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# Do targets react and third parties comment? Responsiveness and scope expansion in television news items of protest

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates reactions of political targets (responsiveness) and third parties (scope expansion) in news reports of protest events. It asks whether targets and third parties react to protest in the media, examines how they react, and explores when they are more likely to react. To date, scholars have primarily studied media selection and description of protest. This study explicitly puts reaction in news items of protest center stage. Media-independent data on protest events (police archives from Brussels) are combined with a content analysis of the resulting news reports (Belgian Television;  $N = 564$ ) to test hypotheses drawn from journalism and protest impact literature. Results show that protester voices dominate protest reports and that reactions of targets are more prominent and negative than those of third parties. Demonstrations which are large, reactive, and which have a domestic and political target that is specifically addressed, are more likely to include target reactions. Disruptive demonstrations trigger negative third-party reactions, whereas large demonstrations trigger positive third-party reactions. Together, these findings shed light on the role that media play in the process from protest action to protest outcome.

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## Introduction

Protest actions are communicative acts that seek to trigger reactions (Etzioni, 1970; Lipsky, 1968). Ultimately, protest actions are aimed at a target: an actor or institution responsible for, or capable of dealing with, the situation that the protesters want to address. By engaging in unconventional political action, protest groups intend to challenge and impress their target in exchange for responsiveness (Rucht, 2004). Simultaneously, however, protesters need to appeal to other actors – here labeled ‘third parties.’<sup>1</sup> As protest groups are relatively powerless and therefore easily ignored by the target, they need to convince other, preferably more influential groups, to enter the conflict (Gamson, 2004). By expanding the scope of conflict and getting third parties on their side protesters can increase pressure on the target, which might shift the power balance to their advantage.

In this process of activating targets and third parties, mass media play a crucial role (della Porta & Diani, 1999). According to Koopmans (2004), it is in the media arena that nowadays most of the interaction between protesters, targets, and third parties takes place. By generating media attention, protesters are able to signal their grievances to third parties and targets (Kollman, 1998), who in turn, primarily react to protest if and as mediated by journalists. Similarly, by closely following the (re)actions

of targets and third parties in the media arena, protesters can learn about political opportunities and constraints, which might shape their future strategies (McAdam, 1983).

The premise of this study is that responses of targets and third parties in the media are relevant discursive outcomes of protest activities (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Take for instance the example of demonstrating taxi drivers in Brussels in 2004, demanding smoother licensing procedures and fairer taxation.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of taxis, slowly driving and sounding their horns in the streets of Brussels made the news. In the newscast, the secretary of transport responded positively towards their demands: he announced that the procedure indeed should be made more transparent and the training period of drivers shorter in order for the profession to become more attractive. Or take the example of protest actions by undocumented migrants and refugees. Their actions in Belgium in 2007 attracted the media spotlight and were endorsed, on camera, by MPs of the Green Party and the unions, who also pressured the government to draft clearer regularization policies.<sup>3</sup> Both of these examples show how positive reactions in the media signal that the claims of the protesters are relevant. They increase the standing of the protesters and point towards recognition (Gamson, 1990, p. 31). Negative reactions only at first sight are worst-case scenarios (Koopmans, 2004). Although experiments show that a negative slant in protest items increases criticism towards protesters (McLeod & Detenber, 1999), negative reactions also push a conflict forward. They inject protest stories with newsworthiness, which might be essential for the further diffusion of the story in the media arena (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). No reaction, on the other hand, points to indifference and irrelevance. If nobody reacts, contestation is likely to peter out quickly and the conflict is stillborn (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

In sum, given that provoking reactions is key for protest, and given that the media arena is the major forum where protesters, targets, and third parties interact (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002), this paper investigates the reactions to protest by targets ('responsiveness') and third parties ('scope expansion') in the media arena. Three research questions are set out to be answered: first, to what extent do targets and third parties react in news coverage of protest? Second, how do they react? And third, when are they more likely to react? The structure of the article is as follows. In a first section, I present a preliminary theory on why targets and third parties would be interested to respond to protest in the news. I explore the motivations of targets and third parties in terms of whether and how they react in the media arena, and stress the role played by journalists in this process. Next, I shed light on the presence of targets and third parties in protest news items. I forward an argument for why I expect targets to respond more frequently and more negatively compared to third parties. The final theoretical section deals with the conditions under which reactions are more likely. Here, I rely both on protest impact and journalism literature. After presenting data, methods, and results, I conclude by highlighting the role that media attention in general, and reactions in particular, play in the process from protest action to protest outcome.

### **Stakes in protest news construction**

Why would targets and third parties react to protest in the media arena? In this section, I sketch out the stakes that targets, third parties, and journalists have in the process of protest news construction. The stakes of these actors can only be understood if one acknowledges the centrality of the mass media in contemporary politics (Strömbäck, 2008). With overall decreasing membership of political parties and civil society organizations, increasingly volatile citizens now primarily get their political information via mass media (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). As a consequence, in the media, all kinds of actors compete for attention and struggle over meaning, believing that winning (favorable) media attention can increase their power in the political arena. This competition in and over the news can best be seen as part of a larger contest over political control (Wolfsfeld, 1997). In this light, media attention can be perceived as threatening political control from a target's perspective, and can offer opportunities to get into control, or restore control, for third parties.

From the perspective of targets, protest events are very specific forms of blame communication. Blame attribution is a crucial component of social movement framing tasks (Benford & Snow, 2000): besides offering a diagnosis (what is the problem? e.g. severe taxation and licensing procedures for taxi drivers), protest actions also tend to signal a prognosis (what needs to be done? e.g. cut taxes, make procedures more transparent), and both elements have a blame component (who is responsible for creating and solving the problem? e.g. the secretary of transport is responsible, but fails to act). Clearly, protest actions assign blame to the target of their action. McGraw (1991) holds that the success and survival of modern politicians strongly depends on their ability to deal with blame (for a similar argument see Weaver, 1986). A crucial strategy for them to deal with blame assignments would lie in giving statements to the media (McGraw, 1990). Although targets might be eager to avoid association with blame-communicating media coverage, and hence would prefer to ignore protest signals, Wolfsfeld and Sheaffer (2006, p. 337) argue that targets often cannot 'afford to leave the playing field to their opponents.'

From the perspective of third parties, it is relevant to consider demonstrations as 'issue-publics' or highly committed issue-specific voting blocs (Popkin, 1991). This makes third parties with congruent stances eager to endorse protest events. By publicly reacting to protest, third parties can position themselves, can win the sympathy of the protesters and a broader audience (in the form of, for instance votes, memberships, or donations) and can add momentum to a topic that is in their interest. Put differently, by reacting in the news, they seek to gain control and leverage over the political situation. Similarly, third parties with opposing stances vis-à-vis the demonstrators can intervene in the media arena to counter the protest claims and to restore political control.

Finally, crucial to the construction of a protest news item is the role played by journalists. Journalists are the gatekeepers in this entire process (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Their role is double: on the one hand, they receive reactions from targets and third parties, in the form of phone calls or press statements, and decide whether to incorporate these reactions in their reporting or not. On the other hand, they actively seek for such reactions, as incorporating them is an essential part of their profession. Gathering reactions strengthens their conviction that they are right in deciding to cover the protest event. The very fact that others react signifies the relevance of the story. Also, reactions inject the story with conflict, which allows for the construction of more appealing news reports (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Finally, a central aspect of professional journalism is that news coverage needs to be balanced (De Swert, 2011; Entman, 2007). Journalists to this end need reactions to be able to create a voice-counter-voice structure (Niven, 2005). Although news items are a coproduction between journalists and their sources, and their relationship is one of mutual dependency, in the end, it is the journalist who decides whether and how to cover an event, and which voices to include (Tresh, 2009). Yet their maneuvering space is severely limited: not only by whether or not certain sources want to deliver a quote, or by whether or not the journalist has sufficient resources to reach a source (time, access, etc.), but also by criteria of newsworthiness and mass media's working routines, which steer journalists in their search for quotes and interfere in their craft of constructing news stories (Reich, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). In the next theoretical section, I draw upon such theories to understand the presence of sources in protest news.

### Sources in protest coverage

What can be expected about the presence of target, third party, and protester sources in protest coverage? Interestingly, extant literature is not on the same page about this issue. Literature on the protest paradigm holds that protest reports are characterized by an implicit template that tends to trivialize, marginalize, and demonize protesters (McLeod & Hertog, 1992, 1998; Weaver & Scacco, 2012). One specific characteristic of the paradigm deals with its reliance on official sources. Officials add prestige to a story and maintain the illusion of objectivity. Moreover, as journalists need to operate within limited time and budget constraints, they tend to opt for sources with whom they interact on a routine basis

and who are well-known to the public (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). McLeod and Hertog (1998, p. 314) therefore argue that protest coverage is 'heavily laden with official sources'.

Literature on news initiation, in contrast, contends that event-driven news – such as protest coverage – is less likely to be shaped and controlled by official sources (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Protest is regarded as one of the few avenues by which movements can catch elites off guard. As a consequence, protester sources would dominate protest coverage. From a news routine perspective, this interpretation yields support as well: when journalists decide to cover a demonstration, they go to the site of action and find protester sources easily accessible and available, which is not necessarily the case for targets and third parties (Schoemaker & Reese, 1996). Moreover, quoting protesters fits the trend in contemporary journalism of increasing the focus on the ordinary person, the proverbial 'man in the street' (Neveu, 2002).

Little empirical evidence (on a non-case study basis) deals with sourcing patterns in protest coverage. Boyle, McCluskey, Devanathan, Stein, and McLeod (2004), however, found that targets are less frequently present than protester sources in local newspaper stories of protest between 1960 and 1999. Also McCluskey, Stein, Boyle, and McLeod (2009) found that targets were quoted less than protesters in US newspaper coverage. Comparing sourcing patterns of advocacy groups across protest and non-protest television news items, Wouters (2015a) found advocacy group voices to be more dominant in protest reports. In sum, scant empirical evidence points to protester dominance in protest reports.

Far less is known about the presence of third parties in protest reports. In selecting sources, however, media are known to follow the trail of political power (van Dalen, 2012). Therefore, one can expect political targets to be more prominent than third parties in news reports of protest. Targets of political protest are often politicians with executive power (e.g. the secretary of mobility). As they make the decisions and are the most influential, their quotes are highly newsworthy from a news value perspective and therefore more likely to make it into the news (Hopmann, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2011; Walgrave & De Swert, 2005). Also the fact that target reactions inject news items with conflict, and that target statements are the most direct indication of voice-counter-voice coverage, add to the expectation that target reactions will dominate third-party reactions in protest coverage (De Swert, 2011; Tresh, 2009).

Finally, targets and third parties are likely to react differently in news coverage of protest. Both actors play a very different role in the process of activation that protesters try to set in motion when staging protest (Lipsky, 1968). Because targets are under attack when confronted with the blame communicated via protest, their reactions can be expected to be more frequently negative. Third parties, on the other hand, can be expected to react in more frequently positive ways. As said, the major incentive for a third party to go public is to add weight to an issue that is of their concern, to make it more salient in the public sphere, and perhaps, to win sympathy of the protesters and the audience at home (della Porta & Diani, 1999). Third parties with opposing stances might prefer to ignore the protest, hoping that momentum will pass quickly. In all, this synthesis leads to three hypotheses on sourcing patterns in protest reports:

H1: Protester sources are more frequently present than political target and third party sources in news items of protest.

H2: Political target sources are more frequently present than third party sources in news items of protest.

H3: Political target sources in news items of protest react more frequently in negative ways, whereas third party sources react more frequently in positive ways.

## Predicting responsiveness

Besides whether and how targets and third parties react, this study also investigates when they are more likely to react. This section focuses on political targets and the conditions under which they are more likely to react in news items of protest events.<sup>4</sup> The reactions of targets in protest news can be considered as a function of features of the protest signal, features of the receiving target, and features of the context in which the signal is sent. It should be noted that these aspects do not only influence the

target and its likelihood to react, but also the news value of the protest event, and hence how journalists will deal with the story. Therefore, both literatures on the impact of protest and on the mechanisms of news production, aid our understanding of target reactions in the news.

First, *event characteristics* might affect the perceptions and behavior of targets and journalists. Protest events are communicative acts, and features of the protest events might color the signal. A central question in the protest impact literature deals with whether protest power resides in numbers, disruptiveness, or organization (Andrews, 2001; McAdam & Su, 2002). Protest that succeeds to mobilize large numbers fits the logic of representative democracy. If many people show up, targets that are eager to get re-elected are inclined to be responsive, as large numbers communicate likely success (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). For journalists as well, large demonstrations are more likely to fall into the sphere of legitimate controversy, a sphere that incites balanced coverage (Hallin, 1986). Therefore, the confluence of target and journalistic mechanisms leads to the expectation that high numbers will increase responsiveness.

The impact of disruption is of a different nature. Protest impact studies have found disruptiveness to be positively related with movement success, albeit under specific circumstances (Cress & Snow, 2000; Piven & Cloward, 1993). The underlying mechanism would be that disruptive protest presents a threat to elites, and as such incites them to react. What can we expect about reactions in the media arena to disruptive protest? According to Wolfsfeld (1997) disruption leads to the negative portrayal of protesters (see also Trevor Thrall, 2006). If coverage runs against protesters, it can be expected that targets are eager to react. They are likely to judge reacting as relatively safe, as the claims of the protesters can easily be dismissed on grounds of their inappropriate behavior. However, it might be that journalists are less interested in using or seeking reactions when protest is disruptive: in cases of disruptive action journalists are likely to focus on the incidental details of the event and do not need target reactions to construct an appealing news story (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001; Wouters, 2015b).

Finally, in line with the resource mobilization approach (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), organizational strength might also matter for triggering reactions. The underlying mechanism would be that resource-rich organizations can enroll a more diverse strategy, with strong leadership and centralized spokespersons. As such they would be able to develop more routine access which would increase their ability to trigger target reactions (Andrews, 2001). Gamson (1990), for instance, found organizations that are centralized and bureaucratized to be more successful. In Belgium, labor unions are textbook examples of strong, professionalized organizations. Moreover, Belgium is a neo-corporatist country and unions have gained insider positions in the Belgian political machinery (Martens, Van Gyes, & Van der Hallen, 2002). From this perspective, targets under pressure from unions might be more likely to react. However, given that unions are more likely to have a large communication staff, that can draft extended press statements and train leaders to become credible spokespersons, it might be that the information subsidies they provide (Gandy, 1982) suffice to fill news slots, leaving journalists with the impression that there is no need (and news item time) to incorporate reactions of other actors. Taken together, based on both expectations raised by protest impact and news production literature, three hypotheses on responsiveness and event characteristics can be formulated. Interestingly, only in the case of 'numbers' both literatures tend to correspond:

H4: News items of protest events that are larger are more likely to include a reaction of a political target compared to news items of protest events that are smaller.

H5: News items of protest events that are disruptive are more likely to include a reaction of a political target compared to news items of protest events that are not disruptive.

H6: News items of protest events that are staged by unions are more likely to include a reaction of a political target compared to news items of protest events that are not staged by unions.

*Target characteristics* might also affect responsiveness. First, protests can to different degrees address a target specifically or not. The more specifically the target is addressed, such as in the movement's framing tasks (Snow, Burke Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986), the higher the odds of responsiveness.



Cress and Snow (2000), for instance, find that a more coherent articulation of culpable and responsible agents is associated with positive outcome attainment. The underlying mechanism would be that specific articulation produces a clear signal that is easier to categorize and to follow-up on by the receiver (Fassiotta & Soule, 2015). Moreover, if a protest specifically addresses a political target, it scores highly on the news values of personalization and elite status (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). As a consequence, the resulting news report is more likely to be personalized and elite-focused as well, and thus more likely to include the target (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

Second, the target's scope of competence is expected to affect responsiveness as well. Specifically, protest events aimed at domestic institutions are expected to elicit more frequent responsiveness compared to events aimed at foreign (embassies) or international (European) institutions. The underlying mechanism is that both from the target's perspective and from the journalists' watchdog perspective, what is at stake in terms of public accountability on the domestic level is far higher than what is at stake at the European and foreign levels (Follesdal & Hix, 2006). This is further illustrated with European elections clearly being second-order elections, with less campaign intensity and less being at stake (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). In short, foreign and international targets can take the risk of non-reaction and can leave the media playing field open, as they are less likely to be held accountable for their actions in the voting booths (de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006). From the journalist's perspective, similarly, ties between domestic journalists and domestic political targets are more likely to be close. Because of their previous interactions, the approachability of domestic targets by journalists is higher. Together with a higher news value of domestic targets, these latter are more likely to be selected by journalists and included in protest news reports (Niven, 2005). Together, two hypotheses based on target characteristics can be put forward, and in both cases, expectations from protest impact and news production literatures clearly point in the same direction:

H7: News items of protest events that specifically address a target are more likely to include reactions of political targets compared to news items of protest events that do not specifically address a target.

H8: News items of protest events that target domestic institutions are more likely to include a reaction of a political target compared to news items of protest events that target foreign or international institutions.

The final predictor is of a more contextual nature. Specifically, the stage of the policy-making process in which the protest occurs should be taken into account. The argument is that reactive protests are more likely to trigger responsiveness in the media arena compared to proactive protests. According to Kriesi (1995), reactivity has to do with the prevention of already politicized disadvantages. Proactivity, on the other hand, deals with the introduction of new advantages that need to become politicized. In concrete terms, reactive protest is staged at the end of the policy-making process against a measure that is in the pipeline, just about to be implemented, or just implemented; proactive protests try to put (new) issues on the agenda. Higher responsiveness at the end of the policy-making process is expected because of accountability mechanisms (Bühlmann & Kriesi, 2013). Representative democracy requires that policy-makers explain and justify their decisions. Logically, this pressure to render accountability is higher for real measures that are (about to be) implemented and impact lives, rather than for (new) ideas that try to gain access to the political agenda. Similarly, journalists as a fourth estate will feel more strongly about playing their watchdog role in cases of reactive protest: as policies change, journalists are extra attentive to make sure that different sides of the conflict can have their say (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990). Therefore, the final hypothesis is:

H9: News items of protest events that are reactive are more likely to include a reaction of a political target compared to news items of protest events that are not reactive.

## Data and methods

Two data sources are combined to test the above hypotheses. Data-set one contains media-independent information on protest events and is gathered from police archives. All protest events that took place in the police district 'Brussel-Hoofdstad-Elsene' (2003–2010) were retrieved from a paper archive and

digitalized ( $N = 4582$ ). The police reports contained standardized fields with information on the number of protesters, whether disruption occurred (material damage, people wounded, arrests, blockage of traffic), what the main claim and who the target was, and whether a delegation of protesters wanted to be received by the target. The asset of using police data is that it is unfiltered by mass media and much more systematically complete (Rucht, Koopmans, & Neidhardt, 1998). For more information about the police archive data-set, see Wouters (2013).

Data-set two contains coded television news data of the protest events that succeeded to make it onto the 7 o'clock flagship newscasts of the two most important television stations in Belgium. In total, 428 unique protest events were picked up by television, which resulted in 564 protest news reports (as some appeared on both stations). Coding of the protest reports was done by the author (51% of all protest reports) and three trained MA students (who coded about 90 protest reports each). After initial coder training sessions, inter-coder reliability tests were performed on a sample of 20 protest reports and produced satisfactory results (see specific Krippendorff  $\alpha$  values below). A correlation matrix and basic descriptives of dependent and independent variables can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

### **Dependent variables**

In order to compute the dependent variables (responsiveness and scope expansion), we coded every actor in a news report that was directly quoted or to whom a statement was attributed (name, specific function, whether the actor was quoted or not). The statement every actor gave was literally transcribed. Next, an inductive coding of these statements led to a typology of 10 non-mutually exclusive variables where each got attributed a positive, negative, or neutral tone. Each statement was assigned one or more of the elements I will describe below. Examples of the statement and elements are given in Appendix 3. Statements that contained elements of substantial disagreement ( $\alpha = .901$ ), formal disagreement ( $\alpha = .953$ ), stated that no budget was available ( $\alpha = .897$ ), that the demand was others' competence/one had other priorities ( $\alpha = .766$ ), or that one would stick to an earlier measure ( $\alpha = .821$ ) received a negative valence. Elements in statements that were considered neutral referred to the political process and the need for negotiations ( $\alpha = .718$ ). Positive statement elements referred to substantial agreement ( $\alpha = .799$ ), formal agreement ( $\alpha = .743$ ), the availability of budget ( $\alpha = .827$ ), or the expression of sympathy and understanding ( $\alpha = .710$ ). In order to arrive at a single tone for the statement of an actor in a report (which could combine negative, positive, and neutral elements), negative elements received priority over neutral ones, which in turn received priority over positive ones.<sup>5</sup>

The responsiveness variable is a dummy variable that has a value of 1 if the political target reacted in the news report ( $\alpha = .834$ ). The scope expansion variable is a dummy variable that has a value of 1 if at least one third party reacted ( $\alpha = .607$ ).<sup>6</sup> Civil society groups, experts, and official actors like party leaders, parliamentarians, and spokespersons of official institutions were considered third parties on the condition that they were not the political target of the protest event. In a final step, the responsiveness and scope expansion variables were combined with the tone of the statement elements and aggregated to arrive at separate responsiveness and scope expansion variables with a positive, negative, or neutral tone on the protest report level.<sup>7</sup>

### **Independent variables**

All but one independent variable was retrieved from the police archive data-set. Descriptive statistics can be found in the appendix. Demonstration size is the effective amount of participants at the demonstration as counted by the police. The variable is log-transformed because of a negatively skewed distribution. Disruption is a dummy variable that turns 1 in case of arrests, violence (property damage, people wounded) or blockage of traffic. Union is a dummy variable that turns 1 if the protest was staged by a union. Specific Target is a dummy variable that turns 1 if the protest group requested for a delegation to be received by the target. It is a proxy variable for how specifically the target was addressed by the event. Domestic Target is a dummy variable that turns 1 if the target was a domestic



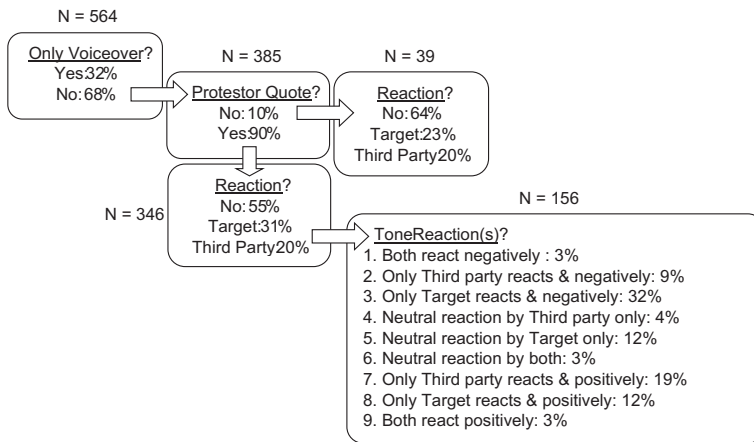


Figure 1. Sourcing patterns in protest news reports.

political institution. Reactive Protest is a dummy variable ( $\alpha = .776$ ) that was coded 1 if the protest was staged against a measure that was in the pipeline or just (about to be) implemented. In order to construct the reactive protest variable, the description of the protest event in the police archive data-set and the summary of the news item in the media data-set was recoded. If at least one of these two sources referred to the protest as staged against (future) measure implementation, the protest was considered reactive. Although this is a suboptimal measure of the reactivity of protest – it in part relies on transcribed information from the news report – reactivity was coded separately from coding the dependent variables and a simple cross tabulation reveals a far from perfect match between reactivity and responsiveness.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is safe to assume that both concepts are independent.

## Results

Figure 1 presents sourcing patterns in protest coverage. This goes from ‘news items narrates with only a voiceover rather than direct protester quotation’ to ‘quotation in combination with reactions of targets and third parties.’

Of all protest reports, about one-third (32%) were completely narrated by a voiceover, not giving any actor direct quotation. 90% of the items with direct quotation featured at least one direct protester quote. If protesters were quoted, about half of the time (45%) a target or a third party was also part of the report. This evidence clearly corroborates hypothesis 1: protesters (present in 61.3% of all protest reports) dominate protest reports, not targets (22.5%;  $t(1126) = 14.36, p = .000$ ) or third parties (14.4%;  $t(1126) = 18.58, p = .000$ ). Hypothesis 2 gets support as well: targets are more frequently part of protest news items than third parties ( $t(1126) = 3.55, p = .000$ ).

The final stage of Figure 1 adds tone to the reactions of targets and third parties. What first strikes the eye is that, most of the time, reactions come either from targets or third parties. Media attention is a zero sum game and rarely both targets and third parties react (9%). Another pattern is apparent as well: targets react most frequently in negative terms, whereas third parties react foremost in positive terms. Hypothesis 3 hence can be maintained: 54% of all protest reports with any reaction had a target reacting negatively, whereas only one-fourth (27%) of target reactions were positive ( $t(252) = 4.51, p = .000$ ). Third parties, in contrast, reacted twice as frequently positively (60%) compared to negatively (31%) ( $t(160) = 3.94, p = .000$ ).

Table 1 presents a more substantial view on reactions of targets and third parties in protest reports. The unit of analysis here is the statement of an individual actor. Each statement could contain several elements, presented in the rows of Table 1. Rows 1–4 present positive elements and row 6–10 negative ones; row 5 presents neutral elements. Results show that reactions of third parties were most frequently positive: they communicate agreement with the demonstrators (66%), agreement with

**Table 1.** Typology of statement elements by political targets and third parties in reaction to protest.

Statement element	Political target		Third party	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
1. Substantial agreement with diagnosis and/or solution	40	23.5	83	65.9
2. Agreement with protest as form of expression	–	–	15	11.9
3. Reference to (some) budgetary maneuvering space	20	11.8	–	–
4. Shows sympathy and understanding in non-substantial statement	45	26.5	10	7.9
5. Refers to political process or need of compromise	49	28.8	10	7.9
6. Substantial disagreement with diagnosis and/or solution	37	21.8	13	10.3
7. Reference to previous or new proposal not in line with protest	20	11.8	3	2.4
8. Reference to no budgetary maneuvering space	10	5.9	–	–
9. Reference to other priorities or other responsibility	13	7.6	2	1.6
10. Disagreement with protest as form of expression	7	4.1	14	11.1
Total <i>N</i>	170	126		

Note: Statement elements are not mutually exclusive; percentages exceed 100%.

the form of claims making (12%), or express sympathy and understanding (8%). Third parties rarely reacted negatively.

Statements of political targets were more evenly distributed across the positive–negative spectrum and most often contained neutral elements, that is, references to compromise and negotiations (29%). If political targets disagreed with the protesters, two types of statement elements dominated: substantial disagreement (22%) and reference to previous policy implementations (12%). When protester demands could be met, politicians did refer quite frequently to budgetary maneuvering space (12%). The most common positive reaction, however, was a simple but vague statement that contained elements of understanding and sympathy (27%). Interestingly, political targets far more frequently combined different account elements in their statements – positive as well as negative ones – which made their answers less univocal than those of third parties. For instance, political targets first expressed sympathy and understanding, but then continued by saying that it is not their responsibility, or that there is no budget.

Table 2, finally, presents six logistic regressions predicting reactions of targets and third parties in protest reports. Hypotheses 4 to 9 are tested in model 1, which deals with reactions of political targets (responsiveness). Models 2 and 3 incorporate the tone of the reactions, and show results for positive and negative responsiveness; models 4–6 deal with scope expansion. Models that test for the tone of reactions have a lower total *N* as they filter on protest items with target or third-party reactions.

Hypothesis 4 expected news items of larger protest events to be more likely to include a reaction of the target. Results in model 1 support hypothesis 4. When demonstration size increases, the odds of a target reaction in the news report increases as well. Predicted probabilities show that demonstrations with more than 1000 participants have a 29% chance of triggering responsiveness. Demonstrations with less than 100 participants have a chance of about 17%. Demonstration size matters for scope expansion as well. Results in Model 4 indicate that size is the only significant predictor of whether a third party reacts or not. Moreover, results in model 5 and 6 indicate that if protests are large and a third party reacts, odds of negative reactions decrease and of positive reactions increase.

Hypothesis 5 held that targets would be eager to react to disruptive protest. Whereas protest impact literature provides substantial evidence for the impact of disruption, it was less clear whether disruption would also be able to make targets react in the media arena. Results show that disruption has no significant impact on whether targets react or not (Model 1;  $B = .072$ ,  $p = .794$ ). Hypothesis 5 thus needs to be rejected. Importantly, if targets do react to disruptive protest, their reactions are less likely to be positive (Model 3;  $B = -1.531$ ,  $p = .004$ ). Keeping all other variables at their means, predicted probabilities show that chances of positive target reactions decline from 59 (no disruption) to 24% (disruption). A similar pattern can be observed for third-party reactions. If protest is disruptive, chances of negative third-party comments sharply rise (Model 5), from 16 (peaceful protest) to 65% (disruptive protest). In sum, disruption does not seem to explain whether targets or third parties react, but it appears instructive as to how they react.

**Table 2.** Predicting responsiveness and scope expansion in protest news reports.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Responsiveness B (SE)	Sig.	Negative responsiveness B (SE)	Sig.	Positive responsiveness B (SE)	Sig.	Scope expansion B (SE)	Sig.	Negative scope expansion B (SE)	Sig.	Positive scope expansion B (SE)	Sig.
Constant	-.2789 (.386)	***	-1.027 (.689)		.306 (.684)		-2.97 (.431)	***	.303 (.928)		-1.204 (1.027)	
<i>Protest characteristics</i>												
Demonstration size	.127 (.056)	*	.127 (.098)		-.023 (.098)		.241 (.063)	***	-.383 (.15)	*	.596 (.189)	**
Disruption	.072 (.277)		.743 (.512)		-1.531 (.532)	**	.197 (.307)		2.267 (.771)	**	-2.044 (.83)	**
Union	-.436 (.258)		-.288 (.46)		-.198 (.459)		-.590 (.343)		3.001 (.905)	***	-3.559 (.998)	***
<i>Target characteristics</i>												
Specific Target	.76 (.253)	**	-.459 (.402)		-.031 (.406)		-.136 (.368)		-1.354 (.935)		.88 (.928)	
Domestic Target	.923 (.241)	***	.585 (.441)		.271 (.443)		-.271 (.276)		.226 (.712)		-.486 (.731)	
<i>Policy stage</i>												
Reactive Protest	.603 (.241)	*	.25 (.434)		.282 (.439)		-.318 (.339)		.942 (.906)		-.844 (.972)	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	13.5%		9.0%		10.3%		7.4%		40.8%		46.7%	
N	564		126		126		564		80		80	

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Hypothesis 6 expected union protests to trigger responsiveness more frequently. Again, the protest impact literature supported this statement, whereas the expectation from a journalistic perspective was somewhat more dubious. Interestingly, union protest is associated with less target reactions, although the result is only very marginally significant (Model 1;  $B = -.436$ ,  $p = .091$ ). Similarly as with the findings on disruption, expectations of organizational strength, and protest impact thus do not seem to hold track in the media arena. Union protests get less frequent responses of third parties (again marginally significant; Model 4;  $B = -.590$ ,  $p = .086$ ) and if third parties react to unions, such reactions are more likely to run against them (Model 5;  $B = 3.001$ ,  $p = .001$ ). If unions stage a protest and third parties react, chances of negative reactions rise from 15 (non-union protest) to 78% (union protest). This strong substantial effect most likely can be explained by the presence of strong employer organizations in Belgium.

Hypotheses 7 and 8 dealt with target characteristics. Results show that features of the target only influence the reaction of the target, not of third parties, which makes sense. If a target is specifically addressed, responsiveness becomes more likely, confirming hypothesis 7 (Model 1;  $B = .760$ ,  $p = .003$ ), with predicted probabilities rising from 18 to 32%. Hypothesis 8 expected domestic targets to be more responsive. Again, results confirm hypothesis 8 (Model 1;  $B = .923$ ,  $p = .000$ ) as well. In fact, whether a target is domestic or not is the strongest predictor of responsiveness, explaining 7% of total variance.

Hypothesis 9, finally, presumed that if protest is reactive, political targets would be more inclined to go public and react. This hypothesis gets confirmed as well (Model 1;  $B = .603$ ,  $p = .012$ ). If protest tackles decisions that are about to be, or only just, implemented, political targets are more likely to be incorporated in the news. Keeping all other variables at their means, predicted probabilities show that when protest is reactive, chances of responsiveness rise 11%, to a level of 28%. It appears therefore that the place of protest in the policy-making cycle matters on top of protest and target characteristics.

## Conclusion and discussion

This paper investigated reactions of targets and third parties in news items of protest, considering reactions as relevant discursive outcomes of protest. Doing so, this paper aimed to improve understanding of how mass media intervene in the process from protest action to protest outcome. Theoretically, reactions in protest news were considered to be a function of protest, target and context characteristics. These features were expected not only to motivate targets and third parties seeking political control to react (or not), but, also to impact the decisions that journalists make, and their intentions to seek and incorporate reactions (or not). In sum, this paper expected reactions in the news to be the result of an interplay between mechanisms associated with protest impact and news production theories.

Contrary to expectations raised by the protest paradigm, but in line with literature on event-driven news, protester voices clearly dominate protest reports. They are more prominently present than targets and third parties in protest news, meaning that protesters are granted some standing in the news when they mobilize. However, findings also indicate that protesters only in about 60% of all protest items have a direct voice. Even if movements mobilize, 'standing' in the media arena remains relatively slim. Moreover, only in about half of the items that directly quote protesters, political targets or third parties step into the debate as well. This shows that protesters in the media arena are relatively frequently depicted as isolated, without immediate endorsements or rejections of their claims by significant others. In line with expectations from news value theory, reactions of political targets are more newsworthy, and were therefore incorporated more frequently in protest news. Reactions of targets also were more frequently negative compared to those of third parties. These results make sense given the different role both types of actors play: targets react to protest to manage (or counter) blame, third parties endorse protesters to add weight to an issue that is of their concern.

The main thrust of this study sought to explore under what circumstances political targets and third parties are more likely to react in news items of protest. Could any recurring patterns be established? Results showed that only when expectations of protest impact theory and news production theory corresponded, significant relationships were found. So, larger crowds are more likely to trigger target and third-party

reactions because they increase newsworthiness and hence spur journalists to incorporate target reactions; because they more strongly pressure targets interested in re-election to react; and because large crowds are more interesting (because more numerous) for third parties seeking political control.

With regard to features of the target, results show that domestic political targets and targets that are more specifically addressed, are more likely to react. Again, the confluence of protest impact and news production mechanisms explains these findings. Domestic targets feel a stronger pressure to be responsive, their reactions are more likely to be newsworthy, and journalists are more likely to have routine access to them. Similarly, protest actions that more specifically address a target send a clear and personalized signal, which leads journalists to personalize the story and spurs targets to react. Finally, one contextual factor clearly mattered as well: reactive protest actions more frequently provoke target reactions. If social problems are already the subject of institutional political work, politics more easily gets incorporated in protest items. This leads to a paradox: although movements stage protest because they are ignored by elites, elites are more likely to react when they are already paying attention to the issue that is of concern to the protesters.

Finally, expectations derived from protest impact theory on disruption and organizational strength did not hold track in the media arena. Disruptive protest had no influence on whether targets or third parties react. Instead, disruption influenced the tone of reactions, with more negative reactions towards disruptive protest. Strong organizations, finally, were less likely reacted to (although this result was only marginally significant). Again, this protest feature influenced the tone of reactions, with strong organizations getting more negative reactions in the media arena. In both cases, it is the role played by journalists that can help to explain why the findings in the media arena diverge from typical findings in protest impact studies. Specifically, disruptive demonstrations cause journalists to focus on disruption, and strong organization can easily feed journalists with content. Both processes make journalists less eager to incorporate target or third-party reactions to make interesting news items. These findings cautiously allow us to conclude that although constructing protest news is a co-production between protesters, targets, third parties, and journalists, it is especially the journalist who, in the end, decides how to cover the story and which reactions to include.

That said, this study has only made a beginning with regard to studying reactions to protest in the news. Its analysis is based on a wide range of protest events on a diverse set of issues in a single country. Future studies could focus on specific protest cycles, and could incorporate issue information or data on the public mood to more specifically predict when, and especially how, targets and third parties react to protest in the news. The rise of social media and especially twitter is also relevant in this respect. These social media platforms without doubt have made it easier for targets and third parties to quickly react to protest, circumventing journalists. For journalists, these platforms have facilitated quickly tracing reactions. Future research could investigate whether and how the quick diffusion of these platforms has affected the presence of reactions in protest news. Testing whether the findings reported in this study hold in other political and media contexts would also be worthwhile. Moreover, more in-depth qualitative research is needed to clarify the mechanisms underlying the decision-making processes that lead journalists to include target and third-party reactions. Additionally, experimental research could assess the effects that different sourcing patterns in protest reports have on the perception of protest. If media coverage is a crucial mediator between protest activity and protest outcome, the question of how protest is presented and who (as well as how, when and with what effect) reacts to protest in the news, should be of interest to scholars studying the factors that cripple or amplify protest power.

## Notes

1. The term 'third parties' as used and operationalized in this article aligns with the concept of 'third parties' as used by Lipsky (1968, pp. 1144–1146); Della Porta and Diani (1999, p. 169) and Rucht (2004, pp. 199–200) amongst others. In this article, third parties are operationalized as specific types of influential non-targets, like experts, parliamentarians, or civil society organizations.
2. This demonstration took place on the 25 October 2004. About 500 taxi drivers participated and the action was covered both by the public and commercial television stations.

3. This demonstration took place on the 19 May 2007. About 2000 protesters were present.
4. No hypotheses are developed about the reactions of third parties, nor about the tone of reactions. These aspects will be treated inductively and explorative in the empirical section.
5. So, if a source stated something negative and neutral about the protest in the news item, the statement was coded as negative. If a source said something neutral and positive, the statement was coded as neutral. Only if a source said something positive, and nothing neutral or negative, the statement was coded as positive.
6. Although this Krippendorff Alpha value is rather low, pairwise percentage agreement is 89%.
7. The procedure for aggregating the valence of the statements to the valence of the report (in the few cases where multiple third parties reacted) followed the same rationale as explained in endnote 4, with negative statements getting priority over neutral ones and neutral ones over positive ones.
8. Of the 136 reports coded as reactive, only 36% had a political target in the report.

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## Notes on contributor

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## Appendix 1. Correlation coefficients.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Demonstration size	1					
2 Disruption	.112**	1				
3 Union	.206**	.019	1			
4 Specific target	.044	.041	.341**	1		
5 Domestic target	.123**	-.059	.331**	.292**	1	
6 Reactive protest	.142**	.023	.300**	.237**	.239**	1

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

No VIF-score above 1.308; VIF scores of about 5 point to multicollinearity.

## Appendix 2. Descriptives of dependent and independent variables.

Variable	Description	Mean	Min	Max	Std. Dev.	N
Responsiveness	1 if political target reacts	0,225	0	1	0,418	564
Negative	1 if political target reacts negatively	0,121	0	1	0,326	564
Neutral	1 if political target reacts ambivalently	0,044	0	1	0,206	564
Positive	1 if political target reacts positively	0,060	0	1	0,238	564
Scope expansion	1 if third party reacts	0,144	0	1	0,351	564
Negative	1 if third party reacts negatively	0,044	0	1	0,206	564
Neutral	1 if third party reacts ambivalently	0,012	0	1	0,111	564
Positive	1 if third party reacts positively	0,087	0	1	0,282	564
Demonstration size	Demonstration size log transformed	6,013	1,10	11,16	2,027	564
Disruption	1 in case of arrests, violence, traffic blockage	0,176	0	1	0,381	564
Union	1 if union organized protest	0,294	0	1	0,456	564
Specific target	1 if delegation requested	0,220	0	1	0,412	564
Domestic target	1 if target is domestic political institution	0,510	0	1	0,500	564
Reactive protest	1 if protest against measure (to be) implemented	0,241	0	1	0,428	564



### Appendix 3. Examples of account coding.

Protest claim	Target/third party	Transcription of the account	Account elements
Hunger strikers demand government to work out clear regularization criteria for asylum seekers	Yves Leterme; Prime minister (Target)	'I understand the demand, but I do not agree with the method. A hunger strike is an unauthorized pressure tactic in a democracy'	Understanding; disagrees with form
10,000 demonstrate against plans to liberalize the non-profit sector (health care, education). Demonstrators fear privatization of public services and downgrading of social rights	Annemie Neyts; Minister of Foreign Trade (Target)	'The demonstrators exaggerate. (sums up, counting on fingers) education: nothing to fear; audiovisual sector: nothing to fear; cultural sector: nothing to fear; health sector: again, nothing to fear'	Substantive disagreement
80,000 union demonstrators do not agree with the measures put forward in the 'Generation Pact', a range of measures which deal with retirement age, amongst others	Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister (Target)	I understand the concern uttered today in the streets of Brussels. The generation pact is an important and a thorough reform, which highly impacts the careers of employees. But it is also a necessary reform. It is necessary for safeguarding the future of our country, and most especially, for the future of our social security system. We will therefore execute it, and execute it completely, because it is necessary, for future generations	Understanding; stick to measure
The social profit sector wants better wage and working conditions of the federal and Flemish government	Freya Van den Bossche; Minister of Employment (Target)	(Journalist voiceover) The government, however, is willing to negotiate: 'It is important to negotiate. Not with everybody at the same time and at one table, but with everybody separately. We should discuss what is important for them, but also, what is feasible for us. As such, we can see whether there is any room to find and make an agreement'	Political process
Unions demonstrate against the proposal to allow child care by commercial institutions and employment agencies; quality will lower, will become more expensive	Renaat Landuyt; Flemish Minister of Work (Target)	The starting point is that it does not matter who provides the service, as long as it meets the standards. Who provides the service is sideshow, the service needs to be provided. I will continue to defend this proposal	Substantive disagreement; stick to measure
Protest against Bush, the imminent war in Iraq, and the weapon transports on Belgian territory	Jos Geysels; party leader AGALEV (Third party)	'If Bush decides unilaterally to attack Iraq, then we will have to see whether we still can allow this weapon transports on Belgian territory'	Substantive agreement
Protest of refugee organizations: clear regularization criteria	Rik Torfs; Professor (Third party)	'To me this seems much better than the alternatives. Now there are only bumbling initiatives, or a sort of emo-politics, in which mothers with children are given advantage over unattractive males'	Substantive agreement
Protestors demand more purchasing power, a new indexation of the wages, stable prices and financial support for the skyrocketing energy prices.	Pieter Timmermans; VBO, employer organization (Third party)	(Journalist voiceover). Employer organizations do not understand the union reaction. They say that already many important measures are taken. 'Wages are indexed about three times a year, the government will inject from October first 100 million euro in purchasing power, the Flemish government pays 700 million euro on a yearly basis. We have calculated that this means 500 euro extra per capita. I do not think we need more measures'	Substantive disagreement; stick to measure