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**Painting the 'Essential' Green Activist: Critical Interrogations of Responses to  
Environmental Activism**

by

Alex Painter

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of Sociology and  
Criminology in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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**Painting the 'Essential' Green Activist: Critical Interrogations of Responses to Environmental Activism**

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September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, qualitative Directed Content Analysis is used to elucidate and analyze media rhetoric and legal rhetoric found in prominent news publications reporting on green protests in Canada and the United States. Preliminary theory suggested commodification of the environment encourages the denigration of green dissenters and may aim to lead to negative conceptualizations of the 'green activist' in the public consciousness. Further content analysis notions that the political leanings of given news publications may be the strongest predictor of the level of support/opposition to green protest that an article will purvey. And, animal advocacy, youth-led dissent, protest around critical infrastructure, and disruptive-to-civilian protest are suggested to be solid predictors for heightened negativity in coverage. Furthermore, protestors were rarely depicted as threats to peoples' safety but more often to the established status quo of the treadmill of production.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
A BRIEF HISTORY	4
METHODS	8
FINDINGS	11
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	23
REFERENCES	26
VITA AUCTORIS	35

## 1. Introduction

Green activism is an increasingly precarious enterprise in regard to both the health and safety of its advocates, as well as their public image. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPS), corporate lobbying, and ambiguous ad hoc policies have facilitated the dispersal and criminalization of green dissent (Best & Nocella, 2004; Birss, 2017; Brown, 2019; Glasser, 2011; Loadenthal, 2013a; Rowell, 1996). Moreover, media representations of direct-action green activists have perpetuated the image of the unsophisticated dissenter (Birss, 2017; Lee, 2014; Loadenthal, 2017; Wouters, 2015). It is difficult to overstate the importance of media rhetoric in setting an identity in stone. A group's perceived identity is rooted in social and historical factors that fit groups neatly into digestible standardized molds (Saïd, 1981; 1993). And, partisan-bias, opinionated news pieces, and misrepresentation are tinderboxes for the rhetorical flames that temper these molds (McCarthy et al., 1996; Loadenthal, 2013a; 2013b; Lee, 2014). In other words, the media has the ultimate say on how groups and individuals are to be represented; movements and individuals might gain influence, but rarely ever direct power to decide their labels for themselves (Habermas, 1989; Sheldrick, 2013).

News publications are not neutral faucets of facts. Moreover, the coverage people consume informs their opinions on the economic health of their country (van Dalen et al., 2018), attitudes toward different groups (Mourão & Brown, 2022), and disproportionate attention to 'negative' news stories affects public opinions on certain out-groups' legitimacies (van der Meer et al., 2018; Ayodeji-Falade et al., 2021). How the media portrays green protest is an important area of study because sustained negative portrayal of green protest may canonize the green activist as a danger (Loadenthal, 2013a), and as antidemocratic (Hansen, 2003). The usage of words and phrases that demean and/or demonize green activism exemplifies what Collins & Glover (2001) call "collateral language". That is, by filling media with a certain outlook on a given practice, the public consciousness will also be colonized by said outlook. By canonizing a group in such a way, criminalization or dispersal of said group becomes a much more digestible course of action (Joosse et al., 2013; Birss, 2017). This type of practice has been explained as a dirty, implicit form of social control that manufactures consent from the public for the further prosecution of certain activities and groups (Collins & Glover, 2001; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Therefore, it is important to take a two-prong approach in understanding the broad conceptualization of the 'green activist,' seeing it as both rhetorically delimited and socially decided by an interplay between common consciousness and the media industry.

This study seeks to understand how differential characteristics of protests mediate the media's depictions of said protests. And by doing so, hopefully, a clearer illustration of how the 'green activist' fits into public consciousness, and what shape its mold takes, can be drawn. Edward Saïd's (1987) framing of the 'essential terrorist' offers a strong conceptual framework to follow in this endeavour. That is, it is possible to reframe Saïd's work on terrorism to better understand how the conceptualization of the green activist is not only a product of policy but media distortion as well (Saïd, 1986). To Saïd (1986), increased viral usage of the term 'terrorist' imported and canonized an ideological view that misconstrues the realities of issues that are misunderstood or

voluntarily ignored by most of the Western populations. And thus, the title of ‘terrorist’ is not always reserved for those that are truly terroristic, but for those who fit the bill according to sensationalized racist discourses (Saïd, 1986). The rising fear of terrorism in America, then, is thanks to a political and intellectual scam (Saïd, 1986, p. 196), one that buttresses politico-economic development by enabling social control (McLeod, 2007), and facilitates both legal and social “determinacy” of categorizations of groups/individuals (Phillips & Grattet, 2000, p. 568).

The green activist is examined using a similar but retrofitted lens for the purpose of this paper. The green activist has been sensationalized to a point where activists are often met with mistrust (Brown, 2019). However, whereas the ‘essential terrorist’ is identified and demeaned through racialized and often religious dimensions (Saïd, 1986), the ‘essential green activist’ is identified and demeaned through perhaps primarily ideological and political dimensions (Habermas, 1989; Kojola, 2015; Wouters 2015, Mourão & Brown, 2021). Although, it is difficult to disentangle our conceptualization of Indigenous activists, who perhaps are often necessarily environmentalists (Etchart, 2017), from the conceptualization of Western activists who might be more abstracted from environmental destruction. Regardless, there has been no shortage of slander against green activists since the FBI, a day after the events of 9/11, suggested that ‘radical’ environmentalists were America’s #1 domestic terror threat (Brown, 2019).

Scholars suggest that the West fears environmentalism as it stands against their natural resource state (Jungk, 1979; McCoy, 2007). Consistent with this, the FBI describes environmentalism as “one of today’s most serious domestic terrorist threats” (2005, p. 1). Yet, of the 3633 Americans killed by terrorism in the United States since 1995, 0 have been killed by ‘eco-terrorists’ (Miller, 2020, p. 1). And per Loadenthal’s (2013a) dataset of 27,136 direct-action green protest incidents, injuries were only reported in .01% of all events (pp. 17-18). Notwithstanding this information, media depictions of high-profile radical green groups like GreenPeace have been labelled as “terroristic,” “antidemocratic,” “undemocratic,” “heterodoxes” (Hansen, 2003). According to FBI reports (FBI, 2005), eco-terrorism in North America is not credited with any acts that would traditionally be considered terroristic (Loadenthal, 2017; START, 2018). So, in this sense, the phenomenon of the green scare could be further likened to the mass hysteria-inducing red scare (Potter, 2009), the satanic panic, or the homophobic rhetoric surrounding the AIDS crisis. That is, the employment of demeaning phrases like ‘eco-terrorism’ in policymaking and media depictions of environmentalism frame the movement as a radical counterculture, thus leading to unsavoury conceptions of green activism in the common consciousness (Lynch et al., 2020).

A commonly held belief in eco-Marxist literature is that the spreading legal kneecapping of green activists is an inexorable symptom of capitalism’s growth doctrine (Curran, 2017; Guattari, 1981; Schnaiberg, 1980; Stretesky et al., 2012), one that necessitates a “treadmill of law” – the continuous safeguarding of capital processes by way of legal interventions (Birss, 2017; Lynch et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2022; Stretesky et al., 2018). As well, a “protest paradigm” – news coverage patterns that disparage, incidentally or otherwise, protestors that perhaps threaten these capital processes – has



been observed (Chan & Lee, 1984; Hertog, 1998; Mcleod & Douglas, 2007; McLeod, 2007; & Mourão & Brown, 2022).

As noted by Boyle et al. (2012), “understanding the triggers of the social control function [of the media’s alleged protest paradigm] is particularly important in understanding when and why the social control function is most likely to be invoked” (p. 139). And, there is a dearth of research regarding media framings of specifically green direct-action protest. Most existing research designates a specific issue for study – i.e., pipeline protests, climate protests, etc. (Boyle et al., 2012; Joosse, 2012; Kojola, 2015; Williams et al., 2022; Loadenthal, 2022; Yarosh, 2023). Additionally, studies tend to parse animal activism from environmental activism, which closes off the opportunity to see in the context of a single study how differently they are treated in the media. Further, protest research is only just beginning to pay more attention to political partisanship in media and its potential effects on the framing of different forms of protest (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Mourão & Brown, 2022; Mourão, 2023). Direct-action protest is particularly interesting as it is of the most polarizing kinds of protest a group/individual can undertake; subsequently, it is expected to engender the harshest criticism from the media (Joosse, 2012; Loadenthal, 2013a). However, Boyle et al. (2012) suggest that we do not yet understand how significant an effect political-leanings in publications have on the paradigm of protest coverage.

Therefore, the following study aims to identify the aspects of direct-action green protest that are associated with negative responses from wide-reaching media entities and governmental entities (Boyle et al., 2012). More specifically, this study seeks to understand how disruptive direct-action green protests are depicted in print and internet media, and how these media representations of green activists are mediated by salient characteristics of protests and of the news publications. To be a truly comparative study on responses to green protest, all news coverage on green-issue direct-action protest was eligible for inclusion in the study’s dataset. Looking at protests organized by bigger groups like Extinction Rebellion and Save Old Growth helps paint some of the picture. But the inclusion of small-scale direct-action protests done by individuals or a small clandestine group also helps round out the study. This study uses Directed Content Analysis (See: Holsti, 1969; Kibiswa, 2019) to discover what opinions/rhetoric are most salient in media coverage of green protest, and relate them back to extant theory. Specifically, the analysis is directed by the theorized notion that a relationship exists between a ‘protest paradigm’ and a ‘treadmill of law,’ in turn creating a sort of ‘treadmill of media.’ Establishing the salience of different rhetoric/responses provides insight into what forms of direct-action protest are most efficient in prompting supportive discourse from media outlets.

My hypotheses are that a) protests around/about critical infrastructure or multinational industries will engender harsher coverage, b) smaller protests will garner harsher coverage than larger protests as they are easier targets, c) epistemological biases will be observable in most articles, d) coverage of ‘disobedient’ protest will be more often episodic than thematic, and e) protestors that possess degrowth or biocentric values will be framed as criminal/deviant and discussed more harshly than those that do not

## 2. A Brief History

### a. *The 'Protest Paradigm' and Rhetoric*

Activism and mass media have a rocky relationship (Baker, 1996; Chan & Lee, 1984; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Tavares et al., 2020); protest paradigm studies have suggested that media depictions of activism follow a highly routinized script which is politically aligned and value-laden, and predisposed to conceptualizing activists as 'deviant' (Wouters, 2015). In fact, until around the 1960s, it was common that "observers [typically] used the obvious emotions of crowds to dismiss protesters as irrational" (Jasper, 2014, p. 346). Selection biases (Lee, 2014; McCarthy et al., 1996), framing biases (Entman, 2007; Kojola, 2015), epistemological biases (Recasens et al., 2013), and non-reflexive journalistic routines are all purported to be interdependent facilitating factors for "mainstream media's social control" (Lee, 2014, p. 2726; McLeod, 2007; Vargas et al., 2023; Yarosh, 2023). So, incidentally, or otherwise, media depictions of protestors can wildly spoil audiences' conceptions of activists more generally. Furthermore, a salient power dynamic is visible between mass media outlets and activists (Kojola, 2015); it is often assumed that activists need news media a lot more than the news media needs activists (Lee, 2014; Smith et al., 2001). The relationship is much more symbiotic than that, but activist groups are notoriously less powerful than the corporations/governments they protest and the news publications that cover them (Sheldrick, 2013; Long et al., 2018). The news ultimately has the final say on how dissent is going to be publicized. To put it another way, movements and individuals might gain influence, but rarely ever direct power (Habermas, 1989).

In 1991, Shanto Iyengar proposed two ideological models for storytelling: thematic and episodic. Interested in the media portrayal of activists, Smith et al. (2001) repurposed Iyengar's (1991) framework, detailing that whereas activist groups prefer "thematic" coverage of their endeavours – which would discuss the underlying causes for activist dissent – journalistic routines typically proffer "episodic" coverage of activist activity that concentrates on protests in a decontextualized manner (p. 1417). Smith et al.'s (2001) findings were that news coverage of activism, deemed radical or not, is predominantly episodic, and newspapers are rarely primarily thematic in nature. Feezel et al. (2021) show that episodic framing generally paints issues as an individual responsibility, while thematic framing generally paints issues as a governmental/societal matter. Moreover, decontextualized, protest-specific coverage offers audiences only a glimpse into what activists stand for, and perhaps that glimpse does activist groups more harm than good. This kind of episodic coverage has also been referred to as nothing more than "trauma porn" by distressed activists (Bosman et al., 2019), and is best for generating short-term emotional responses from readers as opposed to challenging their beliefs one way or another (Gross, 2008; Springer & Harwood, 2015).

Some protest paradigm research suggests that news publications leaning politically conservative are more likely to negatively portray activists who address political topics (Lee, 2014; Mourão, 2023). And, however true it may be that a protest paradigm still exists whereby media coverage generally abides by political-partisan expectations, many current activism researchers are abandoning the notion that all mainstream media is purposefully and ideologically anti-activist (Lee, 2014). Every year,

it becomes increasingly more difficult to forecast what media responses to activist activities will be (Cottle, 2008). As new advocacy tactics crop up, media heads must scramble to construct responses that will garner attention from audiences while hopefully not contradicting previously published articles too greatly (Cottle, 2008). Considering all non-radical forms of activism, Lee (2014) discovered an increasingly positive outlook from media outlets regarding movements. The increase may be rather small, but it is relatively consistent (Lee, 2014).

Nevertheless, perhaps unsurprisingly, protests deemed radical by news publications are often met with more critical (Loadenthal, 2013a), episodic coverage than those that are not (Lee, 2014). Some empirical research has also found that journalists generally avoid covering radical activism altogether unless their activities are likely to effectively garner unavoidable mainstream attention (Armstrong, 2006; Boyle et al., 2012). Further, when radical protest *is* reported, there is often an emphasis on the coverage of disruption and violence, and less focus on the voices of the activists themselves (Boyle et al., 2014; Lee, 2014). Andrews & Caren (2008) offered similar results, finding that publications favour “professional and formalized groups,” and often ignore small, volunteer-led activist groups (p. 841). Small, low-profile events are often not considered newsworthy and are covered episodically if at all (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Regarding specifically green protest, clandestine and leaderless movements are more likely to engender harsh coverage than organizations and movements with discernible structure (Joosse, 2012). Moreover, protests critical of economic developments like pipelines, deforestation, or fracking are depicted as obstacles to national interest or job creation (Kojola, 2015; Grote & Johnson, 2021).

However, Cottle (2008) suggested that some newspapers are participating in “manufacturing dissent,” supporting protestors instead of discouraging them (p. 856). But it has also been argued that some newspapers are simply co-opting green discourses, for instance, in an attempt to stay relevant (Milne, 2015). ‘Greenwashing’ is an unfortunately pertinent topic apropos the success of green activism. That is, political and media responses to activist activities may put forth the appearance that they have been persuaded, or that they are in favour of the activists’ ideas. However, their newfound perspectives may perhaps be influenced more by opportunities for praise (Maier, 2011), financial gain (Milne, 2015), and/or the hopes of capturing a story that will have a lengthy attention cycle (Andrews & Caren, 2008; McCarthy et al. 1996). ‘Appearing green’ is attractive; after all, environmentalism is at a level of vogue that it has never enjoyed before. But activism does not necessarily share that same limelight. Green activism, particularly when in the form of direct-action protest, is quietly undergoing criminalization and terrorization by governments internationally (Birss, 2017; Loadenthal, 2017; Potter, 2012). And, colloquialization of negative phrases like ‘eco-terrorist’ used to depict green dissent – and the common representation of activists as disruptors – certainly makes it easier to stomach their criminalization (Joosse et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2020). This is particularly problematic as research tends to suggest that themes of protest and conflict are the easiest for readers to pick out and become opinionated about (Ayodeji-Falade et al., 2021).

### *b. The 'Ecoterrorist'*

Incrimination of green activism is nothing new (Loadenthal, 2017). There are documented cases of state-actuated violence against green activists as early as the 18th century (Burton, 2004, p. 135). In the United States, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA; 2006) officially declared that animal rights activism could legally be acknowledged as terrorism if damage to or threat of damage to 'industry' takes place (McCoy, 2007). Although this marked the first time in U.S. history that safeguards against 'eco-terrorism' were officially legislated (Brown, 2019), the term eco-terrorist predates AETA by over two decades. Ron Arnold is generally credited with coining the term 'eco-terrorist' in 1983 (Smith, 2008). And in 1997, Arnold depicted direct-action green activists, collectively, as a misanthropic threat to modern industrial civilization, while prominently featuring the radicalization of Ted Kaczynski – the Unabomber – as a telling sign of a trend.

This anti-green-activist fearmongering is not something that would shock any modern environmentalists; after all, it has been oft-theorized that we are living in the era of the "green scare," where governments have conceptualized the green activist as a threat that corporations and citizens should be fearful of (Grubbs, 2022; Parr, 2015; Potter, 2009). But Arnold (1997) went further, proposing that radical environmentalists and Kaczynski share beliefs in deep ecology, which "gives humans no central place in the universe, much less their industrial civilization" (Arnold, 1997, p. 7).

It could be argued that Arnold's (1997) conflation of Kaczynski's bombing campaign with other radical environmentalists' activism is reductionist and problematic for two reasons. Firstly, his complaints rely heavily on Bookchin's (1988) argument that deep ecology is indeed anti-humanist. Secondly, Arnold (1997) manufactured a reality in which *all* radical environmentalist groups are: a) ideologically and philosophically uniform and b) in accordance with the values of deep ecology. In reality, there are a multiplicity of reasons that individuals protest green issues. And, groups that perhaps would appear allied are at odds with one another's ideological positions; green movements have always struggled to form a collective identity (Saunders, 2008), and the controversies are furthered even more when you consider stark ideological differences between animal rights movements and environmental movements (Fitzgerald, 2018). It has also been suggested that protests with multiple organizations/messages are often misinterpreted by journalists as having an absence of any coherent message (Sobieraj, 2010). So, thanks to a disjointed collective identity as well as the proliferation of governmental fearmongering and negative, uncritical phrases like 'eco-terrorist,' media outlets have found pitting their readers against activists a profitable and undemanding undertaking (Joosse et al., 2012).

### *c. SLAPPS and Ad Hoc Laws*

The points that Arnold (1997) made regarding the growing trend that is direct-action green activism are eerily similar to what is written in modern legal documentation that condemns green dissent (Smith, 2008). Namely, discussing demonstrations nearby 'essential production' is nearly indistinguishable from government jargon such as 'critical infrastructure' (Arnold, 1997; ICNL, 2022). And, his

term ‘eco-terrorism,’ has found itself commonly used in political discourse between government officials surrounding direct-action, and even indirect-action activism. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005, John E. Lewis – who was at the time the deputy assistant director of the FBI – stated during a congressional hearing that “Investigating and preventing animal rights extremism and ecoterrorism is one of the FBI’s highest domestic terrorism priorities” (S. Hrg. 109-947 Eco-Terrorism, 2005, p. 13). Lewis would go on to speak on how the FBI plans to “disrupt and dismantle these *movements*” and how he believes environmental extremism is on its way to adopting more violent approaches to protest (S. Hrg. 109-947 Eco-Terrorism, 2005).

In 2006, several new laws designed to empower police to disrupt direct action activism were legislated in the United States; most famously, the AETA (Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act), but some state-specific laws would offer even more empowerment. For instance, in June of 2006, Pennsylvania enacted the ‘ecoterror statute’ (Karasick, 2009). In this statute, if an individual is found guilty of arson, criminal mischief, criminal trespass, and/or threatening or terrorizing owners of occupants of a premises, they could be charged additionally as an ecoterrorist (Karasick, 2009). Since 2006, 254 protest-delimiting bills have been offered for consideration, 39 have been enacted, and 10 are still pending (Loadenthal, 2013b; ICNL, 2022). And since 2016, the United States has been *inundated* with a rising wave of anti-protest bills that are designed to protect ‘critical industry’ by increasing the penalties for taking part in green activist-adjacent dissent (Ruddock, 2019). For instance, criminal trespassing laws have been beefed up in some states, making it more criminal to be an activist demonstrator than a regular trespasser (ICNL, 2022; Ruddock, 2019). Seemingly, these new laws ‘protecting’ these industries do not fulfil any unmet needs. Instead, they are specifically designed to target activist groups (Ruddock, 2019).

#### *d. The ‘Treadmill of Media’*

The “treadmill of law” theory posits that legal developments that snuff out green protests in favour of economic development facilitate what Schnaiberg (1980) called the “treadmill of production” (Stretesky et al., 2018). Schnaiberg (2008) suggested that environmentally harmful activities (e.g., polluting, fracking, deforestation, etc.), and the ecological disorganizations associated with production mechanisms (Stretesky et al., 2013), are exacerbated by corporations’ and governments’ pursuit of economic growth (Curran, 2017). A feedback loop, or treadmill, exists under capitalism’s growth doctrine (Guattari, 1981). And so, if it is true that capitalism has colonized all of Earth’s spaces and our public consciousness too (Guattari, 1981; Simpson et al., 2013), and that corporations can and do operate with distinctively more *real* power than individuals (Long et al., 2018; Sheldrick, 2013), then it should come as no surprise that a conflict between protest groups, legalism, and methods of motivating social control exists. Lobbyists have deep pockets (Stretesky et al., 2013), and dissenters rely on unreliable crowdfunding and sometimes elusive public support. But even so, under democratic rule, there is no simple or invariably moral way to snuff out dissent – unless you buy into Chomsky’s conclusion that “propaganda is to a democracy what a bludgeon is to a totalitarian state” (2006, p. 20).

Propaganda has been historically used to motivate value production and mobilize anti-dissent sentiment (Chan & Lee, 1984), but the notion of all mass media following an overt protest paradigm might be too reductionist a position (Lee, 2014). After all, not all media companies identify themselves as partisan to a political party, and those that do may not always publish opinions that concur with any given party in an attempt to garner a larger audience (Lee, 2014). And, covering controversial direct-action activism is more profitable than covering more modest demonstrations (Armstrong, 2006; Boyle et al., 2012); therefore, media insulates audiences into seeing a negatively connotated depiction of 'the activist' (Chomsky, 2006), effectively reinforcing the status quo of anti-green sentiment (Stretesky et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2020). Just as Lynch et al. (2020) proposed that legal processes safeguarding the economy maintain the status quo of production and ecological disorganization (p. 117), I suggest that news publications produce widespread manufactured consent for the continual development of new anti-dissent laws, and furthered othering of activists by normalizing phrases *like* 'eco-terrorists' and 'eco-zealots', underrepresenting/misrepresenting, and politicizing green activism; the 'media control' theorized by Chomsky (2006), then, functions not only as a mechanism of iterating what ought to be the confines of protest, but how dissenters ought to be conceptualized: collectively, and as a political entity.

### 3. Methods

#### *e. Directed content analysis (DCA)*

##### *i. Framework development stage*

The goal of DCA is to validate and/or extend theoretical frameworks (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281); the researcher's work is directed by a collection of existing theory, as well as content and operational definitions that stem from extant theory (Holsti, 1969). The purpose of using DCA in this research, as opposed to an undirected paradigm, is two-fold: a) to extend or re-theorize the part that media plays in green activist identity construction, and b) to help elucidate what aspects of green activism are most consistently represented in a negative tone. The guiding framework for this study is my proposed 'treadmill of media' that suggests an implicit - even incidental - protest paradigm that routinizes anti-dissent rhetoric that manufactures public consent for the further othering of green dissenters. The treadmill of law and the protest paradigm, I theorize, work in tandem in constructing and disseminating 'the essential green activist'.

##### *ii. Sampling and Data Collection*

As the current literature on activism tells us that news media is a chief factor in the propagation of negative stereotypes that other out-groups (Lippman, 1922; Loadenthal, 2013b; Smith, 2008), sensationalize untruths surrounding specific out-groups (Collins & Glover, 2002; Saïd, 1986), and subsequently manufacture consent for the criminalization and demonization of out-groups (Chomsky, 2006, Lynch et al., 2020), this study examines news publications and the potentially routinized nature of how they select and frame green protests. Specifically, the focus is on high-profile and wide-reaching news publications, as they will have larger audiences. I examined the top four most accessed news publications' websites in both Canada and the United States, for a total of eight sources. Per both [Similarweb's](#) web analytics tool and [Google Trends](#), the

top 8 sources by the size of audience are: cbsnews.com, nytimes.com, foxnews.com, the-sun.com, cbc.ca, ctvnews.ca, cnn.com, and torontosun.ca.

To collect media coverage, I accessed the main websites of each of the 8 selected news publications, querying numerous search terms such as environmental activist, animal advocate, climate activist, climate protestors, environmental protestors, and green activists. This was in order to account for different phrases and to create a dataset with a wide variety of different forms of direct-action green protest. I examined articles written between 2018 and 2022 as 2018 was the year that marked Extinction Rebellion's public debut. And, because the Extinction Rebellion protests were so salient and have been deemed as part of "...the fastest-growing environmental organisation in the world" (Iqbal, 2019), I expected there to be a large amount of news coverage surrounding these events. Additionally, the Covid pandemic made it difficult for activists to organize themselves in 2019 and 2020, so I expected less news about activism in those years. Any and all articles discussing protests were entered into a spreadsheet; however, 50 articles from each source (if there were 50+ articles available) were randomly selected for DCA because a) data saturation seemed to come about after around 20-30 articles, and b) politically right-adjacent news publications reported protests more often than left-adjacent news publications. There was no obvious benefit in coding, for example, 20 *Fox News* articles to every 1 CNN article. In total, 345 articles were included in this study.

Any coverage of direct-action green protests was eligible for inclusion. Articles that covered specific protests were selected as opposed to pieces that exclusively reviewed movements, organizations, and/or protest ideologies. Those pieces offer interesting insights into how publications/journalists regard green activist groups, but not only is the current literature already ripe with studies that include articles of this type, I was interested in the types of criticism/support that articles purveyed and what protest/protestor characteristics were most salient in engendering them. Thus, my focus was on articles that reported on and responded to specific protest events. Protests were labelled as having one of five goals: a) blockage, b) destruction, c) vandalization, d) violence, e) picket line/demonstration, or f) combination. These labels were established during the coding and analysis phase of the study and made it possible for me to measure how often each kind of protest was covered and how the goal of a protest influenced the quality of its media attention.

It is worth noting that some of these news publications are politically biased. For instance, *Fox News* is famously conservative, even being referred to as a conservative media establishment that functions as an echo chamber (Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). *The Sun* and the *Toronto Sun* are generally viewed as right-adjacent news publications. And, conversely, *The New York Times* is more often than not left leaning in its coverage of green activism. *CBC News*, *CBS*, and *CNN* are often presumed to favour the left. The variety of political stances in these publications offers interesting avenues for qualitative analysis. Thus, I performed a comparative analysis between left-leaning and right-leaning publications on how they covered green protest

The difficulty in such a comparative analysis lies in the conceptually nebulous dichotomy of 'left politics' and 'right politics.' This is, and has long been, a great

dilemma for the political scientist – what passes as ‘leftist’ politics, for instance, is frightfully unclear – and the determinacy of what constitutes a positionality is heavily influenced by regionality, current and historical leanings of dominant political parties, and heterogenous notions of what is considered to be the status quo. That is, a counterculture in one social may be the conventional elsewhere; a reformist movement could identify with the ‘left’ or the ‘right’ depending on the political climate of the country they exist, etc. In this study, I interpreted ‘leftist media’ or ‘left-adjacent media’ as publications that have historically been categorized as such in the mainstream of their respective country. This is a by no means a perfect remedy for the malady of conceptual ambiguity

### *iii. Coding and Analysis*

Where this research differs from more orthodox content analysis approaches is in how *themes* are formulated. Orthodox approaches define themes as the subjective interpretations of how underlying meanings are expressed (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). With DCA, we attempt to “...understand the underlying contexts for using explicit versus euphemistic terms” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1285). For instance, Yarosh (2023) identified “negativity as the norm,” “a lack of specifics,” and “the removal of humans from the issues” as three salient motifs in *Time Magazine’s* coverage of environmental issues (p. 7). Yarosh’s (2023) coding was committed to providing new frameworks for understanding how the media facilitates the symbolic annihilation of environmental issues through journalistic routines. Likewise, in order to further theorize how these news publications frame green activism, I read over each news article a number of times with the treadmill of law and the treadmill of media in mind. I recorded handwritten notes regarding tone, criticism, phraseology, rhetoric, focal points, and the news publication, and then engaged in focused coding. In the end, I was left with a number of themes and observations.

I started with several themes and codes that I prefigured to be salient or notable in the selected articles; these themes and codes were informed by extant protest paradigm, green criminology, and media analysis literatures as well as my own observations regarding media rhetoric and news coverage. I expected certain topics to be present in articles covering direct-action green protestors, including protestor arrest, protestor rationale, protest type, assemblage size, established groups present, political alignment, demographics, stated violence, negative phraseology, and environmental racism. After my first read-through of the articles, several codes were revised; some were removed and replaced by multiple new codes, enabling greater nuance of analysis. For instance, ‘negative phraseology’ was cleaved into ‘anti-protestor voices,’ ‘militant language,’ ‘political contention,’ and ‘conflict;’ and, ‘protestor arrest’ became ‘criminalization,’ ‘dispersal,’ and ‘police presence.’ Moreover, additional codes were added inductively as new notable and salient themes became apparent: ‘Call to act,’ ‘youth,’ and ‘celebrity,’ are a few examples. Subsequent read-throughs of the articles each offered new insights into different ways that media publications select and frame green protest. Just as Lee (2014) had mentioned in his analysis of Hong Kong protests, I too acknowledge that my range of factors is not comprehensive (p. 2334); but in seeking



to explain *what*, and not *how* – as this falls outside the scope of my research – factors most elucidate the treadmill of media, the codebook was considered finalized once I had enough data to answer that specific question.

#### 4. Findings

##### *i. Tone of Coverage*

The findings indicate that protest on behalf of animals engenders less nuanced criticisms than environmental protest; animal activists are generally depicted as immature, nuisance radicals/extremists. In total, there were 54 references to green activists as immature and trivial, and despite making up less than 20% of the dataset, animal activists made up 41% of that category. They were also considered dangerous 15% of the time and nuisances 24% of the time. When measuring the dataset in its entirety, animal protest prompts 0.80 critiques per article, but the number is predominantly inflated by politically right-wing publications – 74% of the critiques levied against animal activists, and 100% of the critiques labelling them as radical, dangerous, and politically motivated were made by Fox News and Toronto Sun (See Table 1 for frequencies of different critiques). What became abundantly clear is that animal protest coverage is rarely taken seriously and is trivialized instead.

Animal protestors are often used as the brunt of journalists' and counter-protestors' demeaning humour. Whereas environmentalism coverage may highlight the presence of counter-protestors or irritated civilians, animal protests are met with pranksters and jokers that consider "trolling vegan protesters by eating 'world's biggest burger' in front of them" a mature form of counterprotest (Wilford, 2021). Protests are usually either depicted as unlawful, silly and unmeritorious, and not well thought-out. Protestors are criticized for only advocating on behalf of cutesy, traditionally lovable animals and for failing to attribute anthropomorphism to all animals. More space is usually spent giving voice to corporate heads, agricultural industry leaders, and anti-vegan individuals than the protestors or advocacy group spokespersons. In this way, there is implicit preferential treatment for the animal agriculture industry and non-vegan perspectives in the coverage of animal protests.

**Table 1.** Salient critiques (Anti-protest voices & Public Complaints) of activists in US & Canadian publications.

	CBS	NYT	FOX	SUN	CBC	CTV	CNN	TO SUN
	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	16/46	12/50	35/50	13/13	8/50	14/50	17/46	24/40
<b><i>Framing of Critical Articles</i></b>								
Episodic	14	2	30	13	6	14	12	24
Thematic	2	10	5	0	2	0	2	1
<b><i>Critiques of Activists</i></b>								
Unsuitable methods	1	1	4	3	3	0	3	8
But, sympathetic	1	1	0	0	3	0	1	1
Immature/arrogant	1	3	17	18	1	4	3	9
Radical/extremist	0	2	9	7	1	3	1	11

Non-scientific/uninformed	9	2	13	3	5	10	3	9
Political/Ideological tribalism	0	1	8	0	0	5	0	7
Counterproductive	1	4	4	1	0	0	3	2
Anti-progress/economy	1	0	14	1	0	3	2	0
Dangerous	0	2	6	4	0	2	3	15
Unnecessary nuisance	8	5	16	11	5	3	6	17
<b>Average Number of Critiques per Article</b>	0.48	0.42	1.82	3.46	0.36	0.62	0.54	2.20

Whereas protests on behalf of animals prompted an average 0.80 critiques per article, environmental activism prompted 1.14 critiques per article. Animal activism was generally treated as a non-issue and was depicted as immature and unimportant. Although this sentiment does surround environmental activists as well, the environmental movement is treated as a more capable and complex entity than animal advocacy. Criticism is more sophisticated, regarding environmental protest as having greater worldwide support and being more of a threat to the status quo than animal protest. Although some publications, namely the *US SUN*, selectively choose environmental protest coverage to offer its readers more casual, disparaging coverage of “eco-zealots” and “environmental yobs,” coverage is still more nuanced when covering the environmental movement (The *US SUN*, 2022). Environmentalists are sometimes depicted as being simultaneously capable of “hamstringing [the] economy” and being immature ideologues (Catenacci, 2022). Like animal protest, environmental protest is more heavily criticized by politically right-wing publications. Right-wing publications are 3.14 times as likely as left-wing publications to criticize green protest – 2.84 times as likely to criticize protest on behalf of animals. Conversely, left-adjacent publications are more prone to contextualizing protest goals (See Table 2), offering protestor voices, and providing explanations of the environmental issues that protestors are speaking out about.

**Table 2.** The Rhetoric of Protests and the Depth of Coverage in US & Canadian Publications.

	CBS	NYT	FOX	SUN	CBC	CTV	CNN	TOSUN
	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	46	50	50	13	50	50	46	40
<b>Rhetoric of Protest</b>								
Animal Activism	20	5	13	0	6	11	1	12
Environmental Activism	36	45	37	13	44	39	45	28
<b>Depth of Coverage</b>								
Episodic	41	7	41	13	34	45	30	38
Thematic	5	43	9	0	16	5	15	2
Contrasting voices	10	6	18	1	4	10	15	2
Contextualized protest	7	22	3	0	16	12	14	3

ii. *Depth of Coverage (Episodic vs. Thematic)*

Seventy-two percent of the articles (249) were episodic in nature, i.e., protest events are simply chronicled and not explained in detail; protestor goals are not contextualized further than a short blurb (See Table 2 for frequency of thematic/episodic articles per publication). That is, protestors are referred to with broad strokes as ‘protestors’ for a ‘given cause,’ with little additional detail to qualify their goals or values. For instance, “Twenty protesters were arrested at the scene of a climate demonstration that blocked traffic for several hours on the Bloor Viaduct on Monday” was the extent of context given in an article chronicling a protest in Toronto, Ontario (CBC News, 2019). Conversely, more thematic articles go further into platforming a protest’s goals. This excerpt from CBC is indicative of more thematic-oriented coverage:

Extinction Rebellion has three key objectives: to see governments communicate and act with urgency around climate change; engage citizens through an assembly that will determine policies to stop climate change; and ensure carbon emissions are reduced to net zero by 2025 — a deadline 25 years shorter than that proposed by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (CBC News, 2021).

Of the eight publications studied, only the *New York Times* wrote thematic articles with consistency, and the *US Sun* was the only publication that wrote 100% episodic articles. The strongest predictor of whether an article will be episodic or thematic in nature is the news outlet. Publications tend to stick to one form of storytelling instead of flip-flopping between different styles depending on the nature of a protest. Potential predictors such as protestor arrest, protestor cause (animal vs environmental protest), protest type, assemblage size, established groups present, or political alignment had associated weak correlation coefficients of -0.071, -0.016, 0.032, 0.015, -0.044, and -0.009 respectively. Low-profile, grassroots protests are slightly predictive of more episodic coverage (0.428), but this is still highly dependent on the publication. Although some publications – namely *CBC* and *CNN* – do offer both thematic and episodic coverages of activism, the quality and length of their thematic pieces vary greatly from articles from predominantly thematic publications such as the *New York Times*.

The *New York Times* publishes almost exclusively thematic stories that tend to platform protestor and protest spokesperson’s voices. It is generally more overtly sympathetic towards green activism than other news publications, and controversial protest events are served up to readers with multiple perspectives offered. Moreover, a selection bias that favours green activism is seemingly clear. As outlined by McCarthy et al. (1996), journalists find newsworthy “news pegs” in stories on which they maintain their focus (p. 480). McCarthy et al. (1996) outline “notoriousness,” “consequentiality,” “extraordinary,” and “cultural resonance” as the four main characteristics that journalists look for in a story. And, *NYT* articles seem to look for stories that hit on these four characteristics, offering the biggest spectacles for the reader. That is, along with *CBC* and *CNN*, *NYT* articles tend to focus on high-profile protests organized by vogue, formalized activist groups like Extinction Rebellion or Save Old Growth. Moreover, 21

out of the 50 *NYT* articles depicted protests with 1000 or more participants, and 30/50 featured more than 500 participants.

*NYT* articles tend to be long-form and thematic in design (43 of the 50 articles follow a thematic framework). Whereas it is common for *FOX*, *TO SUN*, and *CTV* to focus on the chants of protestors, *NYT* articles generally opt for a number of statements from activists and interview anecdotes. By quoting a protestor as saying “You can have a million people marching through the city each week and no one cares. But you block a road, people stand up and take notice. Such activities have also inspired people to join,” the journalist humanizes an individual and provides some context to the reader about protest techniques (Marshall, 2018). This type of coverage is preferable to episodic coverage that spotlights chants uttered by protestors through loudspeakers, which may identify them as a sort of angry mob.

*NYT* and *CNN* articles use imagery more generously than other news publications. Pictures of children painting pro-environment signage and close-up shots of protestors holding up bristol boards reading mantras like “respect your mother” or “fight for *our* future” are littered among articles (E.g., Sengupta, 2021). Employment of demeaning and criminalizing terms like ‘eco-terrorist,’ ‘extremist,’ or ‘eco-idiot’ is non-existent in *NYT*, *CNN*, *CBC*, and *CTV* articles, and on the rare occasions where ‘radical’ comes up, the journalist takes time to report their stories. As opposed to seeing more radical and controversial forms of protest as cause célèbre, journalists provide some semblance of a platform for activists to expound their values and beliefs.

Twenty-three of the 50 *NYT* articles talk about the arrest of protestors, and *environmentalists* are framed in one of two ways: a) as believers of a cause, willing to face conviction or b) utterly terrified of the prospect of arrest, but courageous in the face of it. However, *animal advocates* and *vegan activists* are not covered as supportively or commonly by *NYT* as environmentalists; *NYT* articles regarding them are not inflammatory but their infrequency is perhaps telling: only 5 of the 50 articles regarded animal-related protests. And, opening an article by saying: “When vegan activists *halted* morning traffic on Monday at one of Australia’s *busiest* intersections, Prime Minister Scott Morrison described their actions as ‘un-Australian’” (Albeck-Ripka, 2019), is not a particularly warm welcome to activist readers.

*NYT* articles regarding animal protests take episodic approaches, and although they are not wholly negative depictions of activists, they do not offer the same level of support for the protesters as they generally do for environmental protestors. This could be due to animal welfare protests being less fashionable than more environmentally-centric protests, or it could be that even green-friendly news publications still prefer anthropocentric (humans first) models of environmentalism, and therefore deem animal issues as less important. Another potential explanation, and perhaps the most likely, could be corporate hegemony (McCarthy et al., 1996). The *NYT* finds environmentalism coverage financially rewarding, and animal issues are simply not that newsworthy. The comments section on all *NYT* articles is seemingly indicative of this too; some articles on climate protests can have hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of commenters. Three of the animal activist articles garnered no comments. In the other two, commenters are

conflicted, if not explicitly opposed to, animal activism while they are almost always supportive of environmental demonstrations.

Being a tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, expectedly, has the fewest mentions of green protest out of the 8 selected news publications. In fact, I was unable to collect 50 articles from *The Sun*. In total, *The Sun* has only published 13 articles even mentioning green protests between 2018 and 2022. Despite the dearth of articles, *The Sun* managed to be the distributor with the most extensive catalogue of green activist-derogating jargon out of the bunch, utilizing terms like “eco-zealots,” “eco-idiot,” and “eco mobs.”

Whereas a vital tenet of the *New York Times*’ and *CNN*’s protest paradigm is to refocus attention from protests to activists’ stories and voices (See Table 3 for data regarding representation of protestors), Fox News prefers to report on green protest almost to the point of oversaturation. Querying all the other news publications’ archives for articles featuring the phrase “environmental protest,” for instance, returned less than 1500 articles and in most cases less than 500. Certainly, most of these articles do not detail specific protests, but discuss green issues instead. However, querying *Fox News* the same way as the rest returned about 17,900 articles. Granted, just like the other distributors, some articles are case studies on certain activist groups/anti-activist groups, Op-Eds on environmentalism as a concept, or discussions that contrast activist beliefs with alternative perspectives. But, as far as sheer quantity of articles go, Fox News beats out all the other news publications. This could be an example of “mediatization” (Van der Meer et al., 2018), where overrepresentation of a specific issue compounded with primarily negative discussion of said issue can inform, distort (Pinker, 2019), and canonize conceptualizations of deviance of a group (Saïd, 1986).

**Table 3.** Dominant frames and codes in publications in US & Canadian Publications.

	CBS	NYT	FOX	SUN	CBC	CTV	CNN	TOSUN
	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	46	50	50	13	50	50	46	40
<b>Representation</b>								
“Complicated passions”	4	5	3	0	4	4	4	3
“Youth movement”	3	13	6	2	15	7	13	2
Celebrity	4	1	3	1	1	1	2	1
“Eco-anxiety”	3	10	3	1	4	4	10	5
Call to action	3	14	7	1	9	11	13	2
Protestor voices	14	31	13	2	27	24	25	13
Spokesperson	5	16	8	0	13	25	27	7
Militant language	2	2	4	4	0	3	0	5
Anti-protest voices	13	10	30	11	7	14	10	24

Fox News and the Toronto Sun do not seem to use selection bias as a mode of reinforcing values or concepts. Instead of exclusively covering controversial forms of green protest, they provide a panoramic view of green issues, covering seemingly all forms of protest and activism. However, the tones and phraseologies that are used by journalists are decidedly and unforgivingly rhetoric-laden and stiff; negative framing and

epistemological biases are commonplace. For instance, the subtitle of an article covering a regular non-violent pipeline protest reads “Business owner says: ‘opponents are shielding themselves with Native Americans’” (Lucas, 2021). Because many traditional theories of the protest paradigm suggest that media groups pick and choose topics to cover based on how they fit in with corporate interests, Fox News, especially, presents an interesting conundrum. Instead of conservative and critical topic-selection, *FOX* journalists seem to nonselectively choose protests, and approach them in epistemologically stiff manners that uphold anti-dissent values without challenge. For instance, two articles detail large-scale student protests of climate change between September 20-27 in 2019, where an NYC school district allowed students to participate in climate change protests; in these articles, journalists call grade school teachers “hysterical climate alarmists,” “communists,” and even berate them by putting the word “teacher” in quotations when referring to them (e.g., Bertz, 2019; Friedrichs, 2019).

Thirty-two of the 50 *FOX* articles mention activists being arrested, which makes them the publication that mentions criminalization the most. In some of the 18 articles that did not mention arrests, there are hypertexts linked to other tangentially related articles reading things like “arrested outside of a Whole Foods in San Francisco” (Hollan, 2019), or “...Reported making more than two-dozen arrests as of Monday afternoon.” Additionally, 26 articles spoke about activists being dispersed. Some articles chose to eschew overt criticism of activist activity, while still deliberately including certain buzzwords that are instilled with a negative connotation in the minds of *FOX*’s primarily politically right-adjacent audience. Notably, ‘liberal’ is commonly used as a kind of pejorative, while ‘extremist’ and ‘illegal’ are hammered home in articles that cover protests that approach more widespread blockage of city streets (Shaw, 2020). Forty-two of the *FOX* News articles were episodic in nature, and only four of the articles were distinctively thematic. The remaining four articles were episodic in nature but would offer one-sided perspectives on the protests being discussed or brief superficial exploration of what/why the activists were protesting. And none of the nine articles explicitly referring to activists as violent were handled thematically.

Activist Greta Thunberg is commonly mentioned by all 8 publications, regularly represented as being “uncertain” and childish. Similarly, democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s (AOC) involvement with green protest is regularly mentioned, and is always covered in a begrudging tone; and, her ideas regarding environmental issues are often represented in a dismissive tone. For instance, “She [AOC] called for politicians to forsake donations from the [fossil fuel] industry” (O’Reilly, 2018). Out of all 345 articles in the dataset, actor Jane Fonda and Canadian environmental activist David Suzuki – both polarizing figures in their own regards – have 11 and 4 mentions respectfully. Four *FOX* articles discuss Fonda and one discusses Suzuki. And, both are mentioned in a *Toronto Sun* piece stating that “Ford [Ontario’s Premier] needs to ignore radical environmentalists who oppose building anything at all” (Lilley, 2022).

### *iii. Political Parallax*

It is common in conservative publications for green activists to be depicted in a dehumanized state as points of political conflict; activists are represented not as

purveyors of provocative ideas or advocates for green solutions, but instead as individual points of political and ideological contention. Environmentalists are rarely identified through the cause(s) or beliefs that they explicitly advocate on behalf of, but through predefined, archetypal identities such as “leftist,” “left-wing,” “liberal,” or even “far-left” and “antifa” that may promote the notion that participation in more disruptive forms of green protest is a tactic exclusively employed by members of the political left. A possible explanation for this routinized “common sense” conflation of leftist groups and environmental groups is that conservatism in developed capitalist countries feature a negative correlation between GDP and pro-environmental sentiments (Gramsci, 1937/1971; Nawrotzki, 2012; Kojola, 2015, p. 894), and that right-adjacent individuals are more likely to see green policies as going against national interests and economic growth (Kojola, 2017). Thus, if more politically right readers see green protest as advocating for a hamstrung economy, they may see them as a political opponent. Funk & Hefferon (2019) found that whereas 81% of Liberal Democrats think climate policies do “more good than harm for the environment,” 75% of Conservative Republicans believed the opposite to be true (p. 9). The image of a ‘liberal’ environmentalist is doubly polarizing; ideologically, some readers may already be epistemologically biased against green activism going into an article – seeing activists referred to as “far-left” or “leftist” further feeds the reader’s bias. The following excerpt from *FOX News* discusses how ‘liberal’ values in public schools are rising:

Simple deductive reasoning reveals that union-controlled school districts are exploiting our kids for their political agenda. What kid wouldn’t skip school to hang out with friends at a big well-funded event that causes worldwide controversy and receives massive media coverage? (Friedrichs, 2019)

Belittling activism while also generalizing green activists as zealous ‘liberals’ is a tactic employed by right-leaning publications that also represent protests done by activists against Liberal or Democrat leaders as self-contradicting. Some articles claim green activists are contradicting themselves, confused, or ill-informed when they protest at, for instance, Joe Biden’s speeches for his alleged failures and lacklustre performance tackling green issues. By labelling, and subsequently politicizing green activists so broadly as devout leftists, publications assume a monolith exists, and that green activists protesting leftist politicians or speakers somehow suggests ideological and political ambivalence. This disregards the reality that members of any given political party are not homogenous and that current left-adjacent North American leaders, namely Justin Trudeau and Joe Biden, are often interpreted by green activism groups as economically right-wing and against degrowth principles and green-first policies. In other words, North American leadership is rather climate moderate, and green advocacy groups are generally not satisfied with such moderacy or inaction. Thus, treating green activism as a “religion of the left” not only further polarizes the issue, but incorrectly simplifies it as an issue of ‘red vs. blue’ that comes across as newsworthy and poignant to certain readers.

Additionally, *Toronto Sun* and *FOX* articles depict green activists as simultaneously a pointless, naïve group of green ideologues and a passionate crowd of dreamers that

leftist politicians are so cruel for fraudulently virtue signaling towards. In a *Toronto Sun* article titled “Trudeau joins climate protest against himself,” the focus was for once not the protestors or their supposedly disruptive nature, but Justin Trudeau’s “hypocrisy — on steroids” (Goldstein, 2019). The thousands of activists present at the protest were not depicted as individuals protesting, but homogenously as victims of Trudeau’s climate hypocrisy and false interest in their message. Trudeau’s inability to meet his government’s projected emissions goals was the focal point of the article; and, this article was one of only two slightly thematic articles in the *Toronto Sun* dataset-- the other a piece criticizing “vigilante” vegan for protesting outside of a restaurant (Wallace, 2018).

Conversations surrounding the criminalization and dispersal of green activists had little to do with disruptivity or the dangerousness of their protests, but predominantly had to do with the challenges to the status quo and the caretakers of the status quo that the protests threatened. Only 23 articles (7%) referred to protestors as violent. It was much more common for articles to focus on the legitimacy and potential polarizing effects of activist ideology, or the goals of the protestors, albeit with biased judgment - sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit. Instead of simply chronicling disruptive events, journalists have a tendency to introduce their position on the protest’s efficacy (Chuang & Taylor, 2023). Only 64 articles featured ‘contrasting voices,’ which would offer voices in favour of and against protests, although both sides are rarely given equal representation in these articles. In this way, journalists have a hand in manufacturing what the ‘mainstream’ is by selecting what voices and what ‘common sense’ values are chronicled. As shown in Table 3, the number of ‘protestor voices’ and ‘anti-protest voices’ included differ quite significantly between publications. Oftentimes, coverage of disruptive green protest is an opportunity to advance certain political beliefs and challenge or support the acceptability of green protest. The following excerpt from the *Toronto Sun* exemplifies this.

We’ve had weak political leadership, at all levels, and police afraid to act without the backing of their political masters, treating the protesters as if they were the mainstream. They are not. (Lilley, 2020)

In this case, green advocates are not to be seen as ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary,’ but as impedances to the status quo. Rampant conflation of ‘liberal’ progressivism and green advocates’ own wishes for ‘progressive,’ or as put plainly by activists, ‘necessary,’ environmental policies are covered alongside journalist/editorial board opinions about political developments. Unsurprisingly, policies and regulations that would make the dispersal of protests easier and less discriminate are also covered differently depending on the politics of the publication. Publications on the left platform activists and protestors who deem these policies as infringing on their rights and as anti-dissent laws, while publications on the right tend to highlight the benefits of “...calling for police to do their job and restore law and order to Canada” as “multiple lines have been



crossed in the lawlessness that has descended upon our country [via green activist groups] from coast-to-coast” (Toronto Sun, 2020).

*iv. The Youth, the Dissenter*

“Specifically with the kids, I’m not sure they take it [activism] seriously. We aren’t supposed to take them literally. Activism is a form of social currency. It’s fun for them,” writes one journalist (Carlson, 2019). According to another, “They’re all supposed to be intelligent people. It looks like there’s a lot of common sense that has missed their generation” (Gaydos, 2019). Although 45% of articles discussing youth protest also brought up the arrests of protestors, it was highly irregular for conversations of youth protest to mingle with themes of radicalism or dangerousness. Although articles on youth activism offered criticism 41% of the time – with an average of 2.16 critiques per article – they were rarely represented as criminal or as deserving of arrest. Instead, articles depicted youth as either the passionate spearhead of modern-day green advocacy, or as simply idealistic and “politically risky.” The following excerpt from *CBC* is an example of when youth are depicted as dangerous “ecoterrorists,” while still pointing out that youth participate in protest as a “cool thing to do” and as a form of social currency.

United Conservative Party MLAs called protestors "ecoterrorists" and "spoiled kids," saying some participants joined blockades because they thought it was a cool thing to do with their friends and post about on social media (French, 2020).

The presence of youth protestors was almost exclusively pointed out when protests involved blockages of city streets or demonstrations that took part near government buildings or schools. It was common for articles to refer to them as irritants or disruptive. There were many articles that featured youth protest that did not actually touch upon youth involvement with the protests – direct-action protest that involved trespassing or acts of vandalization often had younger participants but their ages were never stated, and the protestors were never framed as being youth. Youth are relegated to being passionate ideologues whom sometimes are uneducated on the topics they choose to protest and are left out from coverage of more ‘radical’ or controversial protest. Youth are rarely depicted as genuine or meaningful, or as anything more than participants in disruptive protest. Instead, they are depicted as scapegoats for political movements and as unsophisticated actors.

In 2019, New York City’s Department of Education announced that public school students would be allowed to skip school in order to participate in a climate strike without punishment. The dataset includes 5 articles about the protest from 4 publications; the protest was met with lukewarm reactions in all 5 articles. The most common critique was that it was a forced protest, one that politicized education and aimed to indoctrinate students into climate alarmism. For instance, a *NYT* article stated “Many critics of the protest, including climate-change deniers, argued that Mr. de Blasio was using classroom attendance to promote a political aim” (Barnard & Barron, 2019). Moreover, articles criticized the choice to take kids out of school for civic engagement that would be lost on them. One article goes as far as stating that “This is how union

activist ‘teachers’ get away with using our kids on picket lines and presenting lessons you’d expect to see in Communist China like ‘have one or no children.’” In short, the most common critiques of the youth protestors were that they were too immature and uninformed to participate in any meaningful protest or cognize the concepts that they were protesting on behalf of. Some praised the protest as an opportunity for students to learn about the impact of civic engagement, while others suggested that in-class education of climate change is more important than climate protest.

*v. Disruptive Activists (The Radical? The Criminal? The Terrorist?)*

Sixty-six percent of the articles (228) represented intentionally disruptive forms of protest. Almost all cases of disruptive direct-action protest can fit into two categories: disruption in order to block progress of a certain environmentally troubling development, or disruption in order to garner attention from the public/government. In either case, coverage of these blockages is precisely what protestors want; what is not necessarily wanted is coverage that criticizes their protests and their goals. As this excerpt from the *NYT* states, the increasingly uncomfortable and controversial situations that activists put themselves in are due to a fear of not being properly noticed, not feeble attempts to one-up previous protests:

The radical climate activists tried hunger strikes. They glued themselves to famous paintings. They tried to disrupt a classical concert. They confronted lawmakers trying to enter Parliament. They even desecrated an official Christmas tree of the city of Berlin. It took them donning neon vests, walking into traffic at rush hour and gluing themselves to the streets in Berlin and Munich, causing miles-long backups and bringing drivers to murderous rage, to make their protest impossible to ignore (Schuetze, 2023).

In cases where protests disrupt civilian life for attention, coverage is prone to using demeaning language, considering protestors counterproductive and their methods unsuitable. Seven articles featured quotes from protestors who seem apologetic for their means of protest, but overall think the means are necessary. In episodic forms of coverage, protest goals are rarely laid out for the reader, but more thematic articles tend to offer some details; the most commonly reported goals of disruptive protest are a) spotlighting the movement and garnering attention, b) educating the public on green issues, c) forcing governments to listen and make changes, d) stopping an organization from doing a certain task such as constructing a pipeline, and e) overwhelming police resources.

Protesters are not always framed as disruptive in a criminal way, but as nuisances that make life harder by way of disrupting everyday life. Participants in direct-action protest are not seen as threats to civilian life - as opposed to protestors nearby governmental buildings or sites of critical infrastructure - but as people who are simply confused about what they are protesting. Protestors that irritate civilians and disrupt civilian life, whether that be by way of blocking roads or access to public transportation, are also sometimes understood to be ‘unsophisticated dissenters:’ protestors that are not putting their efforts into the right place. Meanwhile, protests that do approach the

so-called ‘right-places’ are criminal, destructive, and somehow even more reprehensible than those that perform ‘counterproductive’ protests against civilians who cannot fix the climate crisis. The following excerpt from *CTV* is indicative of this kind of coverage:

...[This protestor] appears to be the type of person these [activist] groups entice and basically use as sacrificial lambs for their causes... I find this conduct reprehensible as they hide behind the persons who have come before me, good people and people such as [the protestor], who says that he was given a sense of purpose and belonging by these groups (Holliday, 2022).

In this way, protestors are represented as not having total autonomy over their protest decisions. In the same way as youth are stripped of any legitimacy simply by being youth, protestors participating in demonstrations that disrupt traffic, public transportation, or civilian events are not offered much plaudits or sympathy in news coverage. Nearly all disruptive-to-civilian protest is covered episodically; and, the *New York Times* - the publication that seems the most sympathetic and supportive of green activism - did not cover even one of these types of protest. This may be emblematic of an underlying understanding that disruptive-to-civilian protest is unlikely to garner support from the general public (Table 4 shows the most reported forms of disruptive protest).

**Table 4.** Salient ‘Types of Disruptivity’ Chronicled in US & Canadian Publications.

	CBS	NYT	FOX	SUN	CBC	CTV	CNN	TOSUN
	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	46	50	50	13	50	40	46	40
<i>Disruptivity</i>								
Critical Infrastructure	10	11	16	1	14	17	7	7
Public Complaints	4	4	10	3	2	4	8	10
Vandalization	5	1	7	3	7	1	6	12
Blockage	22	29	31	6	20	31	28	19
Political Protest	6	17	16	5	8	7	12	5

On the other hand, in line with previous studies’ findings, coverage of protest surrounding sites of critical infrastructure is the most likely to discuss legal controversy and pro-economic sentiments. Activists were blatantly critiqued for being anti-economy/growth 21 times in the dataset, and 18 of those critiques came in articles covering sites of critical infrastructure: pipelines, factory farms, coal mines, etc. Phrases like ‘eco-terror’ get thrown around when coverage approaches critical infrastructure too. A *CBC* article quoted a CEO of a major energy company saying ‘small interest groups’ stand in the way of Canadian development, and that blockading or disrupting pipeline development is a new form of eco-terrorism. In short, protestors are pitted against their fellow countryfolk, as shown in the following *FOX* News excerpt:

Stopping average Canadians from getting the propane they need to heat their homes, the chlorine their town needs to clean their water or even stopping

them from getting to work, will not win over supporters from fixing real issues (Wallace, 2020).

This quote furthers an ‘us vs. them’ attitude with ‘average Canadians’ and ‘small’ green activists pitted against each other. This is echoed in other articles that suggest “we cannot have protests conducted by a small minority disrupting the lives of the ordinary public” (McGee, 2023). The anti-economic discourse that gets passed around when discussing this form of protest lends easily to discussion of activists being criminal. But coverage that normalizes the idea of activists being anti-economy and anti-YOU makes conversations of criminalization more acceptable and even enjoyable.

**Table 5.** Chronicled Political Responses in US & Canadian Publications.

	CBS	NYT	FOX	SUN	CBC	CTV	CNN	TOSUN
	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	46	50	50	13	50	50	46	40
<b>Political Responses</b>								
Dispersal	21	24	33	13	18	14	18	21
Deaths	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	3
Criminalization	21	23	32	13	16	16	18	19
Police presence	9	10	13	6	9	8	23	17
Abusive	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Positive	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Indifferent	8	9	9	6	9	8	23	17

Forty-six percent of the dataset (158) featured the arrest/arraignment of green protestors (See Table 5 for frequency of reported criminalization per publication); 30 articles had the word ‘arrest’ in their title. Ten articles had the criminalization of protestors as a focal point - two of the articles covered the arraignment of two animal activists, and the others episodically mentioned the arrest and charging of various disruptive activists. Coverage of criminalization is varied, with some claiming that protestors deserve arrest as they “have inflicted misery for far too long” (US SUN, 2023), while others quote activists saying that “[they] don't do civil disobedience as a first effort” (Lewis, 2020). However, the latter is uncommon, as articles featuring the arrest of protestors only platform protestor’s voices 35% of the time. It is more common that an article simply mentions the arrests or condemns it. In the case of the *US SUN*, all forms of protest are seemingly deserving of criminalization and dispersal; all 13 *US SUN* articles commend arrests and/or call for more liberal arresting. And the *US SUN* is peculiarly explicit about their distrust of green advocacy, referring to even modest demonstrations as displays of eco-idiocy.

Although a common theme identified in the analysis is the blatant trivialization of protestors, paradoxically, they were sometimes depicted as seriously concerning. Framing protestors as ‘radicals’ or ‘extremists’ was not exceptionally common; there were 34 explicit mentions of protestors being radical or extremist in the dataset. ‘Extremist’ did not always imply criminal, but was used as a pejorative and seemingly

synonymous with bully. Similarly, ‘radical’ was not always used to call protestors criminal, but to differentiate them from slacktivists. Even small picket-lines or non-disruptive demonstrations were labelled as radical, as the term has seemingly evolved from referring to specifically - supposedly - dangerous radicals like those fear-inducing Earth First! activists of the early 1980s, to now simply referring to activists upholding ideas that espouse status quo-incompatible values and ideas. For instance,

Vegan extremists have bullied a mom-and-pop butcher shop in California’s most liberal city into hanging an animal rights sign in the window that the shop owners say amounts to “ethical extortion.” (Fox News, 2018)

What colloquially counts as ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ is starkly different from what intelligence agencies might say. Whereas the media’s depiction of the ‘extremist’ green activist is not necessarily a violent saboteur, the FBI considers ‘extremists’ as those terrorist-inclined (FBI, 2005). However, the radical green activist is whatever a publication needs it to be: green activists are radical if they do not fit in. Someone standing at a picket line, a youth that has been ‘indoctrinated’ into the climate alarmist cult by their woke teachers, someone blocking an intersection with a long banner that reads ‘Save Old Growth,’ a climate group yelling at a politician, or even just a woman letting a pig sip water from a dixie cup before s/he gets sent off to the slaughterhouse. All radicals; none the same.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Mediatization is when overrepresentation of a specific event compounded with primarily negative discussion of said issue can inform, distort (Van der Meer et al., 2018; Pinker, 2019), and canonize conceptualizations of deviance of a group (Saïd, 1986). And, a group’s perceived identity helps fit groups neatly into digestible standardized molds (Saïd, 1981; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Using these molds in order to create newsworthy stories, news publications participate in the treadmill of media – mainstream “common-sense” assumptions about a conflict between green activism and capitalist growth ideology feed into what is considered newsworthy by different publications (McCarthy et al., 1996; Kojola, 2015, p. 894). Media that further propagates negative common-sense assumptions about the legitimacy, purpose, and ideological backbones of green activism attaches unsavoury labels to the groups that were not of their own design (Sobieraj, 2010; Joosse et al., 2012; Sheldrick, 2013). In this way, news publications insulate audiences into seeing negatively connotated depictions of ‘the activist’ object (Chomsky, 2006), effectively reinforcing the status quo of anti-green sentiment (Stretesky et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2020), and implicitly manufacturing mainstream consent for potentially further mistreatment or even criminalization and terrorization of green protest activities (Chomsky, 2006; Glasser, 2011; Loadenthal, 2017).

As with the treadmill of production and the treadmill of law (Schnaiberg, 1980; Lynch et al., 2020), the treadmill of media is highly political. And all these treadmills work in tandem. Theorizing the causal nature between the three is outside the scope of this paper, but understanding the political undertones – perhaps overtones – of

publications that guide their positionalities on green protest is telling of their stances, incidental or otherwise, on the treadmill of production and treadmill of law. As has been outlined in other studies, green protest is undergoing **quiet** – not loud – criminalization around the world (Loadenthal, 2017; Potter, 2012). The power that publications – namely *FOX* and the *Toronto Sun* – have to instill anti-dissent values in readers is extreme and crucially political in nature. If exposure to often vitriolic anti-dissent sentiments exhorts audiences to vote for political parties with the expectation of bringing disruptive green protest to an end, then the treadmill of media is functioning as intended. (Lee, 2014). But as I have tried to show in this paper, the consistent framing of green activists as points of political contention and as a homogenous yet ideologically and politically ambivalent group paints the ‘common sense’ picture of the ‘unsophisticated dissenter’ (Gramsci, 1937/1971). Any monolith comes with its fair share of untruths, but the problem with mainstream depictions of groups is that the sentiments inherent in them have the potential to inform social, epistemological, and legal canons surrounding specific identities.

It is worth iterating that all eight of the news publications examined are independent producers of rhetoric. Further, the notion of a universalized protest paradigm was not apparent. However, certain themes do seem to predict more negative coverage. As I examined these articles, it became clear that criminalization was not judged as a matter of purely legal or social mechanisms, but as a vehicle to distinguish an author’s/publication’s political stance. Protestors are not ordinary, normal, or average peoples, but are sometimes considered counterproductive; they exist outside of the mainstream. It is hard to parse the conversation on political contention out from the criminological, as they are most often spoken of simultaneously and to suggest, and comfortably assume, that right-wing or conservative interpretations of economic best-interests are diametrically opposed to green activists’ interpretations of the conflict between economics and environment; i.e., the treadmill of production. This constructed archetype is further evinced by the consistent positive/thematic coverage coming out of left-adjacent publications and the reverse published by right-adjacent publications. Coverage featuring the criminalization of activism is embarrassingly disinterested in the nature and goals of the protests, and instead primarily influenced by the political leanings of news publications. Left-adjacent publications will often not mention arrests of protestors even when arrests had occurred, and the reverse is true for right-adjacent. Contrary to protest paradigm studies, the disruptivity or illegality of a protest does not reliably predict less supportive or more episodic coverage – moreover, the episodic/thematic quality of an article is not heavily influenced by protest characteristics. Simply, a different paradigm for protest coverage is present in every publication.

The findings are in accordance with more contemporary protest paradigm research, suggesting against the original – and perhaps once true – hypothesis that a universal paradigm drives journalistic routines; instead, routines appear to be mediated through a sort of political parallax (Di Ciccio, 2010; Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Kojola, 2015; Mourão, 2023; Chuang & Taylor, 2023). An explicit paradigm does not appear to have a grip on some mainstream publications, as “counter-hegemonic media” is

increasingly common (Chuang & Taylor, 2023). Framing biases that favour activist dissent are most commonly found in politically-left publications, although protests on behalf of animals and disruptive-to-civilian protests are seeming exceptions to the rule.

Little research has been done on the effects that protest size, group affiliation, disruptivity, and criminalization have on the thematic/episodic nature of articles covering specifically green protestors (Boyle et al., 2012). However, research regarding other forms of protests generally purports that these factors inform the episodic/thematic nature of coverage in slight ways (Chan & Lee, 1984; Mourão & Brown, 2022). I found no evidence that these factors have any significant impact on the methods of storytelling used in articles whatsoever. Instead, the ideological, political, and epistemological biases upheld by different publications seem to be the strongest predictor of the episodic/thematic nature of articles. Furthermore, contradicting my expectations was the observation that protestors were rarely depicted as threats to peoples' safety and well-being but more often to the established status quo. The observation that the 'status quo' is something protestors must be careful not to stray too far from is in line with the consensus in protest scholarship (Di Ciccio, 2010; Boyle et al., 2012). However, the lack of explicit reference to green protestors as violent, radical, or extremist contradicts earlier assumptions about mainstream coverage of green protest (Manes, 1990; Joosse, 2012; Loadenthal, 2013a).

My examination concludes that while it is true that not all articles – and publications – are explicitly anti-green, certain factors do exacerbate the otherization of dissenters. Animal advocacy, youth-led dissent, protest around critical infrastructure, and disruptive-to-civilian protest are all solid predictors for different types of heightened negativity in coverage. In all these cases, protestors have their credibility questioned. These protest characteristics are considered insignificant and their methods as well as goals are treated as moot and disregardable. Denigrating phrases often compound negative framing of protestors.

Many publications appear to take for granted that these kinds of protest are trivial, while also insisting the same of more 'radical' direct-action protest that is doubly polarized by additionally being called criminal and economically destructive. And in the end, it can be difficult – if not impossible – to parse out publication's views on protests deemed 'radical' from those that are not. Phrases and rhetoric that are used to describe protests involving, for instance, vandalization are often carried over into articles covering small-scale picket lines, in some sense equating the two forms of protest. This perhaps explains there being so few explicit references to protestors as 'radicals' and 'eco-terrorists' in the analyzed articles (only 34/345). Established 'common sense' conceptions of protest groups already exist in the mainstream that frame green protesters as dangerous and radical (Kojola, 2015). So today, media responses to environmental activism do not always need to explicitly mention harsh phrases, instead, they can implicitly perpetuate the extant ones and focus on broadening the social strata that they refer to. A 'radical' protestor does not need to be referred to as such for them to fit the common-sense archetype, they simply need to be presented as counter-to-norm. For instance, a *Toronto Sun* article referred to "vigilante," "bully" picket-liners (Wallace, 2018); and, the U.S. senate suggested that environmental and animal

*extremists* and *terrorists* are “bully” vigilantes, all while declining to hear statements from environmental groups during congress hearings (Eco-Terrorism and Lawlessness on the National Forests, 2002, p. 121-127). At the same time, congress did allow multiple lengthy statements from Richard Berman, founder of an infamous anti-environmentalist thinktank which boasts that their motto is: "dedicated to protecting consumer choices and promoting common sense" (Mayer & Joyce, 2005).

Gramsci (1937/1971) had suggested that governments maintained social control not just through political and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the bourgeoisie and the ruling class became the 'common sense' values of all. And the treadmill of media is most conspicuous when publications and public figures espouse values that disparage or discredit those that challenge the status quo (of capitalism) – the preservation of which is invariably dependent on lasting governmental and social maintenance of a particular common sense. Thus, when green protest challenges a status quo surrounding ecological disorganization or the maltreatment of animals, it subsequently challenges certain social strata's common sense(s). 'Eco-terrorist' was not always considered legal jargon, but continued employment of the phrase and a subsequent growing fear of/opposition to direct-action green protest provided enough of a spark for its legitimacy and legal canonization to blossom. Likewise, the 'media control' functions enabled by common sense-dictated 'news pegs' provide manufactured consent for increasingly stringent anti-dissent laws that concurrently target the green protestor, and conceptualize the image of the essential green activist as the 'unsophisticated dissenter'.



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