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## **Professional journalistic routines and the protest paradigm: The Big Potato Swap in traditional and alternative media**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the news coverage of a highly mediatised protest action which took place in early May 2011 in Flanders, Belgium. A social movement called the Field Liberation Movement rallied against a field trial of a scientific research project testing genetically modified potatoes. Seeking to understand how implicit patterns associated with the protest paradigm influence media representations of this 'Big Potato Swap', this article discusses the results of a qualitative content analysis of news coverage by two Flemish quality newspapers and one alternative news website. We conclude by discussing to what extent strategies assigned to the protest paradigm are in fact a product of normative journalistic routines. Different journalistic approaches to coverage of protest may be interpreted as distinct journalistic paradigms. As a result, any criticism of protest paradigm mechanisms in news reporting should be seen as part of a broader critique of prevailing journalistic formats and practices.

### **Keywords**

Alternative media, content analysis, democratic debate, field trial, genetically modified food, ideology, newspapers, protest, protest paradigm

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## Introduction

In early May 2011, a Belgian–Dutch university research consortium, together with chemical concern BASF Plant Science Company, launched a field trial with genetically modified (GM) potatoes in the Flemish municipality of Wetteren. The field trial aimed to test several varieties of GM potatoes for their resistance against potato blight.

On 29 May, an environmental movement named the Field Liberation Movement (FLM), comprising several hundred civilians, scientists and environmental and agricultural representatives, carried out a protest. This announced action of civil disobedience was aimed at ‘liberating’ the field by pulling out GM potatoes and replacing them with biological varieties. With this protest, the FLM hoped to open up the debate on the development of GM food regarding the commercialisation of science, the industrialisation of agriculture and the perceived democratic deficit surrounding GM development (FLM, 2011, 2014). With much media attention, the FLM protest ended in a confrontation between protesters and police officials. In the days following the action, it became clear that several university employees were involved with or publicly supported the protest, culminating in the dismissal of an activist researcher by her employer KU Leuven because of a breach of trust. Eleven protesters were sued for vandalism, assault and battery, and conspiracy. Simultaneously, support for the protesters came from all corners of society, criticizing the criminalisation of social protest. As a result, a fierce public debate on freedom of expression versus freedom of scientific research got underway in a wide array of media.

The so-called ‘Big Potato Swap’ and its aftermath cast light on the centrality of science-related techno-environmental issues in societal debate and the enormous democratic challenges involved with an issue like GM food. Its highly mediatised nature also emphasised the need to comprehend, in Schudson’s (2005) words, ‘how the institutions and practices of news-making interact with “events”’ such as these (p. 173). It is essential that we understand how this influences the space available for public debate about the concerns of the protesters. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the complete media discourse on this controversial protest (for a critical discourse analysis of this case, see Maesele, Raeijmaekers, Van der Steen, et al., 2015), this article uses the Potato Swap as a stepping stone for reflection on public debate, the so-called protest paradigm and professional routines in both mainstream and alternative news media.

This contribution seeks to understand how implicit patterns associated with the protest paradigm from social movement literature influence media representations of the Potato Swap and how we can explain this form of newsmaking. To this end, a qualitative content analysis is conducted to examine which protest paradigm indicators can be discerned in the reporting of two Flemish quality newspapers and one alternative news website, and what the consequences of these mechanisms are for the media’s definition, interpretation and evaluation of the protest and its aftermath. This research hopes to add to the current understanding of media bias and protest by investigating to what extent protest paradigm mechanisms are intrinsically associated with

mainstream newsmaking routines, and how alternative media may contribute to a more pluralistic account of social protest events. We identify how claims are made about the Potato Swap through protest paradigm strategies and how this develops over time. By opting for qualitative content analysis of a broad sample, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of protest paradigm mechanisms beyond what is manifest.

### **Defining the protest paradigm**

Even though generating media attention through protests may help social movements to spread their message to a wider audience, research shows that actions and movements that challenge the status quo are often represented negatively in news coverage (e.g. Baylor, 1996; Entman and Rojecki, 1993; Smith et al., 2001). Studies into strategies for the definition, interpretation and evaluation of protests in news coverage point to a routine pattern of delegitimation of social movements that challenge the balance of power and advocate social change (e.g. Boyle et al., 2004, 2012; Chan and Lee, 1984; Dardis, 2006; Gitlin, 1980; Weaver and Scacco, 2013). This collection of patterns is referred to as the protest paradigm.

Broadly speaking, protest paradigm literature outlines three mechanisms that tend to shape media coverage of social protest: marginalising story framing, reliance on official sources and information, and the invocation of public opinion (e.g. McFarlane and Hay, 2003; McLeod and Hertog, 1992, 1999). First, marginalising frames are used to make adverse claims about the nature of a protest and the identity of protesters (protest form), at the expense of consideration or legitimisation of the issues at stake, a movement's political goals or a protest's symbolic meaning (protest content). Through focus on protest form, the action may be depicted as irrational, undemocratic or void of reasonable cause. Coverage emphasises the disruptive or criminal nature of the protest, or points to its violent nature, for example, by using war rhetoric. Protest stories are typically framed dichotomously, pitting protesters against authorities, 'them' versus 'us'. Perceptions of 'otherness' or protesters' deviant appearance and identity may be heightened by playing up their emotionality and fear (Baylor, 1996; Hertog and McLeod, 1995) and by emphasising 'the whimsical and bizarre' (Entman and Rojecki, 1993: 162).

Second, journalists tend to prefer official sources of information, which leads to a dominance of official viewpoints and problem definitions (Bennett, 1990; Sigal, 1973). Media's organisational logic dictates that news is produced using time- and cost-efficient methods, delivering appealing news stories (often interpreted as episodic, dramatic, unusual) to an interested target audience. This leads to a preference for easily available official sources and emphasis on dramatic characteristics of events (Baylor, 1996; Corrigan-Brown and Wilkes, 2012; Gans, 1979). In the case of social protest, the official position is often challenged to change. Hence, official sources would tend to support and defend the status quo and try to rebuke challengers, meaning that reliance on official definitions may lead news coverage to negatively evaluate protesters. Indeed, studies have shown that official news sources tend to get framing power, which gives them the ability to define the terms of a discussion

(Hertog and McLeod, 1995; McLeod and Hertog, 1999). While a social movement may receive close scrutiny, 'critiques of elite opinion [are] rare, muted, and inconsistent' (Entman and Rojecki, 1993: 157).

Third, through opinion polls, eyewitness accounts or depictions of breaches of a social/legal consensus, media tend to represent protesters as isolated minorities. Schudson (1996) interprets the public opinion as a set of convictions of policy makers about what a certain public is thought to believe. Public opinion is often articulated or mobilised by stakeholders, but not necessarily made explicit by the actual public. Media then attribute power to this idea of public opinion. According to McLeod and Hertog (1999), such strategies for invoking public opinion related to the protest paradigm can be interpreted as a form of social control, indicating that these mechanisms convey certain messages to the audience that influence the social regulation of protest groups.

### **Understanding the protest paradigm**

Despite this seemingly uncomplicated paradigm, recent scholarship on media coverage of social protest has found that the occurrence of protest paradigm mechanisms is less straightforward than previously theorised. Cottle (2008) remarks that the increasingly complex range of identities and interests involved in present-day protest, combined with an ever-evolving media ecology, probably generates an equally complex scope of media responses. Factors such as the perceived radicalism of protest goals and tactics, as well as a penchant for partisanship or advocacy for certain causes within news media covering a protest might variably influence the tone of reporting (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011; Boyle et al., 2004; Weaver and Scacco, 2013). If we let go of the notion that the protest paradigm is an univocally applied set of social control mechanisms occurring in similar ways across media and accept its contingency, 'it becomes meaningful to examine variations in the applicability of the protest paradigm' (Lee, 2014: 2728).

Therefore, the inclusion of alternative and online (news) media is significant to social movement and media research. McLeod and Hertog's (1999; Hertog and McLeod, 1995) original research ascribes a propensity for sympathetic protest framing to the alternative press. Yet, alternative media are rarely included in protest paradigm research, even though alternative media and social movement scholarship alike indicate that, due to their alternative economic, organisational, ideological and aesthetical values and standards, alternative media are particularly suited to representing voices that are distorted by or left out of mainstream discourses (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009; Downing, 2001). Likewise, scholars argue that the horizontal, bottom-up and fluid practices of online media may make them a suitable channel for social movement and protest communications (Dahlberg, 2007; Van De Donk et al., 2004). Comparing alternative and mainstream protest coverage may thus contribute to a greater understanding of the particular relation of the paradigm with mainstream reporting.

In this regard, it is pertinent to consider professional routines as an explanatory factor. Certain journalistic preferences, practices and norms that are generally accepted

characteristics of professionalism (Schudson, 1996; Sigal, 1973) can be linked to the occurrence of the protest paradigm. Professional journalistic routines are developed in response to an array of practical considerations and constraints, such as information availability, audience expectations and a medium's limitations (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Yet, news routines might not only serve a medium's needs positively. For example, Schudson (1996) recounts how political news tends to underline strategies and tactics over ideology, which enables a journalist to distance himself from political conflicts of interest and value judgements. However, emphasising the form of events may come at the detriment of an analysis of ideological content. Hence, there is an obvious need to look beyond straightforward social 'control' mechanisms, at professional considerations, which have thus far been disregarded by protest paradigm research.

Finally, we assert that a more comprehensive review of different genres of news coverage would foster a more in-depth understanding of which actors are marginalised, and who is attributed epistemic authority. The media narrative is not only determined by its own news coverage but also by its selection of opinion. As yet, research on the protest paradigm tends not to include op-eds and editorials because this type of content performs different functions than regular news articles, which are assumed to operate along the directives of the objectivity norm (e.g. Dardis, 2006; Fuller and Rice, 2014). However, some studies argue that including op-eds may actually provide a more balanced and comprehensive overview of relevant news output (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011; McFarlane and Hay, 2003). Moreover, 'For the purpose of analyzing meaning-creation in the media, if news consumers considered a source news, it makes sense to analyze it as such' (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011: 348).

## **Research design**

### *Data collection and selection*

For this study, we select two Belgian generalist newspapers, De Morgen (DM) and De Standaard (DS), which each represent the 'quality publication' of the two Dutch language print media groups (respectively, De Persgroep and Mediahuis). Each media group also circulates a popular newspaper, but quality newspapers may be better suited to study protest coverage. Scholars assume that 'elite' newspapers have a less sensationalised approach to 'contentious political activities going on in the public sphere' (Beyeler and Kriesi, 2005: 100) and a capacity for mobilising public social engagement (Aalberg and Curran, 2012; Newton, 1999). Moreover, media scholars have remarked on quality newspapers' potential role as agenda setters and opinion leaders in matters of science and technology (e.g. Bauer et al., 2001; Carvalho, 2007). We also select the online alternative news outlet DeWereldMorgen.be (DWM), which is not part of a commercial media group, but distinguishes itself explicitly from traditional media operationally and content-wise. It works without structural market

advertising dependency and profit motive, offering news for free and relying on civil society sponsoring (unions, cultural organisations and environmental, North-South and peace movements). Its editorial department comprises professional and citizen journalists. In its mission statement, DWM states it wants to offer an alternative for traditional news coverage, choosing to give the floor to voices 'that are not or rarely heard in other media' (DWM, 2010). Additionally, DWM interprets 'objectivity' as the rejection of neutrality, on the one hand endorsing journalistic awareness of its own subjectivity, on the other hand ascribing to the notion that objective reporting may be accomplished by being transparent about this positioning. Thus, DWM wishes to promote objectivity through revealing their subjective positioning to their readership (DWM, 2010).

From these outlets, we collect news articles, interviews, editorials and op-eds published between 1 April and 30 June 2011, in order to include both the run-up to and the immediate aftermath of the direct action on 29 May. The total population comprises 121 articles: 41 for DS, 44 for DM and 36 for DWM. Every article is assigned a code (abbreviation medium (DS, DM, DWM), date (ddmmjj) and letter in case of multiple publications on the same date) which will be used as reference in this text. The ratio of news articles versus op-eds in our sample varies. DS and DM preferred regular articles, interviews and editorials. About a quarter of the output of each newspaper consisted of op-eds (respectively 9 and 10). By contrast, DWM only put out 10 articles about the protest and its aftermath from April to June. Instead, much more space was given to op-eds (26). Accordingly, it makes sense to include all op-eds published in the selected time frame.

### *Qualitative content analysis*

This analysis aims for deeper insights into the discourse in which the protest paradigm arises. Although most protest paradigm research is conducted quantitatively, a qualitative content analysis allows us to examine its manifest mechanisms in news coverage and their consequences for the media definition, interpretation and evaluation of the protest, as well as the practices and choices underlying newsmaking. Since the protest paradigm is characterised by marginalising story framing, heavy reliance on official sources and information, and the invocation of public opinion, we set out to identify these three aspects in the data. As to story framing, Entman (1993) describes that 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (pp. 51–52). Media frames can be deduced by looking for patterns in the use of framing devices such as emotive language or metaphors. Working deductively, a list of marginalizing frames and their characteristics was compiled from the literature (McFarlane and Hay, 2003; McLeod and Hertog, 1999), leading us to pay specific attention to descriptions of odd or deviant protester appearance and behaviour, descriptions of irrationality of protesters and their claims, and adverse descriptions of the protest's nature.

Simultaneously, we examined which official, expert, social movement, civilian and other actors/sources were employed in news coverage; whether they were cited, paraphrased or acknowledged; and what type of information they provided. Likewise, we recorded

suggestions of a social consensus or public opinion about relevant issues (e.g. use of eyewitness statements, suggestions about social and legal norms, survey statistics). From a social constructivist perspective, we assessed the validity of the study on its coherence and fruitfulness, that is, the solidity and explanatory potential of the analytical claims, the cohesion of the theoretical foundations and the analytical framework, and the transparency of the presentation of the results section (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Potter and Wetherell, 1989).

## Analysis

Our aim was to identify how protest paradigm strategies were employed, and to establish whether and how discourse evolves from April until June 2011. During the analysis, it became clear that the observed mechanisms could be grouped into claims surrounding the visible manifestation of a grievance or a challenge to a social issue (protest form) and claims about issues/goals/symbolic meanings at stake (protest content). We will discuss the findings accordingly. We finish by examining the evolution of media discourse surrounding the protest, focussing on a shift in media discourse.

### *Protest form*

In both newspapers, the emphasis shifts from protesters' causes and goals, to the visible manifestations of protest. First, DS and DM frame the story dichotomously, presenting protesters and scientists at opposite ends of the debate. Field trial organisers are consistently presented as victims in statements by journalists and by these scientific actors themselves, for example, *'Years of work for the benefit of a more sustainable, environmentally friendly agriculture, destroyed all at once. This is no longer a form of campaigning, this is an act of aggressive violence'* (DM300511a); *'A group of scientists stands at the side lines, looking aghast. Some leave. "This is a sad day for science," says Jo Bury, director of the VIB'* (DS300511d).

By contrast, protesters are described in terms of external details in multiple articles. By emphasising protesters' carefree, unorganised, naive appearance and behaviour, the readers' attention is diverted from the socio-political concerns protesters raise. DS describes the carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding the protest, pointing out participants' appearance, background and flamboyant behaviour:

*'Ten drummers clad in green cross the bicycle bridge by the highway. They are all drumming to the same rhythm. 'The samba of protest' [...] Rousing and cheerful. In the bright summer sun it even sounds a little bit exotic. They are followed closely by a group of clowns. Squatters from Lille, dressed up to the nines in big shoes and a potato nose. Armed with balloons and field flowers they hand to police officers.* (DS310511h)

At first, DM also highlights protesters' perceived deviance several times, alluding to protesters' 'playful' and 'fun' attitude, for example, *'At first glance, it seemed to be a merry lot on Sunday in Wetteren. Conscious citizens who dislike the idea of genetically modified potatoes organised a "playful action"'* (DM300511b); *'[...] they challenge legal boundaries. Always using a fun touch, such as a clown army to cheer things up'* (DM040611d).



Protesters' behaviour is also framed, in a more explicitly disagreeable way, as naive, for example, '*FLM is unaware of having done anything wrong*' (DM300511d). Additionally, most news coverage by DS and early coverage by DM insist on highlighting the events' violent and destructive nature, casting protesters as villains who attack science and democracy, while the protest itself loses its legitimacy. In both newspapers, articles published before 29 May discuss the extensive security measures taken in anticipation of the protest. This suggests that protesters pose a threat to the field trial, as illustrated by the following statement: '*The police and the university of Ghent be warned*' (DS300411). Afterwards, conflict is even more markedly emphasised, for instance, through war language. In the following quote, DM relies on visual descriptions of the 'battle' by referring to (Indian) warfare:

*Wetteren, noon. The sun is at its high point when about sixty policemen – carrying helmets, shields and truncheons – encircle the potato field next to the E40 manu militari. The trial field, about 20 square meters, turns into a nearly untouchable fortress. [...] At three o'clock a war cry sounds. 'Down with the Frankenstein potatoes!' [...] The first potato plant is held up like a scalp. Proud Indian-like whoops echo over the potato field. It all culminates in a true battle. Policemen and protesters: neither concedes. And no battlefield without wounded.* (DM300511d)

Likewise, the two newspapers consistently allude to a social and legal consensus on existing protest options, which does not include violent or destructive action outside of institutionalised channels, for example: '*But even so it is illegal, and the activists are willing to bear the consequences of their actions*' (DS300411). Journalistic discourse on this matter is substantiated by employing official/expert statements warning readers about questionable protest methods and the danger protesters pose to a democratic society, for example, '*We think that the destruction of scientific experiments should not happen in a democratic country in the 21st century*' (DS240511); '*Imposing an ideology by destroying the work of others is a bridge too far*' (DM300511d). Moreover, official discourse keeps building on itself, naturalising the sanctioning of protesters, for example, '*We hope the public prosecution will sue these so-called protectors of nature for intentional damage and for intentional assault and battery to police officers on duty*' (DM310511d). This moralising strategy, which disavows social criticism at the source of the protest, is particularly strong in op-eds, for example, '*The world can finally see the true face of the fundamentalists and troublemakers who participate in those kinds of action. [...] Anarchism has a certain charm, but we cannot accept hooliganism as a form of democratic struggle. Destruction without reason leads to nihilism*' (DS310511j); '*As we could see in Wetteren, this fundamentally anti-humanist attitude leads to a distorted legitimization of violence*'. (DM310511f)

Unlike either newspaper, DWM pays little attention to (potential) destruction. Excepting quotes by GM proponents in some news articles and op-eds that question the protest form without necessarily delegitimising its content, protest methods are consistently described in nonviolent terms, for example, '*an announced action of civil disobedience*' or '*activities and action day against synthetic crops and for sustainable agriculture*',

where the 'trial field was rendered useless' (DWM290511; DWM010611a). The occurrence of violence is attributed to strong police intervention: *'[...] nowhere do we see protesters use violence against the police. On TV newscasts the "violent" nature of the protest is always illustrated by police officers who beat up protesters with their batons'* (DWM040611). Whereas both newspapers relied heavily on political, police and expert sources, DWM does not preclude alternative arguments and sources from its news coverage and op-ed section, but regards them as legitimate. For example, an FLM representative is interviewed early on to explain the movement's position (DWM110511). The questions allow her to defend the FLM against criticism of other actors (e.g. *'The institutions organising the field trial also say you wish to avoid discussion by harvesting the GM potatoes. Can you defend the use of this form of protest?'*). Arguments by official sources about the nature of the protest are sometimes rebuffed in journalistic discourse, for example, *'[...] a storm of negative reactions came from politics, the media and universities. Misstatements and outright lies gained a foothold with the public. However, there is also a lot of support from the scientific community and politics'* (DWM010611a).

It is clear that DWM views genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as a contested issue and does not present the scientific community as a united front, much like DM does. In general, reporting by DWM quickly moves on from the goals and nature of the protest towards debate on the dismissal of an activist researcher by her employer and on freedom of expression versus freedom of scientific research as well as industrial interests in scientific research (see below, A shift in discourse).

### *Protest content*

In short, the action mode, the perceived violence and destruction and protesters' deviance are central to the newspapers' evaluation of the protest but barely come into play for the alternative website. As previously described, marginalising and emphasising the protest form may come at the cost of the protest content. Limited room may be left to discuss protesters' actual concerns. This is the case for the newspapers. Epistemic authority is largely granted to only one side of the debate, framing GM proponents as rational actors versus naive, foolish, irrational protesters.

DS especially favours GM proponents' arguments, who defend their research in terms of innovation and progress (see also Maesele and Schuurman, 2008; Maesele et al., 2015). GM research is presented as the best way forward, economically and ecologically, and its opponents are seen as incapable of recognising this, for example, *'Flanders was once on its way to become the centre of crop biotechnology in the world. But resistance against GMOs became worse and worse. Conversely, the US and elsewhere did see the potential'* (DS040611c). Perceived public opinions are invoked to question protesters' common sense, the (need for) protest, its democratic value and its consequences, for example, *'The whole environmental movement is against GMOs, and enjoys wide support by public opinion. And yet Steven thinks it is necessary to also effectively sabotage the trial field'* (DS300411). By implying that protesters have turned public opinion against themselves and antagonised other actors, it is suggested that they have *'shot themselves in the foot'* instead of opening up the debate on GMOs (e.g. DS310511g). In general, DS gives little space to protesters' concerns, instead emphasising protest form.

Patterns of critically framing protesters are also visible in DM, suggesting the existence of a legal consensus against the protest, for example, *'Can scientists no longer expect from a government that it protects their experiments? Or do they have to settle for a government that watches how things are destroyed and then dryly states that the actions are unacceptable?'* (DM300511b). Yet, the most striking examples of protester marginalization are rarely found in journalists' discourse. Instead, they are confined to the op-ed section and statements made by official/expert sources, for example, *'agricultural experts' who systematically reject the arguments made by the FLM as 'wrong', 'simplistic' and 'dating back to the eighties'* (DM160611c). Notably, DM explores arguments made by environmental activists in both its op-eds and its actual news coverage, allowing them to explain their origins, motives and viewpoints. Strikingly, protesters' scientific background is highlighted as *'remarkable' because 'a lot of university researchers participated in the protest action against the GMO field'* (DM310511c). Even if the protest methods (form) are not necessarily defended, alternative arguments (content) are not a priori excluded from the debate.

By contrast, DWM consistently treats the group of unnamed university employees as just one of several scientific perspectives, paraphrasing a small number of university officials (i.e. rectors) on sanctioning activist employees. Their viewpoints are presented as one of many within the scientific community, accentuating the considerable number of scientists who supported the protest and/or expressed concern about the precedent the dismissal of an activist researcher might set:

*According to them, the presence of scientists in both camps just shows that even in the scientific community, there is no consensus about the scientific necessity and the added value of GMOs. Thus they call for dialogue. 'A dialogue in which labels such as "free and independent research," "sustainable agriculture" and "violence" can be subjected to critical reflection and where there is no threat of sanctions for scientists holding a different, reasoned vision'.* (DWM010611b)

GM opponents are presented as a heterogeneous group, including *'farmers, scientists, environmental activists and other concerned civilians'* (DWM010611a). Notably, most op-eds are written by different social movement actors, social and natural scientists unconnected to the field trial, defending protest goals and condemning its criminalisation. This suggests FLM arguments are not an isolated viewpoint. By giving the floor to a wide range of alternative voices, the scientific community and the environmental movement are presented as overlapping, heterogeneous groups, implying that one group cannot preclude the other from the debate based on their background. Expertise or epistemic authority is not perceived as the preserve of GM proponents. By emphasizing underlying causes, concerns and issues, DWM uses legitimisation techniques (Weaver and Scacco, 2013). The assumption that the FLM may have as much competence to evaluate the GM trial allows alternative arguments into the debate.

### *A shift in discourse*

In many ways, the dismissal of activist researcher and FLM supporter Barbara Van Dyck by her employer KU Leuven 1 week after the protest signifies a shift in discourse.

In the week following Van Dyck's dismissal, sympathisers circulated a petition and an open letter which criticised the sanction and demanded its retraction. While field trial organisers and supporters were able to set the tone just before and after the protest, condemning the protest as an attack on freedom of scientific research, suddenly diverse actors from different corners of society were able to defend the right to voice dissent. Thus, it could be expected that news coverage would also become more mixed. At first glance, articles published shortly after Van Dyck's dismissal usually contain simple updates, for example, 'Petition against "Berufsverbot" KU Leuven' (DS070611), 'Activists threw kitchen salt on GMO field' (DM080611). However, DS gives some room to alternative voices that problematise and attempt to politicise the rapid sanctioning, by citing the petition and publishing op-eds criticising Van Dyck's dismissal for her participation in 'the violent protest'. Discussions of the defensibility of the protest in terms of freedom of expression versus freedom of scientific research are central, for example, 'Whoever propagates freedom of expression and research, does not have the right to stifle critical voices' (DS060611). Nevertheless, the newspaper continues to endorse official discourse, for example, the title 'She hurt the heart of the university' (DS250611).

As for DM, coverage becomes more ambiguous after Van Dyck's dismissal. The article moves away from protest form to content (and from marginalisation to legitimisation), analysing inter alia the conduct of institutional actors. This shift in tone is accompanied by a shift in framing power, from a strong focus on consentient institutional sources to a mix of less conventional external and alternative institutional voices. Two themes come to the forefront. First, articles and op-eds start to analyse freedom of scientific research claimed by field trial proponents versus freedom of expression claimed by protesters. Van Dyck's dismissal is seen as 'remarkable and irregular' (DM100611c), given a track record of sanctioning but not freezing out unwelcome behaviour from academia. It is held up as an example of activist scientists' predicament, navigating between professional ideology and personal values. Multiple articles and op-eds attend to the issues at hand, sometimes criticising, sometimes endorsing the FLM and even dissecting the possible motivations behind the harsh sanctioning of Van Dyck. Sympathisers are given room to express their apprehension:

*We fear the very quick, very harsh, and very mediatised reaction this dismissal was, will send the signal that there is a duty of loyalty at the KU Leuven, or even at Flemish universities in general, which ensures that scientists cannot take certain viewpoints or campaign freely when university interests are at stake. (DM100611c)*

A second theme centres on the far-reaching private financial interests in university research and their potential drawbacks, beginning with an editorial that questions whether 'such hard repression only applies to those who place themselves outside of the consensus in Flanders?' (DM040611b). The newspaper highlights the fact that the chemical concern 'BASF has already spent more than one billion euros on research plant biotechnology' (DM110611b). Subsequently, the discussion turns to concerns about external pressures influencing university research and policies, with articles and op-eds analyzing potential consequences for research independence and freely voiced criticisms. Thus, this theme sometimes becomes linked to the first, for example, in an interview with a

professor Emeritus: *'I have heard suspicions that BASF has threatened to breach important contracts with the university' [had they kept Van Dyck in employ]* (DM220611).

Finally, for DWM, there is no actual shift from form to content. Unlike either newspaper, DWM consistently presents the protest as a democratic, nonviolent direct action of civil disobedience and emphasises its goals throughout. Scientific and governmental arguments are not simply accepted as a certainty and are rather scarce in news coverage; instead, counterarguments are allowed to enter the discussion. The medium reproduces the view that protesters have successfully opened up the debate on the modification of food, the larger agricultural model, as well as the commercialisation of science.

Additionally, after universities and politicians announce they are looking into sanctioning the participants, coverage gives the floor to voices supporting the protesters and rejecting the criminalisation of protest, for example,

*This matter transcends the individual case of Barbara Van Dyck, but is about the future of science, about ecology, about the privatisation of public goods, about the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression, and about the precarious position of young researchers.*(DWM210611)

News articles and op-eds indicate the problematic role of commercial interests for independent research, with striking op-ed titles such as *'Independent research? True colours are shown'* (DWM060611b), *'Scientists abuse the predicate "free research"'* (DWM090611b) and *'Scientific research is never free'* (DWM280611). Even though private financing is not rejected, most of these op-eds agree that commercially driven research can rarely be defended as an undertaking for the general interest, nor as a valuefree, independent venture. Thence, it is a short step back to questioning the motives behind Van Dyck's dismissal. As one op-ed states, *'the dismissal of miss Van Dyck causes me to fear a reversal concerning the support researchers may count on when they get mixed up in controversial issues'* (DWM190611). News coverage observes the considerable backlash against this perceived criminalisation of protest, for example, *'Already more than 4.000 people signed the petition against her dismissal'* (DWM210611), *'The case led to an avalanche of reactions and op-eds. Soon it was no longer about pro or against GMOs, but more broadly about freedom and independence of research'* (DWM260611). Thus, DWM takes a stand on Van Dyck's dismissal more strongly than either newspaper. By giving the floor to a different set of academics, reproducing claims made in public expressions of concern and selecting similar op-eds, the alternative medium joins the denouncement of protest criminalisation and attempts to mobilise the public against it.

## **Discussion**

The protest paradigm traditionally asserts that groups challenging the status quo are routinely delegitimised in mainstream reporting. This study has examined whether this paradigm is still relevant to protest reporting in contemporary media landscapes. We questioned whether a difference could be observed between different mainstream media's coverage, and between mainstream and alternative media. To this end, the occurrence of

three core protest paradigm characteristics – marginalising framing of protests and protesters, heavy reliance on official sources and information, and the invocation of public opinion – was examined in coverage of a controversial protest against a field trial of GM food in two mainstream quality newspapers and one alternative online news outlet. Certainly, protest paradigm characteristics are still prominent in mainstream protest coverage, but predictably less so in alternative reporting. Both DS and DM relied heavily on official/expert information and sources, employed marginalising story framing, emphasised protest form and invoked the perceived public opinion. However, there is a marked difference. Coverage of the Potato Swap controversy in DS most clearly exhibited properties ascribed to the protest paradigm, which led to the effective delegitimisation of the FLM, its supporters and their challenge to the status quo on GM development. Protest paradigm characteristics were also apparent in coverage by DM. However, protester marginalisation and reproduction of official viewpoints only went as far as the first couple of days following the protest. Subsequently, a more equal representation of voices and opinions became visible in news articles and op-eds. It would appear that DM reached for the protest paradigm in the days leading up to and immediately after the Potato Swap as a routine response for framing the actors and the form of the protest.

In line with McLeod and Hertog's (1999) expectation that alternative outlets are inclined to frame protest more positively, DWM was sympathetic to the Potato Swap and the FLM. The website explicitly chose to provide a platform for a wide array of alternative actors. Whereas DS and to a lesser extent DM highlighted the (il)legitimacy of the protest form, the alternative outlet systematically treats environmental, socioeconomic and political arguments surrounding the GM debate as central and crucial to the story. In short, although all three media covered the same case, three versions of the 'truth' were presented. Nevertheless, all three media claim to report objectively and used observable strategies related to professional reporting to substantiate these truth claims.

How may these varying occurrences of protest paradigm characteristics in different media coverage of the same event be explained? We believe that this diversity can partly be explained through gatekeeping theory, particularly Reese's (2001) hierarchy of influences model. From this angle, it seems that the protest paradigm is often explained from an organisational (goals and policies of the media organisation and organisational boundaries), social-institutional (structured relationship with other institutions such as the government or advertisers) or ideological perspective (construction of meaning in the service of power). For example, looking at social-institutional and ideological factors, studies indicate that mainstream news reporting tends to follow the maxim of institutional power. DS is indeed inclined to follow official/expert evaluations. From an organisational perspective, the protest paradigm is sometimes explained as the consequence of an incompatibility between institutional media logic and social movements' logic. Our analysis certainly suggests a Catch-22 protest groups have to navigate: to gain media attention, radical tactics definitely seemed to work for the FLM; however, these tactics also tended to generate negative media framing.

Protest paradigm research seems to disregard the routines level in the hierarchy of influences model as an explanatory factor. Nonetheless, certain professional preferences, practices and norms sometimes relate to protest paradigm mechanisms. Schudson's (1996) account of media bias towards technical news at the detriment of an analysis of

ideological content is strikingly similar to the protest paradigm characteristic of emphasizing protest form over concerns and goals. Indeed, DS and early coverage in DM stressed the violent and destructive nature of the protest tactics over the concerns protesters wished to bring to attention. By contrast, DWM paid little attention to the protest form and focused on the issues at hand.

A more potent example of how professional routines may be linked to the protest paradigm is found in the objectivity norm. All four procedures that journalists employ to maximise their claims to objectivity and professionalism according to Tuchman (1972) can be observed in our data. For example, Potato Swap coverage presents conflicting voices and supports evidence and quotes. Through the convention of showing 'both' sides of a story, 'news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative consensus' (Schudson, 1996: 9). In our analysis, the two newspapers indeed tried to show different sides to the argument, yet granted different degrees of epistemic authority to different parties, which was most obvious in their op-ed sections. DWM however opted to emphasise the counterargument in the debate and de-emphasised the conflictual aspects related to the protest tactics.

Additionally, official/expert information is considered to be the most reliable. This is not a trend exclusive to the protest paradigm, but a general characteristic of what is considered professional objective reporting (e.g. Broersma, 2010; Sigal, 1973). However, overrepresentation of official sources may lead to a dominance of official viewpoints (e.g. Schudson, 1996), a mechanism which is also incorporated in protest paradigm literature and that we observed in mainstream coverage, but not on the alternative website. Objectivity can supposedly also be achieved by structuring information into an appropriate sequence whereby a journalist applies his own professional acumen to decide which 'facts' are reliable, important and interesting enough to be represented (Tuchman, 1972: 670–671). All three media in our analysis structure information into observable frames, with different consequences: mainstream media rely mostly on marginalising frames; the alternative outlet prefers sympathetic protest framing.

This raises some interesting questions. Is the prevalence of protest paradigm characteristics in news coverage simply a matter of social or organisational control mechanisms, or may different practices and routines lead to different approaches to what professional reporting entails? And if so, do these professional choices also influence different degrees of protest paradigm characteristics in news coverage? We argue that the different journalistic approaches to protest coverage we observed may be interpreted as three different journalistic paradigms.

First, our analysis suggests that DS weighs different opinions and arguments almost empirically to deduce which information provides authoritative knowledge. Views with the most relative weight are given precedence in news coverage. DS – following a conventional conception of professional, objective journalism – considers official/expert sources to be the most verifiable and reliable. Objectively speaking, they probably provide information closest to the truth. In this positivist journalistic paradigm, these sources are granted the most weight, whereas counterarguments are often deemed too light.

Nevertheless, our analysis indicates that even a slight difference in the conventional conception of journalistic professionalism may result in a different degree of protest paradigm characteristics. DM treated different arguments in the Potato Swap

controversy equally. Whereas DS considers official/expert information as factual, in stark contrast to the perceived irrationality of protester opinions, DM handles information from different sources as different facts, regardless of their 'authority' or 'support'. Thus, DM follows the strategy of balanced news reporting by granting different voices equal weight and juxtaposing them. We would call this a constructivist approach to journalism.

Finally, DWM shares similarities with DM, in that alternative viewpoints are not a priori rejected as a legitimate source. However, the alternative news outlet makes a clear professional choice to enforce counter-hegemonic voices. As their mission statement clarifies, DWM considers neutrality to be impossible and strives for journalistic awareness of their own subjectivity. Nevertheless, the objectivity ideal is not obsolete for alternative journalism, as some alternative media scholars seem to suggest (e.g. Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Kenix, 2011). The website argues that through revealing their subjective positioning to their readership, reporting may still be objective (DWM, 2010).

Following a critical constructivist line of reasoning, the alternative outlet assumes that the dominant voice in any debate will still be dominant, even if all sides of a discussion are heard. Therefore, weaker voices should receive reinforcement. Thus, whereas DS weighs arguments to reveal the most verifiable ones as objective and DM strives for an internal balance of voices, DWM rejects strategies of neutrality and internal balance, instead striving for objectivity through transparency and external balance between different news sources.

In sum, we argue that the protest paradigm is inherent to the logic of mainstream media and might be avoided by scrutinising and adjusting taken-for-granted journalistic routines. It should nevertheless be noted that different levels in the hierarchy of influences cannot be seen as strictly separate categories. All levels are interconnected and 'operate simultaneously at different levels of strength in any shaping of media content' (Reese, 2001: 179). It is not within the scope of this article to measure whether certain levels are more decisive in shaping content, but it remains necessary to recognise the potential influence of individual journalistic choices, organisational and ideological leverage, and extra-medial determinants. Our preliminary model of different journalistic paradigms might offer direction for future enquiries of coverage both of actions challenging the status quo and of science communications. Research may also explore the applicability of this model to other types of content, and try to refine these initial suggestions. Similarly, we feel that broader research into the ties between the hierarchy of influences and the occurrence of the protest paradigm might prove a fruitful avenue for future research. Finally, we suggest that future research into protest coverage and protest paradigm mechanisms further explores journalistic routines (particularly the objectivity norm) in relation to this structurally negative description bias.

This contribution sought to understand how the long-established protest paradigm influenced media representations of a contemporary protest controversy and tried to take a different explanatory route to this form of newsmaking. The analysis suggests that, in essence, the protest paradigm is as much a product of professional culture as of organisational, social-institutional and ideological influences. Hence, criticism of the presence of protest paradigm mechanisms in reporting should not be interpreted as separate from



a broader critique of prevailing journalistic formats and practices. Quite to the contrary, our analysis seems to suggest that these formats and practices sustain the organisational, social-institutional and ideological influences, and the protest paradigm in general.

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