

# Alternative Media: The Protest Paradigm and Student Coverage of Post-Roe Protest

## Introduction

The Supreme Court's majority in *Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health Organization* sent shockwaves across the country in June of 2022. The writing was already on the wall after this decision was leaked just weeks before. This case was significant because it shook the foundation upon which governmental protections for abortion stood. No longer were the Constitution and privacy rights able to protect this healthcare service. State and local politics were thrown into a frenzy across the country as dozens of trigger bans were locked into place. These laws were passed in anticipation of the *Dobbs* decision. Many states, such as Pennsylvania, were even more tense as the midterm elections loomed ahead in the fall. Journalists of all levels and beliefs grasped onto this tension as they attempted to cover this sensitive topic. Similarly, tens of thousands of activists made their voices heard through protests. College campuses emerged as one such site of activism (Kempton 2024).

Youth activism is a well-documented phenomenon that has deep historical roots. US history is marked with spikes in protest activity as local, national, or even international politics unfold. Depending on the generation, mention of college protests might spark memories of the Kent State protest against the Vietnam War in 1970 or the more recent pro-Palestine encampments at Columbia University. It is no surprise that a monumental event like the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* sparked activist responses across the country.

## **Defining Key Terms**

### *The Framing Effect*

The concept of framing first emerged from studies on communication and marketing. This term initially referred to marketing strategies designed to appeal to consumers. Message framing operates by either drawing attention to the negative traits of competitors or highlighting the positive characteristics of the product. Brands can opt for a more pull or push scenario by focusing on different aspects of an individual's emotions (Masullo et al. 2024; Yu 2012). Framing, therefore, relates not only to how a message is conveyed but also what it is likely to cause a person to do. This may be as simple as cows advertising chicken sandwiches at Chick-fil-A or as impactful as political campaigns on the Hill.

Sociologist Irving Goffman revolutionized the study of framing by adding the dimension of dramaturgy and applying these principles to the study of media coverage and public opinion. Dramaturgy likens social interactions to theatrical performances with people engaging in impression management as they "act" different on "front" or "backstage." In this case, students are the leading actors in on-campus protests. They may occupy the role of activists, reporters, or even impacted bystanders. Other actors might be the college administration, professors, police, or even politicians. Goffman's work sought to describe how people translate "social reality into subjective thought" (Allern 2014; Luo and Ling 2023; O'Boyle and Li 2019; Van Gorp 2014). Framing is what makes it possible to conceptualize how social meaning is built, rebuilt, and maintained over time (Allern 2014; Van Gorp 2014).

Another key aspect of framing relates to selection and salience (Allern 2014; Culver and McLeod 2023; Kempton 2024; Luo and Ling 2023; Masullo et al. 2024; Van Gorp 2014). The

first term refers to what information a journalist or network decides to include in their report. Selection can be observed through the events chosen for coverage, the individuals asked for a quote, or the individuals cited in connection with the event. Saliency denotes the tone and weight that is given to information within a larger article. Think of this as describing a glass as half full or half empty. Other examples include choosing a headline and the overall tone used to construct a narrative (Luo and Ling 2023). The combined effect of both selection and saliency influences the public's perception of the importance and relevance of an issue (O'Boyle and Li 2019).

### *Recent Contributions to Framing*

Luo and Ling combine existing literature to define framing as “a structure for perceiving and presenting things, highlighting specific connotations in selecting and processing things, and expressing ideas reflecting a specific cultural value” (Luo and Ling 2023). Their research, “Coverage of College Crisis under Framing Theory,” describes frames as existing in two places. Implicit frames refer to what is included directly in the text or report, while other frames are grounded in human perception and memory. Van Gorp adds to the latter dimension by further grounding frames in social interaction and macro-level cultural structures (Van Gorp 2014).

When understood as a whole, frames operate to structure how new information is interpreted. O'Boyle and Li add to this definition by proposing the idea of a central theme that structures how a message is perceived (O'Boyle and Li 2019). Journalists often rely on existing cultural schema when presenting news to build a central theme and facilitate reader comprehension. In turn, this perception guides future actions taken (Luo and Ling 2023). Luo and Ling compare frames to a funnel, while Van Gorp likens them to an accent mark that slants how information is taken in (Luo and Ling, 2023; Van Gorp, 2014).

The internalization of stereotypes in the news is another important point to consider, as certain frames become normalized in the media landscape. For example, the prevalence of victim-blaming related to sexual assault may result in survivors discounting their experiences (O'Boyle and Li 2019). Masullo, Brown, and Harlow elaborate in their findings that problematic coverage of an issue can reinforce negative stereotypes (Masullo et al. 2024). Allern describes how the news media coverage will attach greater importance to influential frames that confirm these existing ideas, similar to confirmation bias (Allern 2014). Information at this level becomes a subconscious filter through which later information is processed.

### *Protest*

The general definition of a protest encompasses a degree of planning, focuses on a perceived injustice, and seeks reform. Many protests are also intentionally disruptive, designed to draw attention and garner support for their cause. The media and activists have a tenuously symbiotic relationship with each other ("Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance," n.d). Protestors rely on news coverage to disseminate their message. Visible demonstrations are oftentimes just one part of a social movement's effort to achieve legitimacy and meet its goals (Culver and McLeod 2023; Masullo et al. 2024). Other examples include social media campaigns, hosting speakers, or promoting fundraising events. The scale and visibility of protests are more likely to draw media attention. Culver and McLeod describe the spectacle of protests as a "lightning rod" for journalists (Culver and McLeod 2023). The media needs to report on compelling stories, such as those offered by the activists (Culver and McLeod 2023; Van Gorp 2014).

Allern describes “collective action frames” as how social movements define their goals, negotiate solutions, and urge others to act. The strategic cultivation of resources by activist groups is also referred to as “frame sponsorships” (Allern 2014). These additional terms help outsiders understand the strategies activists choose to pursue, why they do so, and what they intend to accomplish. Activists and the media depend on each other, but this relationship is fragile. This unease is amplified if the media and activists have different goals when reporting an event (Van Gorp 2014).

It is important to note that this relationship is evolving in the rapidly changing world of social media. Various movements have attempted to control their narrative through self-coverage on social media, essentially bypassing the traditional journalist as the middleman (Luo and Ling 2023). There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to how a social movement elects to engage the media. They may work to build relationships and promote their message through the media (“Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance,” n.d; Van Gorp 2014). Today’s hybrid media enables consumers to access information from a variety of sources as media forms become integrated into the audience experience (Masullo et al., 2024).

Alternatively, the news may take a more macro approach and sidestep activist voices, altering the tone and presence of their coverage. The latter option is a potentially harmful form of reporting bias referred to as the “protest paradigm” (“Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance,” n.d; “Students Push Back on Protest Coverage; Share Media Concerns,” 2024).

### *The Protest Paradigm*

Protests can look very different depending on where you stand in a literal and figurative sense. The media has the power to bridge this gap or widen it into a chasm. As covered in “Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance”, Dr. Brown argues that the focus on spectacle over substance erases the political substance of activist demonstrations. The problematic aspect of this paradigm emerges from the overly hostile response of the public to protests, regardless of the actual substance of activist efforts (“Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance,” n.d; Culver and McLeod 2023; “Students Push Back on Protest Coverage; Share Media Concerns” 2024).

A more balanced approach to reporting, instead, prompts a sympathetic response to similar events. As discussed by McLeod, people may not always agree, but they are more likely to listen with an open mind as news coverage shifts away from the protest paradigm (McLeod, 2020). McLeod’s research focused on how news coverage featured acts of civil disobedience rather than the generally peaceful nature of BLM protests. A mixed-methods approach combined results from a content analysis of nearly 400 news articles with tracking of anti-protest bills in Florida. The protest paradigm was applied to understand the potential of the media to pigeonhole social movements into small boxes. Activists are caught in a double bind, needing to remain calm to be taken seriously when articulating their demands, yet also needing to act out in some way to draw attention to their cause (Culver and McLeod, 2023; Masullo et al., 2024).

This dilemma is present across social justice movements. A quintessential example of this is Black Lives Matter in 2020. Following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, protests erupted across the country. Participants called for police reform and a recognition of police brutality against people of color. However, the media tide

quickly turned unfavorable as property damage appeared to rise. Rather than being associated with social change, the general public was more quick to associate BLM with looters and violence (Culver and McLeod 2023).

Masullo, Brown, and Harlow expand on this idea by researching the effects of framing on the perceived legitimacy of social movements. Humanizing protestors and centering activist voices was found to have a significant impact on how social movements are perceived. McLeod reported similar findings related to the racial power struggles present in reporting on BLM. News coverage revealed a concerning pattern of not only criminalizing these activists but also delegitimizing their demands in comparison to other issue-driven protests (Culver and McLeod 2023). Dr. Brown's primary recommendation to journalists to combat this paradigm is to engage deeply and frequently with the communities they report on. When this is not possible, she encourages readers to rely on news that does have these connections ("Ask the Expert: Media Coverage of Protests Focuses on Spectacle, Not Substance"). Context is crucial for accurately depicting protests and challenging the hegemonic roots of U.S. journalism (Masullo et al. 2024).

While these issues provide an essential foundation for teaching ethical journalism, further research is necessary to understand how they manifest in various news production contexts. The focus of this research addresses one such environment by honing in on the substance of student journalists covering protests on their college campuses.

## **The Media Landscape**

### *The Role of Journalists*

As described by Van Gorp, journalists are often caught in the middle of meaning construction— "They not only present a forum where the symbolic contests take place, but also

add layers of interpretation of events.” These symbolic contests take place during visible demonstrations related to a social movement, such as protests. The forum is used to describe the media landscape that activists seek to gain legitimacy within by controlling their narrative. Layers of interpretation are the frames applied by journalists as their voice colors how information is presented (Culver and McLeod 2023; Masullo et al. 2024; Van Gorp 2014).

No individual is without bias, and journalists are no exception to this rule. As described by O’Boyle and Li, bias can be inherent in journalists’ attitudes toward an issue (O’Boyle and Li 2019). Journalists are not always aware of this bias or how they relate to each other. Van Gorp discusses how journalists often borrow frames from each other, using and reusing the same formula when drafting their articles (Van Gorp 2014).

### *Commonly Used Frames*

Van Gorp suggests that the conflict frame and social responsibility frame dominate news coverage. The first emphasizes who is competing against whom and what the stakes of this clash are. The latter frame instead draws attention to where an issue originated and who should be responsible for finding a solution (Allern 2014; Van Gorp 2014). Heath and Lowrey’s study of social capital in campus reporting relies on the conflict frame as one of the most salient frames in news coverage. Four key roles of reporters were discussed within this frame.

1. The adversarial role: Maintains skepticism of public officials and business leaders, representing an alternative approach to top-down reporting
2. The interpretive role: Investigates claims made by the government and seeks to explain complicated social problems as they affect the population

3. The disseminator role: Focuses primarily on spreading information as quickly and as broadly as possible
4. The populist mobilizer: Emphasizes activist narratives and seeks to return journalistic voice to relevant communities

Role conceptions are important to understand when analyzing framing through the news, as they provide critical insights into how journalists interact with their audiences. Different writers and organizations may view their role differently and thus approach their work with varying mindsets (Heath and Lowrey 2021).

Allern proposes additional frames for consideration— human interest, economic consequences, and morality frames. The first frame describes the use of emotional appeals. The economic consequence frame discusses the monetary results of an event or topic. Lastly, the morality frame focuses on how moral and religious values are represented in the media. Each of these frames represents a valuable factor to consider when developing a coding schema to analyze a specific type or medium of news coverage (Allern 2014).

### *Framing and Legitimacy*

Masullo, Brown, and Harlow focused their research on how the effects of protest coverage might impact attitudes toward the protest itself, involved protestors, and the trigger for the protests. This study followed Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that followed the death of a teenager at the hands of police. Their primary finding described how protest stories that used a legitimizing and humanizing frame, rather than criminalizing, successfully shifted the protest paradigm in certain cases. Credibility did not appear to be impacted by these frames but was instead moderated by political beliefs. Conservatives were more likely to discredit coverage with

a humanizing frame, while liberals reported the opposite. This study poses political association as a notable factor to consider when analyzing the effects of framing social movements (Masullo et al. 2024).

The concept of legitimacy is also examined in studies on framing. As a term, legitimacy is incredibly dynamic. Perceptions are subject to change based on a range of external or individualized factors. Legitimacy frames foster the incorporation of social justice into a functioning democracy, rather than positioning protests as adversarial to community interests. Taking care to incorporate legitimation frames into reporting empowers activist voices and fosters a durable frame of reference for a specific social movement. This should be done through source selection, contextualizing protests, and being wary of marginalization cues (Masullo et al., 2024).

### *Recommendations for Reporting*

Following research on the protest paradigm, McLeod identifies five pitfalls to avoid when covering social movements (“Students Push Back on Protest Coverage; Share Media Concerns” 2024; McLeod 2020). He first describes the bias of elite framing. This type of framing relies on hegemonic power structures when gathering information. Foundation research from Goffman explains how the media is more likely to favor powerful entities. (O’Boyle and Li 2019). The commercialization of the media landscape plays a role in reinforcing hegemonic power structures (Masullo et al., 2024). This issue stems from a top-down approach to protest coverage that privileges authority figures over protest participants. The powerful voice shifts based on context but may sound like that of a police chief, government official, or even a college president.

As another pitfall of the protest paradigm, episodic framing refers to the tendency of the media to categorize a protest as a standalone event rather than one part of a larger social movement ( McLeod 2020; O’Boyle and Li 2019; “Students Push Back on Protest Coverage; Share Media Concerns” 2024). This flattens the history of an issue and can shift the perception of protests to be “overly dramatic” or demanding. Protesters must walk a tightrope of public opinion, a balancing act that often hinges on the portrayal presented by mainstream media.

McLeod’s third pitfall refers to the construction of an “us vs them” narrative in news articles. This may appear to be a protest against police and public order. Activists are seeking to draw attention to their issue. Still, this kind of framing may have the unintended effect of alienating their message from the general public, who cannot identify with the protest.

An additional concern of the protest paradigm is classifying a large movement based on the actions of a small subset of individuals. A typical example would be classifying all BLM activists as looters. The fifth and final pitfall cited by McLeod is the lack of empathy displayed in the news. Social movements are often led by individuals who are disenfranchised and marginalized by society. By further taking away narrative control, whether intentionally or not, a journalist can further silence these voices (McLeod 2020; Masullo et al. 2024).

### *Framing in Context: Social Issues on College Campuses*

Yu, O’Boyle, and Li present two interesting case studies to consider in relation to issue-specific framing on college campuses. Yu applies framing theories to the effectiveness of anti-violence messages on college campuses. This study tested the impact of three conditions: gain/loss framing, different information sources, and negative/positive appeal. The primary findings in this study cite that people pay more attention to messages that use negative fact

appeal. Emotional content had a similar effect. This goes in line with the common saying in journalism, “If it bleeds, it leads.” The spectacle of social issues draws media coverage and public attention. However, research on framing warns against biases in this form of spectacle-driven reporting (Yu 2012).

Although Yu primarily examined how public service announcements convey information, these findings remain relevant to how information is perceived through the lens of media coverage. The examination process is applicable to any kind of information. Individuals engage in this process by sifting through what is available to them. They look to identify the 5Ws– Who is talking? What is the purpose or issue? Where is this event taking place? When is this occurring? And why is the problem happening? How media frames an issue will likely slant the answers to these questions (Yu 2012).

O’Boyle and Li offer another approach to framing through their research on how sexual assault is portrayed on college campuses. “#MeToo is Different for College Students” examines how this issue is described in 10 American newspapers. Researchers created a coding schema that focused on who was identified as responsible for the problem and who was assigned the task of finding a solution. Special attention was paid to how the political leanings of a specific media outlet influenced its news delivery. O’Boyle and Li found that both liberal and conservative papers place individual actions as the primary cause of sexual assault on campuses. One proposed explanation was the effectiveness of universities in diverting blame away from themselves. O’Boyle and Li discussed the financial incentives and social implications of pressuring universities to maintain a certain image (O’Boyle and Li 2019)

O’Boyle and Li’s examination of selection and salience revealed gaps in the representation of victims. Even if information was not outright omitted, the narrative presented in

media coverage effectively minimized their perspective by how their voices were included. The method of careful content analysis demonstrated the need to read between the lines of news articles to discover these gaps in coverage. O'Boyle and Li concluded that the disconnect between causes and solutions to sexual assault points to a larger problem of how "private" campus issues are shown to the wider public. The sway of institutions of higher education is not to be overlooked (O'Boyle and Li 2019).

### *Expectations in Higher Education*

The public has high expectations of education, especially in post-graduate environments. Colleges and universities do more than teach young people to recite facts; they teach them new ways to think. These institutions have the distinct function of building the next generation of citizens. Student protestors are often met with conflicted responses from the general public. On the one hand, their actions may be dismissed as the fiery youth testing the bounds of their influence. Large-scale demonstrations, such as Pro-Palestine encampments at Columbia University, have shifted the conversation to be less favorable as activists are perceived as increasingly disruptive. Students are taught to be free thinkers but can quickly cross the line into forming negative public opinions. Further research is needed to examine the potential impact of the protest paradigm on framing student protests on college campuses.

### *The Possibilities of Student News Coverage*

Student journalism presents an alternative form of media that speaks directly to the environment in which reporters belong. For the purpose of this research, student journalism describes students who write for their college's newspaper. They do not necessarily need to be

majoring in a related field. Although some variation is to be expected between school papers, it is fair to assume that each group has some kind of organizational structure. Students are likely to have a faculty advisor or form of administrative oversight. Some papers pay students for their work, others offer class credit, and some offer neither. The audiences addressed by campus newspapers is also varied.

Heath and Lowrey focus on “social capital” as the driving force behind the function of student papers. They define this as a form of social trust in which connections among individuals and wider networks form community norms and expectations. It is best understood as the force that “greases the wheels” of social progress (Heath and Lowrey 2021). Social capital can foster cooperation between groups and a mindset of “I trust you because I trust her and she assures me that she trusts you.” This stamp of approval lends itself to credibility and collective action (Heath and Lowrey 2021; Masullo et al. 2024).

Student journalists often rely on social networks to find stories, sources, and expand their audiences. Heath and Lowrey describe how their research interest emerged from a significant gap in research on the relationship between social capital, campus journalists, and their audiences (Heath and Lowrey 2021). A 2014 study found that students engaging in citizen journalism were more likely to experience satisfaction, trust, and engagement (Nah et al. 2014). Trust in specific forms of media is critical, as overall media trust is declining in the United States. The U.S. ranks among the lowest levels of trust in the world (Masullo et al. 2024). As the media continues to focus on protest activity at college campuses, research is needed to understand how framing may operate at different levels of the media— from national outlets to local coverage to student papers.

Heath and Lowrey hypothesized that social trust would form a social safety net for journalists to report on contentious issues. Their mixed method approach of surveying student

editors and nationwide content analysis of US student papers. Results contradicted their hypothesis as data instead alluded that the higher the newsroom social capital, the more likely the paper would take on a “safer” role as disseminator. Additional research is needed to confirm this finding (Heath and Lowrey 2021).

## **Framing Abortion**

### *Contextualizing the Issue*

Van Gorp describes how frames draw on widely understood cultural models as a “toolkit” to understand what is going on (Van Gorp 2014). Journalistic shortcuts may seem necessary in the rapid environment of news production, but they can be especially problematic when complex issues are distilled into overly simple forms (Masullo et al. 2024). It is in this way that frames both restrict and enable understanding of an issue (Allern 2014). Applying sociological theory related to the framing effect would allow one to infer the implications of media coverage on forming public opinion and shaping public policy (Allern 2014; Masullo et al. 2024; O’Boyle and Li 2019).

As cited in “My Body, My Voice”, research has shown that the portrayal of abortion in the media has impacted political, cultural, and personal beliefs in the United States. The increased politicization of abortion has generated higher demand for political information. The media has responded to this need by disseminating and interpreting information as it emerges from state houses and courts. A legal brief or political memo may be complicated to understand, but its impacts will affect citizens whether they understand it or not. The news can break down these more complex stories and make them digestible by the general population (Kempton 2024; O’Boyle and Li 2019).

*Common Frames Related to Abortion*

Shifting media coverage of abortion was reported by POLITICO following the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. While the most used word started as “pregnancy”, this landmark decision shifted the media focus to “vote.” POLITICO conducted a quantitative content analysis of over 15,700 local papers to determine shifts in the media following *Roe*. This method of analysis provided clues about how an individual might initially perceive an issue— like a game of word association, but with much higher stakes (“How Abortion Coverage Changed in the Media, According to the Data” 2023).

This study identified two key themes: “abortion as a political issue and a focus on the real-world effects of restrictions” (“How Abortion Coverage Changed in the Media, According to the Data” 2023). Data also revealed significant differences in coverage among states. For example, swing states, like PA, were found to have coverage that increasingly focused on the politics of abortion. Swing states have the potential to alter the course of a presidential campaign and are the target of increased political efforts, thereby intensifying the media's influence on public opinion. States with higher levels of restriction, such as NC and GA, were found to use political words more than three times as often as healthcare associations. Both results highlight the importance of considering state-specific differences in researching news coverage. (“How Abortion Coverage Changed in the Media, According to the Data” 2023). Other relevant factors include political cycles, such as midterm elections. Florida was found to have the most articles on abortion as the overturn of *Roe* coincided with ongoing challenges from Gov. Ron DeSantis.

The implications of this large-scale study demonstrate the reflexive relationship between the media and public opinion. Abortion has become an increasingly hot-button political issue. As many as 1 in 4 registered voters report that a candidate's stance on abortion will determine their ballot. This shift may come at the cost of obscuring other human and medical effects of changing policies. While civics is incredibly important, there is a gap in coverage that speaks to the individual experience of this social issue. The question then becomes whether more alternative forms of journalism, such as student coverage, can address this gap ("How Abortion Coverage Changed in the Media, According to the Data" 2023).

### *Stigma and Censorship*

Stigma was found to be associated with reporting on abortion. This was increasingly true in states with higher levels of restriction. Despite First Amendment protections, journalists in this state were more likely to engage in censorship around this issue. ("How Abortion Coverage Changed in the Media, According to the Data" 2023; Kempton 2024; McLeod). This hesitancy to report on abortion was increased when additional dimensions of race or socioeconomic status were added into the mix (Kempton 2024; Masullo et al 2024). These factors are further influenced by both the reporter's perception of the topic and their identity. Researchers have found that it is primarily white reporters who determine what is "objectively true" and what makes the final cut for publication (Masullo et al., 2024). Heath and Lowrey reported self-censorship as it pertained to student-run papers on college campuses. Their study found that student editors were more likely to engage in censorship as perceived levels of administrative control increased (Heath and Lowrey 2021). A parallel could be drawn between increased

control, in either form, and higher levels of self-censorship. This phenomenon illustrates the reflexive nature of the media and public opinion as both influence how the other functions.

### *Framing and Gender*

“My Body, My Voice” examines gender as a factor in framing articles on abortion. Researchers in this study evaluated who was used as a source when covering abortion. Despite the immediate association of abortion with so-called “women’s issues,” research has found that the media are more likely to rely on male sources when covering this issue (Kempton 2024). Additionally, men were more likely to be quoted as experts on this topic. This observation builds on McLeod’s description of the top-down pitfall of certain journalists. Findings from Kempton demonstrate how patriarchal power structures continue to dominate the narrative on abortion. The media is situated at a crossroads in its coverage. Journalists can elect to change the narrative, but many do not. (Culver and McLeod 2023; Kempton 2024; Masullo et al. 2024).

As stated directly by Kempton, “Research on gender and news sources is critical to better understanding the role of women in broad society, as the effects of media representations on public opinion and mainstream culture have been noted time and time again.” Understanding the issue itself is critical to proposed research related to student journalism and activists following the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* (Kempton 2024).

## **Implications for Future Research**

### *Addressing Gaps*

Bringing together literature on the framing effect, protest paradigm, student journalism, and issue-based advocacy has illuminates several gaps in the research. Many of the sources rely on content

analysis as the method for examining news coverage. Kempton's analysis of newspapers revealed the the need to compare local newspapers across different geographic and demographic contexts to better understand how location influences coverage (Kempton 2024). Allern similarly calls for more research into how varying political perspectives are represented in the news ( Allern 2014). Audience demographics— including income, education, and cultural identity— may also impact how information is perceived whether that be in contrast to or in conjunction with journalistic frames (Yu 2023).

Focusing on student protests offers an interesting avenue for media exploration. Yu identifies college students as a distinct and under examined population within media studies, noting a common reliance on journalism students as subjects (Yu 2023). This limited sample may not represent the larger population of students or even student writers.

A community's connection to journalists and the issues they cover also shapes how news is received and framed. O'Boyle and Li argue that journalists' unfamiliarity with student environments and campus culture affects how sensitive issues like sexual assault are described, suggesting that closer attention to reporter–community dynamics is essential for more accurate and nuanced coverage (O'Boyle and Li 2019).

Student papers present a look into how writers' dual roles as members of the campus community and emerging reporters offer a unique perspective on news production. This form of alternative media presents how students experience where they live and how they report on this environments (Heath and Lowrey 2023). Dynamics of student activists, media, and administration on college campuses highlight the importance of situational factors and contextual variables.

### *Key Takeaways*

The media holds considerable power in shaping public opinion and influencing policy. This has been shown to be true in how news coverage frames of contentious issues like overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* and resulting protest activity. The core factors of the

framing effect, selection and salience, significantly impact how journalists write news and build a narrative. Their decisions about whom to quote, especially whether they amplify activist voices, can significantly sway public understanding and legitimacy of an issue (Kempton 2024; Masullo et al. 2024). The credibility and perceived urgency of a topic often hinge on both the source and medium through which it is conveyed (Yu 2012; Allern 2014). Coverage in the wake of *Dobbs* illustrates the deep entanglement between media narratives and judicial outcomes (Kempton 2024).

As traditional and digital media merge into a hybrid media landscape, questions of legitimacy and framing have grown increasingly complex (Luo and Ling 2023; Masullo et al. 2024; McLeod 2023). While the protest paradigm remains a useful lens, further research is needed to explore how emerging technologies and social media platforms shape these narratives in real time and potentially disrupt or reinforce existing media dynamics (Masullo et al. 2024; Luo & Ling 2023). The overturn of *Roe v. Wade* through *Dobbs* is one issue among many that gained traction on college campuses. The goal of this research is to delve deeper into the function and impact of student newspapers to understand how contentious issues are conveyed to their audience of fellow students. Building a comprehensive frame of reference will enable further research in this space on any number of issues.

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