifying to what extent newscasts adhered to the protest paradigm; (2) scrutinizing to what extent they deviated from it; and (3) reflecting on the implications that these potential deviations have for a retheorization of the protest paradigm. The latter objective is examined in this section. Our starting point was classic studies on the protest paradigm, which argue that legacy media focus on spectacle, sideline grievances, portray demonstrators as deviants, and emphasize official voices (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Nonetheless, we addressed calls for nuanced approaches (e.g., Cottle, 2008; Harlow & Brown, 2023; Kyriakidou & Olivas Osuna, 2017), considering the possibility of variations and further complexity.

Although we realized early on that the four frames associated with the protest paradigm—*riot*, *confrontation*, *spectacle*, and *debate*—did not completely fit our data, we still found some adherence to them. News reports on Mega and TVN were mostly delegitimizing, condemning the actions of demonstrators, and emphasizing specific events rather than grievances and context. A look at variations and co-occurring frames painted, however, a more textured picture. As observed in other settings (Mourão et al., 2021), the focus on disruption decreased over time, giving way to more legitimizing frames—especially *peaceful demonstration*—and thematic stories. Anchors and reporters, sometimes forcefully prompted by citizens, made discursive efforts to deescalate the conflict, temper alarmism, and introduce debate. The coverage therefore evolved from an outright condemnatory approach toward a more nuanced one, with more voices expressing support for collective action.

The analyzed coverage therefore deviated from the classic protest paradigm, as well as from how other media narrated the uprising (see García-Perdomo et al., 2024 for X/Twitter; Harlow & Bachmann, 2024 for printed media; Proust & Saldaña, 2022 for Facebook). However, this does not mean that television depicted collective action positively. Statements such as those made by the journalists covering a demonstration in Viña del Mar, which gleefully stressed the desire that “all demonstrations were like this” (TVN, 2019d, 00:00:28–00:00:30) signal a “correct” way of expressing dissent. They imply that collective action is valid only when it fits “desirable” behaviors and is conducted by “respectable” people. Other demonstrations, often those involving youth, peripheral areas, and property damage, are illegal and illegitimate and should be approached as “irrational violence.”

Previous works have noted departures from the classic protest paradigm, attributing them to variables such as protest size, demonstrators’ tactics, political leanings of news organizations, professional routines, and epistemic dispositions of journalists (see Chan & Lee, 1984; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Orchard & Fergnani, 2023; Wouters, 2013). Following these and our own observations, we find value in returning to Chan and Lee’s (1984) original argument that journalists draw on *several* protest paradigms at different times, especially when protests have ambiguous grievances and aims. More concretely, our analysis suggests that two distinct protest paradigms were at play at the outset of the uprising, when Chilean television was struggling to come to terms with an unprecedented episode of unrest. In the first three to four days, we identified an “antagonistic” paradigm, corresponding to the approach suggested by McLeod and Hertog (1999), which emphasized delegitimization, demonization, and marginalization. Because of the fluctuating nature of collective action, the increasing participation of middle and upper classes, criticism of journalists both on- and off-screen, and alternative narratives circulating on social media, television newscasts shifted to a “paternalistic” protest paradigm. Unlike the “antagonistic” one, the “paternalistic” protest paradigm recognizes the right to protest as a cornerstone of democracy, yet selectively portrays only *some* demonstrators positively (Table 4).

Table 4. “Antagonistic” and “Paternalistic” Protest Paradigms.

	“Antagonistic” (Classic) Protest Paradigm	“Paternalistic” Protest Paradigm
<i>Assumption</i>	Protests against the status quo are a deviation from democracy.	Peaceful protests are a cornerstone of democracy.
<i>Grievances</i>	Grievances criticizing the status quo are sidelined.	Grievances criticizing the status quo may be informed.
<i>View of protesters</i>	Condemnatory (vandals, thugs, criminals, etc.).	Selective (distinction between “good” and “bad” protesters).
<i>View of security forces</i>	Positive (guarantors of social order).	Ambivalent (guarantors of social order or human rights abusers).
<i>Desired values</i>	Law and order.	Democracy, social cohesion, peace, respect for the law.
<i>Delegitimizing frames</i>	Riot Confrontation Spectacle	Riot Confrontation
<i>Legitimizing frames</i>	Debate	Police Abuse

		Peaceful Demonstration Debate
<i>Sources</i>	Focus on official viewpoints (authorities and security forces).	Focus on “well-behaved” citizens, experts, and official viewpoints.
<i>Type of news stories</i>	Mostly episodic, with a minority of thematic.	Mostly episodic, but with a significant proportion of thematic.

These paradigms demonstrate that journalists rest on a broader representational palette when covering collective action, echoing the “antagonistic” and “paternalistic” police tactics used to repress, curb, or neutralize dissent (della Porta & Reiter, 1998). Hence, rather than assuming that news organizations invariably delegitimize protests questioning the status quo, legacy media may occasionally tolerate and even celebrate dissent, albeit within limits. For instance, broadcasters in Chile partly acknowledged the validity of grievances—which called for a significant alteration of dominant economic and political arrangements—and acknowledged the right to protest as a component of democracy. When drawing on the “paternalistic” protest paradigm, they emphasized, however, that only *certain types of collective action* were legitimate, namely law-abiding expressions of dissent that could be channeled institutionally. This “paternalistic” coverage therefore deviates from the “antagonistic” one in some key traits. Demonstrators are binarily categorized as either “good” or “bad,” with “peaceful” protests—and those participating in them—applauded as examples of good behavior. In turn, security forces are portrayed ambivalently, both as protectors of social order and occasionally as human rights abusers.

Notwithstanding these seemingly supportive features, the “paternalistic” protest paradigm is a virtue-signaling exercise. It is based on a narrow understanding of democracy, which prioritizes security and order over civil rights (see della Porta & Diani, 2006; Doran, 2017). It grants legitimacy to collective action, but only when it fits behaviors that authorities and/or the state consider appropriate. It is noteworthy that, although the coverage on Chilean television included reports on police abuse, the appropriateness and proportionality of the authorities’ response was never questioned, despite their introduction of curfews, states of emergency, and the deployment of the army. In contrast, broadcasters reinforced instructions to respect these measures. The paternalistic protest paradigm is therefore not too dissimilar to the practice of police kettling, which allows demonstrators to voice their demands but only within enclosed and highly controlled areas (Gilmore et al., 2019). In other words, it is a type of *media kettling*, with news organizations nominally defending and even celebrating the right to protest, while outlining discursive and normative confines that reprove expressions that do not fit the “correct” type of demonstration.

A potential explanation for why journalists tapped into this *media kettling* could be their adherence to professional norms of balance, requiring them to show the alleged two sides of a story, such as “peaceful” and “violent” protests. This seemingly balanced coverage serves to hinder collective action by favoring only those expressions that pose little challenge to dominant political and economic arrangements. Another more structural but complementary explanation can be found in Chan and Lee’s (1989) observation that journalistic paradigm shifts emerge when dominant power relations and social configurations are in flux. For Chile, the 2019 uprising was a significant, albeit temporal, destabilization of the economic, political, and

coercive arrangements prevailing since the Pinochet regime (Somma, 2021). Classic journalistic paradigms, therefore, proved inadequate for dealing with an unsteady social environment, as expressed in the sometimes-fraught exchanges between reporters and ordinary individuals. Notwithstanding changes to routine coverage patterns, such as granting newsworthiness to citizen voices, the paternalistic protest paradigm allowed journalists to extend legitimacy to specific expressions of dissent without fundamentally questioning the status quo.

This study is not without its limitations. Our analysis is based on a single case study comparing two broadcasters within a specific timespan. We are also aware, as Harlow and Brown (2023) note, that content analysis alone is insufficient to inspect how news organizations legitimize or delegitimize social struggles. However, given the enduring significance of legacy news organizations for the communication and (de)legitimization of dissent (Cammaerts, 2024), the identification of the “paternalistic” protest paradigm and *media kettling* contribute to refining analyses of legacy media. Further research is needed to examine whether the coexistence of distinct paradigms is replicated in other contexts, be it temporally or geographically, as well as whether these paradigms correlate with socio-political contingencies, media features, or journalistic routines. This call is particularly relevant nowadays. Protests around the world are facing further criminalization, with governments in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and several Latin American countries—to mention only a few—expanding their *repertoires of containment* to discourage and neutralize dissent (see Doran, 2017; Wall, 2024; Watts, 2020). Subsequent works can consequently interrogate whether, in this increasingly restrictive context, the “naming practices” (Butler, 2020, p. 6) of news organizations transform journalists into aides rather than watchdogs of state authority, perpetuating justifications to curb unrest, supporting restrictive legislation, or celebrating “well behaved” citizens while typecasting as deviant or irrational those who dissent in more disruptive ways.

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