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Framing the Women's March on Washington: Media coverage and organizational messaging alignment

Kristine M. Nicolini^{a,*}, Sara Steffes Hansen^b

^a University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, (920) 424-1105, United States

^b University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, (920) 424-7147, United States

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ABSTRACT

Half a million citizens participated in the Women's March on Washington the day after President Trump's inauguration, starting a political movement. The march communicated key messages to the public directly and via the media. This study explores how media coverage framed those key messages through content analysis. Media frames mentioned all key messages, emphasizing solidarity and activation at the grassroots, and in a way that both supported and challenged organizational messages. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Half a million U.S. citizens assembled in Washington D.C. to participate in the Women's March on Washington on Jan. 21, 2017, the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Media coverage of the march focused on both the size of the demonstration, which surpassed projections, and the rationale behind the protest. The Washington Post noted, "the Women's March on Washington was likely the largest single-day demonstration in recorded U.S. history" (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017, p. 1).

The grassroots nature of the march began hours after the election, when a Facebook page was created to promote the idea of a women's march in the nation's capital. Teresa Shook, a retired attorney from Hawaii, crafted the post that resonated with women across the country. Overnight, the Facebook post generated more than 10,000 RSVPs (Tolentino, 2017). Realizing the growing momentum around the idea, Shook joined forces with Bob Bland, a fashion designer from New York, to organize the event. In the face of growing controversy regarding inclusivity, the two organizers expanded the leadership and visibility to include national activists and speakers representing more than 44 organizations, causes, and coalitions (Women's March on Washington, 2017).

Leaders of the march released an official statement on Facebook that read, "On January 21, 2017 we will unite in Washington, DC for the Women's March on Washington. We stand together in solidarity with our partners and children for the protection of our rights, our safety, our health, and our families – recognizing that our vibrant and diverse communities are the strength of our country" (Women's March on Washington, 2017). Leading up to the march, media played a key role in enhancing the visibility of the event and communicating why participants were choosing to engage in this protest. Additionally, media coverage was leveraged to support social media outreach grassroots efforts to share the message amongst social circles.

While the Women's March on Washington was a strong visual representation (both in the U.S. and globally) of oppositional strength to the incoming administration, the organization did not define itself as a movement distinctly dedicated to a single cause. The initiatives surrounding inclusivity created a diverse agenda, which has left some questioning the effectiveness of the event as a catalyst for change. The New Yorker captured this sentiment by noting "the march has produced fracture as well as inspiration, evincing the same crises of confidence and solidarity that the march aims to resist, if not resolve" (Tolentino, 2017).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: nicolink@uwosh.edu (K.M. Nicolini), hansen@uwosh.edu (S.S. Hansen).

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Political organizations like the march and movement develop key messages that are communicated directly and via the media to the public and stakeholders. Ways that the media frame this organization could play a role in its effectiveness. Through the lens of framing theory (Scheufele, 1999), this study explores how media frames about the march reflected the organization's official key messages and how this coverage supported or challenged those messages. A content analysis of four weeks of media coverage from The New York Times, USA Today, and FOX News related to the march was conducted based on the organization's thematic frames and key messages. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed regarding media frames for the Women's March within the current political environment and the framing context of women's movements in recent U.S. history.

2. Literature review

The literature for framing theory is evaluated related to how the media produce and present news, and how organizations use frames in strategic communication with key messages. Coverage of political protests and events is reviewed, as are framing efforts by political organizations to craft key messages for interactions with the media and the public, particularly related to women's advocacy groups.

2.1. Media framing

Framing Theory (Scheufele, 1999) provides a theoretical understanding of how audiences interpret, internalize, and differentiate key messages within media coverage. When sources develop a specific message, they select a particular frame that defines the problem or gives meaning to the story or event (Rim, Hong Ha, & Kioussis, 2014). A frame is defined as a central focus placed on a specific aspect of a message that helps consumers make meaning and construct their social reality in relation to a particular topic of media coverage. Recognizing the power of media influence on consumer interpretations, organizations use strategic communication techniques to inform journalists and facilitate the flow of accurate and impactful information about organizational goals and issues. Through this process, communicators, such as public relations professionals, work on behalf of organizations to assist journalists in setting the media agenda by influencing what aspects of the message to emphasize to accept an organization's unique perspective on a story or event (Rim et al., 2014; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Within the constraints of the news production process, journalists interact with each other and their news sources to build and influence the frames embedded in the news (Scheufele, 1999).

By using frames to organize and give meaning to an event or story, media essentially reinforce specific ideas within their coverage. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) expand this notion by positing all conversations centered around mass media coverage are essentially based on a set of "interpretive packages" (p. 3) organized by a frame. Entman (1993) furthers the definition by linking framing to the consumer's interpretation of the story or event on a broader scale noting the link between saliency and promotion of a particular definition, interpretation, causal relationship, moral evaluation, or recommendation.

The way media choose to frame a particular story or event directly impacts how audiences interpret the saliency of the unfolding events and long-term implications on shaping public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Rey, 1997). Influencing public perceptions on a news story may affect audience attitudes and actions (Chong & Druckman, 2007; de Vreese, 2005), and contribute to political socialization and potential collective action. In relation to large-scale protests, these frames can be particularly influential on the saliency of key organizational messaging.

2.2. Framing women's protests and strategic communication

Older generations of women participating in the Women's March can recall earlier protests for women's rights, with the most substantive in recent years being protests for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion rights in the 1970s. Studies have evaluated the perceptions of these causes based on media framing of protests, and extended into strategic communication from women's advocacy groups to help frame media coverage.

2.2.1. Framing women's protests

Protests typically involve alternative groups – those challenging the status quo – which media coverage may marginalize because of dependence on sources from government or other official authorities (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Groups that challenge the status quo may be framed more negatively (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). The media acts as part of our cultural system when using frames that align with their view and that of media consumers, not as a separated outsider (Baylor, 1996). In the case of women, an alternative point of view can be even more marginalized in terms of issues and coverage (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Armstrong & Boyle, 2011). Ashley and Olson's (1998) analysis of women's movement articles from 1986 to 2006 showed framing techniques by print media delegitimized feminists, and legitimized anti-feminists, supporting traditional power structures and the status quo. Feminists were portrayed as disorganized, in protest conflicts that lessened their femininity, and with pejorative labels. Armstrong and Boyle (2011) examined news coverage of women in abortion protests from 1960 to 2006, finding men as sources predominant in coverage before and after the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Their findings suggest two story structures in coverage. The first focuses on women, with female sources mentioned from protest groups and the government, that is positive about pro-choice. Meanwhile, the second centers on men with higher opposition to pro-choice.

Media coverage can impact how readers view the news and form opinions about key issues. Xu (2013) used six frames from print media coverage of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011—lawlessness, show, ineffective goals, public disapproval, official sources, and negative impact – which were significantly related to a negative overall tone in news coverage. In analysis, a negative

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