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How Mainstream and Alternative Media Shape Online Mobilization: A Comparative Study of News Coverages in Post-Colonial Macau

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Abstract: Protests today involve more identities and interests and have more complex relationships with the media ecology than previously. Former studies indicate the need to identify framing patterns within the changing media politics of activism. The current study empirically investigates the media framing of a social-media-driven protest in post-Colonial Macau, China. Drawing on the framing theory and content analysis methodology of 243 news coverage articles, reports, and posts published during the protest, this study explores the correlation between multimedia features. The results show that news coverage of the protest exhibits an issue–attention cycle. Media stance can affect the features of protest coverages significantly. Compared with mainstream media, alternative media adopted a more positive tone in reporting the protests, including quotations from news sources and the framing devices of the protest paradigm (show, goals, public attitude, impact) in favorable terms. The result suggests the activists’ alternative media counteracted the mainstream media’s marginalization by using a form of “legitimization paradigm”.



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1. Introduction

In the digital media era, public engagement can contribute to political change. A recent surge of protest activities has stretched all over the world, ranging from radical protests, such as the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution of 2011, to expressions of political discontent, such as the Tea Party movement, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in the U.S and May Day labor protests around the world. In Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau, protests have grown substantially since the 2000s. The protesters view this as a means of influencing government policymaking (Cottle 2008). The literature provides evidence that mainstream media marginalize protest groups by using the protest paradigm. The mainstream media usually emphasize the protesters’ destructive activities, thus, diminishing the impact of social protests (e.g., Bishop 2013; Boyle et al. 2005; Chan and Lee 1984; Oliverand and Maney 2000; Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Hertog 1999; Milne 2005). The internet is causing a considerable change in the field of protest as new media are used by SMOs to mobilize the protest (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014). Digital technologies are reshaping political activism. This new situation can challenge or change the protest paradigm’s bias against the protest group that might be manipulated by the traditional mainstream media. The mainstream media’s extensive coverage of the protests and the digital media’s involvement have aroused scholars’ interest in the study of protest communication. It is important to explore the diverse range of media responses to protest in the new media ecology.

The current study addresses this question by focusing on mainstream media and alternative media in Macau and how they covered the protests. The singularity in the media and social movement environment makes Macau a suitable place to further test the “protest paradigm”. Since the 1999 handover from Portugal, Macau has been a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), characterized by

the style of association politics, which affects Macau's media environment in turn. The traditional social organizations have long-term cooperative relationships with the Macau government. The organizations play an intermediary role in executing policy and they can bridge the gap between the rulers and the public (Huang 2012). Macau's legislative council consists of the pro-establishment elites and the pro-democracy elites (commonly referred to as representing the "pro-establishment Camp" and the "pro-Democracy Camp"). The pro-establishment camp, which is affiliated with pro-Beijing organizations, is labeled as the "love China and love Macau" Camp (愛國愛澳), and they take a pro-government stance, maintaining the status quo. They are historically rooted in "a patron-clientelist network" (p. 62) with China's central government (Ho 2011), whereas, as Ho (2011) points out, the pro-democracy members are consistently a minority in the legislative council. The pro-democracy camp has no significant effect on the policymaking process. Their activities are usually ignored and marginalized by Macau's mainstream media. As Kwong (2014) said, Macau's mainstream media has "extensive self-censorship" (p. 61) and Macau's newspapers only provide a "stamp-size" corner for the pro-democracy camp (p. 63). As the promoter of democracy and freedom, the pro-democracy camp turns to online media to achieve its political goals. They transmit political slogans, share critiques of the status quo, and mobilize social activities in an online environment (Leng 2009). The pro-establishment camp and the pro-democracy camp are two main political forces in Macau's social movement environment. Each camp uses a different set of media channels to attempt to establish the dominant agenda for political discourse. Given Macau's unique political and media environment, the media's protest-framing process can reflect a competition between the traditional mainstream media, which tend to frame protests as irrational or aggressive activities (Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Detenber 1999), and new media, which legitimize the protest.

Through a case study of a social-media-driven protest (Macau's "Anti-retirement package bill" event, which occurred in 2014), this study empirically tested the role that alternative media played in a protest and identified and evaluated the variations in media framing strategies that were used by mainstream media and alternative media. Evidence shows that the media's framing of protest is a dynamic process that varies according to the different sociopolitical environments in which it occurs. Media representation of protest is constrained by the established system and norms (Bagdikian 2014). The media's social control function is decided by media stance and its relative dominance in the local readership market. The emergence of the protest paradigm may differ across media outlets; more specifically, the content analysis of this study considers the effect of a political stance on the media's protest framing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Framing Theory and Protest Paradigm

The framing perspective in social movement study emerged in the late 1980s. Goffman's (1974) concept became especially prominent in social movement research. Social movement theory developed the idea of conscious framing, which suggests that framing is an important condition for successful movement mobilizations (Snow et al. 2004). From this perspective, framing is viewed as a conscious process. Framing is associated with "conceptual scaffolding" as a metaphor (Snow and Benford 2005). The framing process is a strategy that SMOs can use to both disseminate and contest verbal and visual symbols. Snow et al. (1986) first conceptualized this meaning production process, in which the SMOs connect the frames interpreted and deployed by them with those of the prospective resources' providers, as the "frame alignment process". The SMOs deploy the frame to achieve certain purposes, such as recruiting new members, mobilizing the social movement, obtaining resources, and so on. As Kosicki and Pan (2001) stated, the frame can enable SMOs to transmit their appeals to the public. The frame can also affect how individuals "understand and evaluate" the arguments on both sides of the issue. Therefore, this study looks at how social movement organizations use frames to present themselves. The social

movement framing process should be distinguished from the media framing process. This study attempts to illustrate the relationship between the social movement frame and the media frame. The “frames” used in the social movement framing perspective refer to the frames deployed by social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). The social movement framing perspective can help us clarify the dynamic interaction process between media frames and social movement frames. From the literature on social movement framing studies, we can better understand how SMOs compete with the media through the medium of framing strategies. Framing theory and the findings of relevant studies have examined the points of focus, value, and characteristics of the mainstream media’s coverage of protests. The former studies show that framing theory has two perspectives—media frames and social movement frames. Media frames are the frames used in mainstream media’s coverage and the perspective of social movement framing puts an emphasis on the meaning production of the SMOs and how they try to influence policymaking through framing processes. The success of a protest depends on the SMO’s ability to convince the public and the political elites to support the protest’s goals (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986). Therefore, the literature on framing theory suggests that framing is not only a tool with which the mainstream media can perform social control functions but that it can also be utilized by SMOs to mobilize protest. Previous studies have shown that the generation, development, and diffusion process of frames is a contested process between the media and social movements.

In protest communication study, a large number of studies have focused on the phenomenon of the mainstream media’s marginalization of the protest and on how the media frame the domestic social protest (e.g., Boyle et al. 2005; McLeod 1995; McLeod and Hertog 1999; Shultziner and Shoshan 2017; Wittebols 1996). This raises the question, what is the theoretical framework that interprets mainstream media coverage of the protest? One of the earliest studies was Gitlin’s (1980) focus on the media’s framing of the Anti-Vietnam-War movement. He found the U.S. media framed the movement and described the protesters by adopting various strategies. The framing devices include “trivialization”, such as the news coverage making light of protesters’ funny appearance, young age, and dirty language; “marginalization”, which is the news downplaying the description of the protest; ignoring the effectiveness of the movement; undercounting the number of participants; and exaggerating the bad influence that the movement might have on mainstream society. As well as exploring the media’s bias in covering dissent, in the past three decades, many researchers have examined the mainstream media’s framing strategies when covering protests (e.g., Cissel 2012; Keyes 2013; Lee 2014; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Raynauld et al. 2014). Scholars labeled this pattern of mainstream media’s biased coverage of protest as the “Protest Paradigm” (Chan and Lee 1984). The protest paradigm mainly focuses on the protesters’ violent or deviant behaviors, and the consequence of the media’s framing is that the public may become less supportive of the protesters (McFarlane and Hay 2003). Xu’s (2013) research summarized a series of marginalization devices used within McLeod and Detenber’s (1999) protest paradigm. These are outlined below.

Firstly, the news coverage of protests tends to select and put emphasis on the lawlessness and the violent behaviors of the protesters (e.g., Boykoff 2006; Dardis 2006; McLeod and Hertog 1992).

Secondly, the news coverage focuses on the dramatic activities of the protest and depicts the protesters’ young age, funny dress, and immature appearance. The coverage usually ignores the goals of the protest (e.g., Gitlin 1980; McFarlane and Hay 2003; McLeod and Hertog 1992).

Thirdly, the coverage of protests focuses on the internal dissent of protesters’ goals, the noticeably laughable and radical slogans, or the funny ideas (e.g., Ashley and Olson 1998; Brasted 2005; McLeod and Hertog 1992).

Fourth, the coverage of the protests emphasizes the public disapproval of the protest (e.g., Ashley and Olson 1998; Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Hertog 1992).

Fifth, the media usually quote official and authoritative sources, using their words or perspectives to describe the protest and define the issue (e.g., [Brasted 2005](#); [Dardis 2006](#); [McFarlane and Hay 2003](#); [McLeod and Hertog 1992](#)).

Finally, the coverage emphasizes the possible negative impacts of the protest. For instance, the protest may cause inconvenience to the transportation system, create disorder in society, and may be inconvenient for the residents living nearby or people working in the neighborhood (e.g., [Boykoff 2006](#); [Husting 1999](#)).

The complexity of the contemporary media system prompts different formations of the media; we should question the media's conventional bias against the protests. [Jennings and Saunders \(2014\)](#) claim that the influence of the contextual variable on the media's agenda setting is dynamic, not static. It is, thus, useful to examine the applicability of the protest paradigm in different sociopolitical contexts.

2.2. Mainstream Media's Bias against Protest

Although a mainstream media outlet might once have been treated as a more credible news source than alternative media, "it is not clear whether that still holds" ([Harlow and Johnson 2011](#), p. 1362). Political activities, which may challenge the status quo, usually receive negative coverage in the mainstream media. This raises the question of whether mainstream media have a bias against protest and, if so, why are they biased? This is a question that researchers have addressed.

Protest groups usually suffer from a phenomenon called "selected bias" of media. The reason is that media have social control functions: journalists often play the role of "gate-keeper" and they detect, emphasize, and transmit what they think is important ([Janowitz 1975](#)). To perform the social control function, media usually marginalize the political actions or activities that pose a threat to the status quo ([Shoemaker 1984](#)). Practically, the media's social control function is realized through the media routine, which is a set of constraints on journalists ([Mukherjee 1994](#)). According to [Gans' \(1979\)](#) claims, the media routine of news production consists of two processes, "one determines the availability of news and relates journalists to sources; the other determines the suitability of news, which ties journalists to audiences." (p. 238), and these processes are "exercised by all participants in the transmittal of information" (p. 238). As such, news production is "negotiated between sources, reporters, and editors" ([Peterson 2003](#), p. 165) and media is "curtailed by the power of political and business institutions" ([Wouters 2015](#), p. 477); thus, the media routine of news production may induce journalists to help to "distribute political power to particular groups, causes, or individuals" ([Entman 2007](#), p. 166). Constrained by the routine, mainstream journalists may aid political institutions ([Downing 2000](#)). When covering the issues of conflict, the media may support "particular holders or seekers of political power" ([Entman 2007](#), p. 166), and the media routines of news agencies influence whether a protest is featured in news coverage ([Lee 2014](#)). As such, the "selected bias" of media requires journalists to capture newsworthy information and decide how a protest is covered. We can track media's bias using media frames because media frames inform the principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation routine used by journalists to organize the media discourse ([Gitlin 1980](#)). For instance, [Spellman-Poots and Webb \(2014\)](#) found that protests featuring violence and dissent tend to generate episodic coverage instead of coverage that focuses on the underlying issues.

Mainstream media's democratic function was also challenged by some scholars' findings. The authority's power regulates the mass media mechanism. To maintain a stable public opinion environment, media activities should serve national policy, ideology, and other goals ([Machin and Niblock 2014](#)). [Gitlin \(1980\)](#) said that news is a product of cultural influence rather than objectively reflecting reality. As with any cultural institution, journalists may be influenced by the elites' ideology ([Gaye 1978](#)), which means that the norms and practices of mainstream journalism are constantly changing ([Williams 1977](#)). As [Milne \(2005\)](#) argues, under different conditions, media can shift their agenda: the protest paradigm is mostly based on the media practice in Western countries, which means that

the phenomenon of the media's marginalization of a protest group can be different in other countries. The dynamic relationship between the media and the status quo highlights the fact that, in different sociopolitical contexts, the media can change their stance toward the political system, and some protests can be acceptable to the media (Cottle 2008). Previous studies conducted in the Greater Chinese media context show that the conservative media (or pro-establishment media) hold a supportive attitude toward the status quo (Lee 2014). Due to commercialization, when covering political issues, pro-democracy media, which mainly consist of mass appeal tabloids, usually turn to sensationalism and hold a negative stance toward the sociopolitical system (e.g., Guo 2000; Lee 2005; Lengauer et al. 2012). The pro-democracy media tend to legitimize the protest and make the dramatic actions more prominent. Thus, in line with the theoretical discussion about the existence of mainstream media's bias against protest, this study aims to examine the protest paradigm's endurance in a polarized media environment.

2.3. *Shifting Bias through Alternative Media*

Because of biased treatment by the mainstream media, activists turn to alternative media trying to shift their inferior position in the media agenda. Alternative media flourish in response to the public's distrust of mainstream media and exist in various forms (Downing 2000). Alternative media are characterized by opinionated forms of news coverages (Hartsock 2000). Haas (2004) described the alternative media as offering the "representation of issues and events which is opposed to those offered in the mainstream media" (p. 115). Carty and Onyett (2006) thought the alternative web media served as "gateways", connecting media consumers to other media sources, including Web pages and social media. Jean Kenix (2009) said that blogs and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are also important forms of alternative media that are not constrained by advertising or bureaucratic institutions. The alternative space makes it possible to publish independent articles and the alternative media can be used by activists to define and analyze the issues on their own terms (Ryan et al. 1998). The activist alternative media can counteract the mainstream media's bias.

Jean Kenix (2009) said that the researchers should not polarize these two kinds of media as "complete, binary opposites" (p. 790). The two forms of media have distinct differences, but we cannot entirely separate the alternative media from the mainstream media. This raises the question, what roles do the mainstream media and the alternative media play in a protest? What is the relationship between these two media channels? Some scholars suggest that online alternative media can show "a radically different kind of news discourse than the one found in mainstream media" (Haas 2004, p. 388). Boyle and Schmierbach (2009) said the key point of their difference is that the alternative media can provide the activists with what mainstream media cannot provide. Alternative media is characterized by more subjective writing from reporters. The stylized form of reporting with sensationalism in the alternative media may counter standard norms of journalism (Hartsock 2000). When compared with mainstream media, citizen journalists in the alternative media have more access to first-hand information. Cissel (2012) examined the media framing of mainstream media and alternative media and found that, when covering the same protest, while both these media sources highlighted the conflict in the protest, they differed in the description. Mainstream media portrayed the protesters as being at fault, while alternative media were more likely to emphasize the violent actions of the police. Despite the difference between the two forms of media in their framing of the protest, the alternative media were found to have some similarities with the mainstream media. We can interpret the relationship between mainstream media and alternative media from former studies; for example, Harcup (2003) explored the complex relationship between the journalistic practices in the alternative media and those in the mainstream media. He found the alternative-style practices "should not be considered as 'entirely separate' from those of dominant media" (p. 369). Schiffer (2006) found that political current events blogs can strongly influence mainstream media's

editorial articles. Doğu (2015) found that alternative media simulated the journalism practice of mainstream media, usually depending on mainstream experience.

Thus, while mainstream media can privilege the powerful, the alternative media have a significant role in providing an opportunity for representing oppressed groups and offering a perspective “from below” (Harcup 2003, p. 371). Few scholars have studied the role played by alternative media and mainstream media in the same protest. A comparative study that looks at how the mainstream and alternative media treat protest can make a significant contribution to the study of media framing.

2.4. Research Question

The literature on protest communication provides evidence that lacks comparative study examining mainstream and alternative media’s framing of protest. This study expects to predict media politics of dissent in different sociopolitical contexts. Specifically, this study investigated:

R1: How do the tones of the news articles vary between mainstream media and alternative media?

R2: How often are protester group/target group sources cited in mainstream media and alternative media?

R3: Do media with different political stances frame the protest differently?

R4: In a new digital-technology-mediated movement, can the alternative media and social media counteract the mainstream media’s marginalization or not?

3. Research Method

3.1. Case of Macau’s “Anti-Retirement Package Bill” Event

By conducting a case study of Macau’s “Anti-retirement package bill” protest, this study compares the framing strategies of Macau’s alternative media and mainstream media. On 16 December 2013, the Macau Government submitted to the Legislative Council the “Security System for Designated, Current and Retired Chief Executives and Principal Officials” Bill, mainly including the recognition of the welfare system for the Chief Executive and principal officials, as well as the criminal immunity of the Chief Executive, which caused strong dissatisfaction among the citizens of Macau. Mobilized by the Macau Conscience and the Macau Civil Servants Association, about 7000 people participated in the protest on 25 May 2014, appealing for the government to withdraw the bill. On 27 May 2014, after the request was rejected, citizens gathered at the grassland and faced the Legislative Council to hold a demonstration called “Surrounding the Legislative Council”. On 27 May 2014, the Chief Executive announced the bill’s withdrawal. The “Anti-Retirement Package Bill” event was probably the largest protest since Macau’s handover to China in 1999. This protest was a significant event that was mobilized through online media, so it finally successfully formed a consultations and dialogue mechanism between the government and the public. The protest legitimized public opinion and successfully persuaded the government to improve the policy decisions.

In Macau, the successful protest against the “Anti-Retirement Package Bill” was mobilized by social organizations through Facebook. The activists posted their appeals on a Facebook Fan Page and created an Activity Page, mainly maintaining control of online media’s discourses. This study explores how the online platform functioned in protests in Macau. It examines how movement organizers’ articles or posts were framed to mobilize and advance the online collective actions that evolved into offline physical demonstrations. Mainstream media play a crucial role in giving visibility to protests. The study also examines how activists tried to place their demands on the media agenda of the mainstream media.

3.2. Sample Selection

The ideologies of people who finance the media determine the news content. Therefore, taking the identity of the owners of each media agency into consideration, this study made

a judgment on the political stance of these five newspapers. In addition, the design of the page and their usual reporting style are also important factors to be considered. A public opinion survey about the 3rd Chief Executive Election (CEE), which was conducted in Macau in May 2009 by Hong Kong University, showed that 47% of over 300 Macau citizens interviewed accessed the CEF news from Hong Kong media, while only 39% did so from the Macau media (Leng 2009). To some extent, Hong Kong media, which can have a more effective influence on the orientation of Macau's public opinion than the local media in Macau, take up the lion's share of the readership market (Guo 2000). Thus, five mainstream media from Macau ($N = 3$) and Hong Kong ($N = 2$) were selected: *Apple Daily*, *Ming Pao*, *Jornal Va Kio*, *Macau Daily*, and *Jornal do Cidadao*. Between them, these take up the lion's share of Macau's readership market. "Media stance" is a measure of the media's attitude toward the sociopolitical system and the 4-point scale was coded, 1 = alternative media ($N = 103$), 2 = pro-democracy media ($N = 65$), 3 = neutral media ($N = 11$), and 4 = conservative media ($N = 64$). The conservative media have a more supportive attitude toward the current sociopolitical situation; the neutral media have an unbiased political stance; the pro-democracy media have a critical attitude toward the status quo; the alternative media are used by SMOs to mobilize the protest, so they have a critical attitude toward the established norms and take a supportive stance toward the protest.

Alternative media are a news source for movement inspiration, which include alternative online media and they usually connect to social media, such as Facebook. Caren and Gaby (2011) evaluated Facebook as the most prominent of the social networking sites, which can facilitate the development of a social movement. Social media provide an alternative space for online collective actions. Therefore, in this study, the social media used by the social movement organizers and the SMOs' alternative newspaper websites were all categorized as alternative online media. During the event, the SMO Macau Conscience (*Ao Men Liang Xin*) used Facebook and alternative online media to prompt online collective action; then, the online activism was transformed into two physical protests, which happened on 25 May 2014 and 27 May 2014. New media have the power of mobilizing protests, which can topple governments (Shirky 2011). The news sample for the case study includes the posts and news articles published on the Facebook Fan page of Macau Conscience, the articles from the *Macau Concealer*, and the articles posted on the Activity Pages (25 May and 27 May). This study added a new variable for the case study—"Media form"—to compare the difference in protest coverage between mainstream and alternative media, 1 = mainstream media ($N = 140$), 2 = alternative media ($N = 103$).

3.3. Measurement

To measure the relationship between each variable, as shown in Figure 1, the independent variables in this study include protest type, protest tactic, media stance, and the time variable; the dependent variables consist of the tone of news headlines and the main body of news (a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = highly supportive to 3 = neutral to 5 = highly critical) and the news source quoted (a 3-point scale, higher scores means higher necessary). The last dependent variable is the framing devices of the protest paradigm—"show, goal, public attitude, and impact"—proposed by Xu's (2013) study. These are the four framing devices of the protest paradigm (see Table 1). This study separates the protest paradigm into two sets of framing devices. Through examining the news articles published by the alternative online media and the pro-democracy media, this study extracted the symbols and framing devices. The evaluation criteria are shown in the table below.

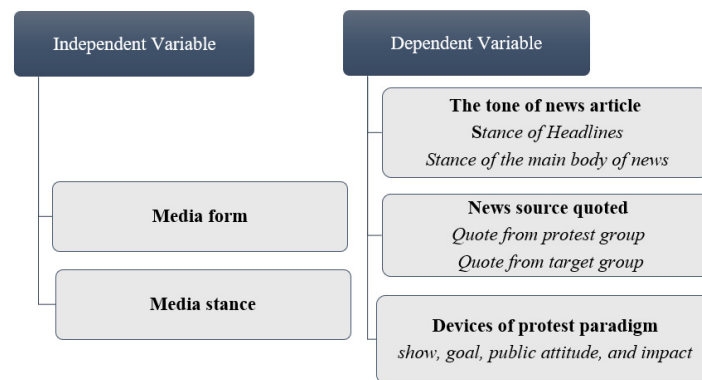


Figure 1. Measurement of independent variables and dependent variables.

Table 1. The evaluation criteria for the four framing devices.

Protest Paradigm	Score “−1” (Legitimization)	Score “0” (Not Mentioned)	Score “1” (Marginalization)
<i>Show</i>	The news coverage of protests tends to select and put emphasis on the lawlessness and the violent behaviors of the protesters; the news coverage focusses on the dramatic activities of the protest and depicts the protesters’ young age, funny dress, and immature appearance. The coverage usually ignores the goals of the protest.		
<i>Goals</i>	The coverage of protests focusses on the internal dissent of protesters’ goals, the noticeably laughable and radical slogans, or the funny ideas.		
<i>Public attitude</i>	The coverage of the protests emphasizes the public disapproval of the protest.		
<i>Impact</i>	The coverage emphasizes the possible negative impacts of the protest. For instance, the protest may cause the inconvenience to the transportation system, or create disorder in society, and may be inconvenient for the residents living nearby or people working in the neighborhoods.		

Two Ph.D. students, who received professional training in quantitative research methods, participated in the coding procedure; the inter-coder reliability of the current study is above 85%, which is within the acceptable range.

4. Result

4.1. News Attention and Frequency of Coverages

The Anti-Retirement Package Bill event received substantial news attention, but the protest against the Bill itself was short lived, as it was related to a controversial bill. When the government withdrew the bill, the public discussions cooled off. Throughout the whole event, the integrated process included the media’s attention, the government’s reply, and protesters’ activism. At the beginning of the event, when the Macau Government submitted the “Retirement package bill” to the Legislative Assembly on 16 December 2013, the bill was passed as “general discussions and voting”, people had fierce discussions on the bill through social media; then, on 25 May and 27 May 2014, this online activism evolved into two physical protests. At the end of the event, on 29 May 2014, the Macau government withdrew the bill. This movement provided a good opportunity to explore how the media’s news coverage and the activists’ posts per day or week changed longitudinally and how the framing strategies that the media adopted evolved along with the development of the event. In the first phase, this research examined the amount of coverage. This can help us to establish the extent to which the issue was mentioned in the media and how news attention changed over the period of the event.

In answer to R3, the protest coverage of five mainstream media from Macau and Hong Kong was selected. In addition, as this movement successfully mobilized online activism into offline activism, and digital communication tools facilitated this movement, this study also collected articles from the Facebook Fan Page and Activity Page of the movement organizer—Macau Conscience. As Macau Conscience created its alternative media (Macau Concealers) as the organization’s propaganda media channels, this study also examined the articles of the alternative media—Macau Concealers. Based on the frequency of media coverage and posts across time, this study classified the event into three periods (see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of news coverages and posts across time.

Period	Frequency	Percentage
Latent period (11 December 2013–19 May 2014)	28	11.5%
Active period (20 May 2014–27 May 2014)	140	57.6%
Cooling-off period (28 May 2014–5 July 2015)	75	30.9%
Total	243 *	100%

* $N = 243$.

1. Latent period:

The first period was from 11 December 2013 to 19 May 2014. On 16 December 2013, which can be characterized as the “pre-problem stage”, the Macau government submitted the proposal for a Retirement Package Bill to the Legislative Assembly, and this bill was passed by the Assembly’s decision after general discussion and voting. During this period, the issue remained latent and was unnoticed by the public. The event was only covered by 28 media articles for nearly half a year.

2. Active period:

The second period of the event was from 20 to 27 May 2014. On 20 May, the movement organizer, Macau Conscience, started to mobilize the protest by opening an Activity Page, “March against the Bill of Greed and Privileges”, on Facebook. On 25 May, over 20,000 citizens participated in the protest. Due to the considerable size of the anti-bill protest, the Macau Government agreed to withdraw the bill to allow time for re-deliberations. On 27 May, 7000 residents surrounded the Legislative Assembly, asking for a complete withdrawal of the bill in a sit-in. News coverage peaked from 25 to 27 May. With the increasing size of the protests and the news value of controversy, the media agencies were attracted to this issue. The proportion of coverage increased from 11.5% to 57.6% of the total news samples till the active period of the event.

3. Cooling-off period:

The third period was from 28 May 2014 to 5 July 2015. The event entered the “post-problem stage”, in which the media’s attention declined. On 29 May, at a press conference, the Macau Chief Executive finally announced that he would write to the Legislative Assembly, requesting the withdrawal of the draft bill. From 2014 to 2015, only 75 articles mentioned the bill and they were mainly editorials or articles in memory of the event.

From Figure 2, which shows the development of the movement, we can notice that news depictions of the activity were guided by journalists’ professional values. It indicates that journalistic practices and news values can affect whether an issue receives media attention. The amount of news attention given to the protest issues fluctuated immensely during different periods of the event. From the descriptive result of media coverage, we can see that the journalists adjusted the amount of news coverage according to the change in the protest issues. The protest did not receive extensive news coverage until the movement

organizer mobilized a large number of citizens to participate in the protests. The media discourse of the protest indicates that the media also considered the disruptiveness of the protest. The size of the protest and the conflict between the protesters and the government can increase the probability of coverage. It can also increase the proximity of the issue to the media agenda.

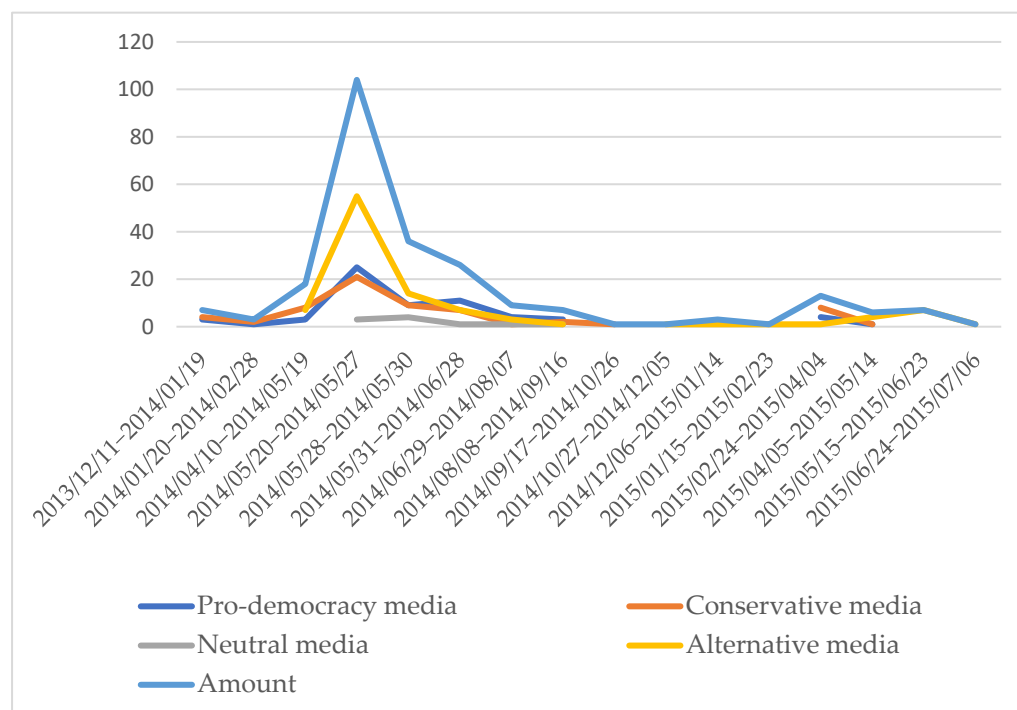


Figure 2. Amount of news coverages during the different periods.

4.2. Comparison of Framing Strategies between Mainstream Media and Alternative Media

Even though many factors may affect people's participation in a protest, the media serve as a significant source for information diffusion and give visibility to a protest and positive protest coverage can aid in people's decision to participate in a protest. The media's construction of protest plays a significant role in the political process. During the "Anti-Retirement Package Bill" event, mainstream and alternative media framed the protests differently. When considering R1, firstly, this study compared the stance of headlines in the mainstream media and alternative media. Chi-square analysis showed that when compared with alternative media, mainstream media were significantly more likely to take a critical tone in the headline of news ($\chi^2 = 53.847$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$) and the main body of news story ($\chi^2 = 43.587$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). As such, 51.5% of articles in the alternative media expressed a highly supportive attitude in the headline ($N = 53$), whereas only 10% of mainstream media had "highly supportive" headlines ($N = 14$), the difference being 41.5%. Overall, for the mainstream media, the number of headlines that take a supportive stance is greater than the number of critical headlines. This indicates that, when treating a controversial issue in which most citizens opposed the government's position, the mainstream media were not likely to strongly criticize any protest that agreed with the majority's opinions. Still, we can observe that the alternative media did not have any critical headlines, whereas the mainstream media had 2.1% highly critical and 1.4% critical headlines (see Table 3). The result of the comparison of the main news stories showed that most alternative media had "highly supportive" news stories ($N = 62$, 60.2%), which was 38.8% higher than the mainstream media, whereas mainstream media tended to be more critical of the main news story than the headline; 3.6% of the main news stories were "highly critical" and 7.1% were "critical". As Casero-Ripollés (2017) points out, the news agenda of the alternative media is "nourished by the issues and complaints of social movement" (p. 49). The Facebook article

accused the senators of only supporting the Macau government rather than caring about the citizens. Therefore, the social movement organizers made use of alternative media to cover the stories that were excluded by the mainstream media. Mainstream media followed an established routine of protest coverage. They legitimized the bill and persuaded citizens to support the legislation.

Table 3. Comparison of the stance of news between mainstream media and alternative media.

	The Stance of New Article	Mainstream Media (%a)	Alternative Media (%b)	Difference (%a – %b)
Headline ^a	The stance of “Headline” (Highly supportive)	10.0% (N = 14)	51.5% (N = 53)	–41.5%
	The stance of “Headline” (Highly critical)	2.1% (N = 3)	0.0% (N = 0)	2.1%
Main Body ^b	The stance of “Main body” (Highly supportive)	21.4% (N = 30)	62 (60.2%)	–38.8%
	The stance of “Main body” (Highly critical)	3.6% (N = 5)	0.0% (N = 0)	3.6%

N = 243; a = $\chi^2 = 53.847$, $p < 0.001$; b = $\chi^2 = 43.587$, $p < 0.001$.

In answer to R2, this study examined the different rates at which each media channel cited the protest group’s own words. Chi-square analysis showed that, when compared with mainstream media, articles from the alternative media quoted protesters’ words to a “very important” degree; the difference between the two forms of media on the “very important” citation from protest groups is 17.7% ($\chi^2 = 8.549$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$), whereas almost half of news articles in mainstream media (N = 69, 49.3%) treated protesters citations as important news sources (see Table 4). This shows online activists’ perception that mainstream media play an important role in legitimizing the movement. The activists began to try to transmit important information to journalists and, thus, became news sources for the mainstream media. As such, this phenomenon was termed an “overturn of medialization” (Casero-Ripollés 2017, p. 50), which is a change in the framework of the relationship between mainstream media and alternative media. The protesters interacted with journalists, rather than treating them as enemies. Due to the mainstream media’s important position in political communication, movement activists seek to influence them and build a relationship, but without adopting the rule of medialization proposed by Casero-Ripollés (2017). This study supposed that mainstream media would use more citations from the target groups and treat their words as more important than those of the protesters. The result showed that mainstream media used quotations from target group members as more important citations (N = 44, 31.4%) than alternative media ($\chi^2 = 10.693$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$). Mainstream media relied on conventional primary sources and stated the official groups’ responses to this controversial issue.

Table 4. Comparison of sources cited between mainstream media and alternative media.

Source	Mainstream Media (%a)	Alternative Media (%b)	Difference (%a – %b)	χ^2	df	p
Use of protest group ^a	49.3% (N = 69)	65.7% (N = 69)	–17.7%	8.549	2	$p < 0.01$
Use of target group ^b	31.4% (N = 44)	14.6% (N = 15)	16.9%	10.693	2	$p < 0.01$

N = 243; a = $\chi^2 = 8.549$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$; b = $\chi^2 = 10.693$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$.

4.3. Comparison of “Protest Paradigm” Framing Devices in the Protest Coverage

When considering R3 and R4, this study predicted that the media, with a more critical stance on the protest group, would be more likely to produce news coverage by adopting the “protest paradigm” framing devices to maintain the status quo. This question was

tested by correlation that compared media stance, “protest paradigm”, and the tone of the news article (see Table 5).

Table 5. The correlation between media stance and “Protest Paradigm”.

	Media Stance	Show	Goal	Public Attitude	Impact	Tone of Article
Media Stance	1	0.196 **	0.506 **	0.425 **	0.179 **	0.556 **
Show		1	0.375 **	0.516 **	0.418 **	0.482 **
Goal			1	0.521 **	0.445 **	0.705 **
Public attitude				1	0.365 **	0.688 **
Impact					1	0.528 **
Tone of article						1

$N = 243$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The result showed that media stance could significantly affect the tone of the article, as there is a positive correlation between them ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, media stance has a significant positive correlation with the four framing strategies of “protest paradigm”, *show* ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$), *goal* ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$), *public attitude* ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$), and *impact* ($r = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). A higher score for media stance means that the media have a more supportive attitude toward the status quo. The result indicated that, compared with alternative media, mainstream media were more likely to frame the event using marginalization strategies. In addition, this study also compared the difference in protest paradigm among mainstream media with different political stances, the result showing a significant difference. When compared with other framing devices, the *goal* frame has the strongest relationship with media stance ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$). This means that each type of media had the most significant difference in their use of the *goal* frame. This finding could help scholars understand which framing strategy of the “protest paradigm” could most effectively influence public opinion. Each media platform treated *goal* as the most useful tool to gain public support and they competed in the media framing process. Movement organizers emphasized the positive side of their actions; they used an *effective goal* frame in alternative media articles. However, mainstream media highlighted the protest group’s negative goals to weaken public support.

By analyzing the relationship among each framing strategy, this study found that the four framing devices were positively associated. Each framing device can explain the tone of the articles, as they all have a significant correlation with the stance taken in the main body of each news story. This shows that mainstream media used the four framing devices as marginalization tools, leading to the audience developing a negative perception of the protest. The adverse paradigm “spectacle, effective goal, public approval, positive impact”, contrary to the mainstream media’s marginalization description, can contribute to the positive description of the movement. The protest organizers made use of these framing strategies to obtain public support.

Goal shows the strongest relationship with the overall tone ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$). The result is consistent with the former findings. The goal is the most critical framing device associated with the stance of the news article. This finding has practical significance; on the one hand, the *goal* could be an effective device for the movement organizers to mobilize collective action, the adverse paradigm *effective goal* can compete with mainstream media’s marginalization, and the protest groups should focus on how to describe the effectiveness of their goals. On the other hand, this finding can also contribute to journalists’ practice; as a watchdog for the government, the journalists could criticize challengers’ ineffective goals and weaken protest’s threats to the status quo.

The result of the correlation test showed that the media’s political stance had an impact on the framing process of the protest (see Table 6). A chi-square test showed the difference between each media’s framing strategy in more detail. The study compared differences between each form of media. The result shows the major frames employed by different media.

Table 6. Chi-square of “Protest Paradigm” in the protest coverage.

Media	Alternative Media (a) *		Prodemocracy Media (b) *		Neutral Media (c) *		Conservative Media (d) *		χ^2	df	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
Paradigm “Show”									26.94	6	<0.001
Spectacle scene	52	50.5%	44	67.69%	6	54.55%	21	32.8%			
Freak show	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	5	7.80%			
Paradigm “Goal”									65.66	6	<0.001
Effective goals	89	86.4%	41	63.08%	6	54.55%	18	28.10%			
Ineffective goals	0	0.0%	1	1.54%	0	0.0%	8	12.50%			
Paradigm “Public attitude”									47.42	6	<0.001
Approval	87	84.5%	45	69.23%	7	63.64%	21	32.80%			
Disapproval	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	4.70%			
Paradigm “Impact”									76.85	6	<0.001
Positive impact	23	22.3%	44	67.69%	6	54.55%	12	18.80%			
Negative impact	0	0.0%	3	4.62%	0	0.0%	14	21.90%			

* Na = 103, Nb = 65, Nc = 11, Nd = 64.

Media had a significant difference in adopting *show* frames ($X^2 = 26.94$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). Pro-democracy media (67.69%) were significantly more likely than alternative media (50.5%), neutral media (54.55%), and conservative media (32.8%) to employ a *spectacle* frame. By contrast, conservative media were significantly more likely to adopt a *freak show* frame (7.8%), and other media did not use any *freak show* frames. Thus, only the conservative media highlighted protesters’ funny or ugly appearance, or their dramatic, violent behaviors.

When it comes to the description of the protest’s goals, each type of media had a significant difference ($X^2 = 65.66$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). Alternative media (86.4%) were significantly more likely to use *effective goals* than other mainstream media. On the contrary, the conservative media (12.5%) were significantly more inclined to condemn the protest’s ineffective goals.

This study also asked whether alternative media were more likely to describe the public approval of the protest. It turns out that alternative media (84.5%) are far more likely to use *public approval* frames than mainstream media ($X^2 = 47.42$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). Only the conservative media (4.70%) described the attitudes of disapproval on the part of the public.

There was a significant difference in the paradigm of *impact* among each media ($X^2 = 76.85$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). As such, 67.69% of the pro-democracy media’s coverage involved descriptions of the protest’s positive impact, whereas conservative media (21.90%) put more emphasis on the protest’s negative impact. When compared with other media, conservative media were less likely to mention positive impacts, with only 18.8% of their news coverage referring to the protest’s positive influence on society.

5. Conclusions

This study empirically tested online mobilization in a post-colonial region. This study contributes to our understanding of both theoretical and practical implications of protest framing, examines how the social movement organizations’ posts or articles were framed to mobilize and advance their online activism, and considers and evaluates the “legitimization paradigm” that consists of a set of framing devices, which are used by the alternative media to counteract the mainstream media’s marginalization.

The emergence of an Internet-based “activism 2.0” means that protesters can mobilize wider public support and affect the policymaking process. Today’s media ecology offers more political opportunities for the activists to target policymakers (Bennett 2012). Macau has a high level of penetration by new media. The findings of the case study of a social media-driven protest show that alternative media can help activists legitimize their actions and obtain wider support. The alternative media adopted a positive tone when referring

to the protest group and they adopted a set of framing strategies that were the opposite of the mainstream media's protest paradigm. Thus, in Macau's sociopolitical context, alternative media can have a potential impact on political change. They can legitimize the protest group, offsetting the mainstream media's marginalization. They could be said to have adopted the legitimization paradigm (see discussion below), which includes *spectacle*, *effective goal*, *public approval*, and *positive impact*.

Scholars have noted the complex relationship between SMOs and the media for a long time. Before the Internet became an important tool that activists used to mobilize protest participation, Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993) study, conducted in the pre-digital-media era, illustrates that "movement is generally much more dependent on media than the reverse" (p. 116). Earlier studies focused on the ability of the alternative media to facilitate the protest but failed to test its efficacy in the mobilization of online activism and offline protest. This study treats the relationship between protest and media as a dynamic process rather than a "one-way" relation the media can fully control of protest's representation. Through a representative case of a social-media-driven protest, the findings of this study show that cyberspace provides more political opportunities for activists and has transformed the protest paradigm in the context of online activism. As shown in Figure 3, the alternative online media try to use the legitimization paradigm to influence the mainstream media's framing of protest. Activists in Macau adjusted their framing strategies based on the mainstream media's construction of protest.

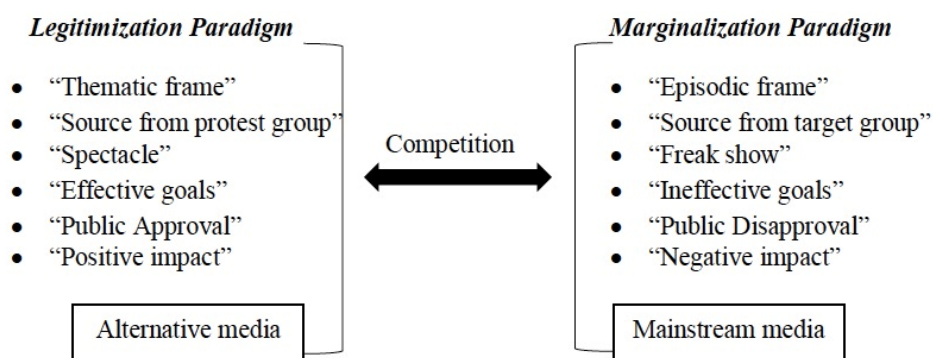


Figure 3. Legitimization paradigm adopted by the alternative media.

This study focused on the alternative online media's framing strategies and extracted the symbols and framing devices from the SMOs' articles and their posts. Then, using content analysis, this study tested the validity of the set of framing devices used by the alternative media. The result shows the high reliability of each frame measurement. The methodology of this study features both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This study refers to this series of transformed protest framing devices as the "Legitimization Paradigm". The alternative media use the "Legitimization Paradigm" to counteract the "Protest Paradigm" used by the mainstream media. The legitimization paradigm consists of a typology of legitimization devices, as follows.

1. *Thematic frames*: the news articles are framed thematically; the articles focus on the protest group's goals and issues rather than their actions;
2. *Source from protest group*: the news articles of protest rely heavily on the protest group as a news source; the coverage tends to cite the protesters or people who have a supportive attitude toward the protest;
3. *Spectacle*: an emphasis on the numbers of protesters and their peaceful actions; the protesters' brave attitude; the high spirits and the unity of the protest group; and the well-ordered nature of the demonstration;
4. *Effective goals*: emphasize that the protest's practical goal can bring about substantive changes.

5. *Public approval*: a claim that the public, media, bystanders, or residents support the protest and are concerned about the issues.
6. *Positive impact*: an emphasis on the positive effects of the protest (e.g., the protest can promote economic growth, can improve people's livelihood, can improve environmental quality, can promote social progress, can change the backward situation in social security, welfare, and service).

These frames have persuasive power in the Macau context and help gain the public's support. The media framing consists of a competitive process between mainstream and alternative media. They compete to mobilize a consensus in public opinion (Figure 4). As Reese and Shoemaker (2016) said, "technology-enabled changes in the media ecosystem have shifted old boundaries and encouraged new" (p. 389). The study of protest communication should consider the realignment of traditional media as it meets the forces of digital technology. The framing process is a strategy SMOs can use to disseminate and contest linguistic symbols. The alternative media is a mobilization channel by the SMOs to transform online activism into offline protest. When the mainstream media outlet meets competition from the SMOs' legitimization framing strategies, the mainstream media's routine of marginalizing the protest can be challenged by the alternative media. The negotiation mechanism that builds on these two media types works together to achieve the success of online mobilization.

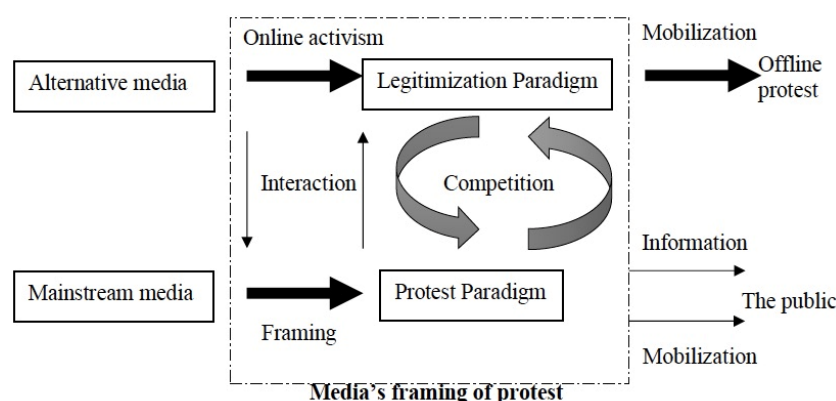


Figure 4. Media's framing of a social-media-driven protest.

The media's framing of protest needs continued analysis as the nature of news production evolves across time and changes in different sociopolitical contexts. Previous studies of the protest paradigm are built on the premise that mainstream media have a bias against dissent. However, as Cottle (2008) said, "some protests, some demonstrations are more politically acceptable to sections of the news media than others" (p. 857). We should consider the media's shifting agenda (Milne 2005). The protest paradigm needs to be extended to include structural conditions vis-a-vis the media environment. This study breaks new ground by exploring media politics in an area where the local audiences have a low resistance to news information from the external media environment. This study expects that the media form can be changed and show a new characteristic. The result shows that, in a heterogeneous media environment, the mainstream media "splinters" into different types of media. In Macau's sociopolitical context, the critical watchdog—the external Hong Kong media—goes against the traditional routine of marginalizing the protest and is sympathetic toward the protest group (Chan and Lee 1984). According to opportunity structure theory, the SMOs must have political alignment, for instance, by obtaining support from pro-democracy media. Hong Kong's pro-democracy media have a supportive attitude toward protest, which seems to challenge the status quo and, thus, they become a political ally of the Macau SMOs. These external media help to mobilize protest participation, shifting the conventional routine of adopting the protest paradigm. The pro-democracy media play the role of the "critical watchdog" and can promote the

protest's success. With the development of an environment that includes new media forms, the audience can engage with a broader array of news sources and other types of news coverage, affecting audiences' perceptions of politics.

The media's strategies for framing protests are currently unstable and future studies should consider the relationship between status quo, media, and protest. As Cottle (2008) mentioned, the characteristics of media politics regarding demonstrations are less clear and are changing in dynamic terms. To understand the complex interaction between media, protest, and status quo, this study shifts the perspective of studying protest news framing from a micro level to a macro level. This study advocates a dynamic analysis perspective to sort out how the media frames protest. The findings of this study will help future scholars disentangle the relationships between the sociopolitical system the media aim to maintain and the protest that can trigger the media's social control function. The findings of this study have both methodological and practical implications. In addition, this study confirms the critical role of protest in legitimacy that can transmit public demands to the government.

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