

Depictions of emotions in news media's visual framing of small-scale protests in Greece

Introduction

Following the global contagion of the financial crisis from 2007 onwards, an increasing number of protests and demonstrations erupted around the world, initially triggered by socioeconomic inequalities and against the austerity measures imposed in many countries (not least in Southern Europe) dissent expanded to embrace various socio-political issues; from racialised discrimination and structural violence (the Black Lives Matter movement, for example) to gender-based violence and gender rights (such as the MeToo movement). News agencies' media images of these protests and demonstrations have circulated widely offline and online, and constitute a main source of public information of these events. As Cottle (2008, p. 854) expounds, "the co-present public at demonstrations no longer count the most" as compared to the "mass audience watching and reading the media coverage at home". While Cottle's account may have been impacted by user-generated content and the ways in which activists and populations in general appropriate new technologies to produce their own stories, mainstream media remain a central source of information.

Photographic imagery accompanying and embedded within news media is important, as it assists viewers to originate differing angles to a news story (Zillmann et al., 2001; Messaris and Abraham, 2001). Such images impress realities that cannot be narrated in their totality through text, and thus permit the viewer to consider and explore various different interpretations. Frosh (2001, p. 43) theorises that "photography is a 'performance of representation', in which both the act and the material product of the act, the photographic image, generate multiple and inter-related meanings." In the case of protests and demonstrations, photographic images are of dual importance. On the one hand, they serve as vehicles for visibility; and on the other, they serve to communicate the feelings and the atmosphere that are crucial constituent elements of any such action. Essential to any liberal democratic societal ideal, news media photographs can serve to illuminate the actions of those that, through protesting, wish their demands to be heard and taken up. Photographs function as visual references of the actions in which people engage during protests and, as Mitchell (2005) suggests of pictorial power, these visual references contribute to others' understanding of the world and can therefore potentially lead to further, synthesised action.

Nonetheless, as various studies attest, much news media coverage of protest tends to be negative, focused on violence, and to delegitimise protesters (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004; McLeod and Detenber, 1999). While a considerable body of scholarly work discusses how contentious politics is replete with emotions (Jasper, 2018; Klandermans *et al.*, 2008), there are fewer studies, predominantly in the field of Media and Communication, examining how protesters' expressive emotions are represented in mainstream media and how audiences then respond (Jeyapal, 2015). That is, how the affective qualities of images can subsequently stimulate empathetic experiences and thereby mobilise publics but also elicit disengagement too.

This chapter provides a socio-semiotic analysis of two different sets of photographs that visually represented a relatively small-scale protest, that of schoolteachers which took place in Athens, Greece, on 21st March 2014. Mainstream press images of this protest are compared and contrasted with those circulated online by a professional photographer on their social media account. The focus of the analysis draws on the emotional portrayal of the protest and deliberates on news media selection criteria of protest imagery and how journalists and editors value emotionality in protest coverage. The discussion unfolds through the juxtaposition of the relative paucity in the mainstream media visual framing of the protest event with the more humanised images produced and circulated online by the photographer. The significance of this specific case study arises with respect to the different media treatment between sizable protests, which tend to attract wider media attention, and smaller scale (both in size and duration) protest events, such that the latter make for an involved case study when examining the visual framing of protest. As this chapter focuses on a small number of photographs constituting a rather unique and idiographic single case study, it does not aspire to offer definite assumptions on the emotional portrayal of protests by the Greek news media, rather, the chapter aims to provide reflections on such matters as well as on the political valence of the visual, and on the asymmetries of influence between creators and recipients of political information.

Emotions and news media's visual framing of protest

“[T]he visual becomes doubly significant. It intertwines two areas of reference: the impact of visual media, images, and practices on political processes, and the relations of power believed to characterize specifically visual forms of communication (what we might call the ‘politics of vision’) – relations between images and minds, viewers and viewed, hidden and displayed.” (Frosh, 2011, p. 95)

Media has an important dual role, namely, in setting the news agenda by selecting the stories to be told, and in the framing of *how* they are to be told. Neither occurs randomly. As Gamson *et al.* (1992, p. 374) argue, “[t]he lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.” Based on a variety of factors (including news values, organisational structures, and occupational practices), editors eventually decide what kind of information is considered newsworthy and how it is going to be presented to the public.

Several studies have discussed and debated the journalistic criteria of newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), and as Hall (1973, p. 181) argues, news values “are one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society.” In an analysis of network television news that draws on a sociological approach to news-making, Epstein (1973) supports the claim that the pictures of society broadcast by national news media are, to a considerable extent, shaped by organisational considerations. Molotch and Lester (1974) suggest a typology of news according to whether stories are planned or unplanned. Their main argument revolves around the claim that the news media reflect the practices of those who have the power to determine the experiences of others, and not the world “out there” (Molotch and Lester, 1974, p. 54). This viewpoint, taking news-making as a reality-constructing activity governed by the imperatives of power elites, proved to be useful and influential in later studies (Bennett, 1994; Schlesinger and

Tumber, 1994). Fahmy *et al.*'s (2006) analysis of images of hurricane Katrina offers an illuminating study of the different visual framing practices among diverse media agencies. Comparing the photographic offerings of the Associated Press and Reuters against the pictures that ran on the front pages of U.S. newspapers, they found significant differences in visual framing with regard to “timeframe, location, storm/flood victims, emotional portrayal, suffering of non-white citizens, presence of public officials, and aerial depictions of massive destruction” (Fahmy *et al.*, p. 551), among other variables. Framing, as a theoretical schema, suggests that the presentation of news events in the mass media can systematically affect how its recipients come to understand these depictions (Price, Tewksbury and Powers, 1995). Drawing on the work of Fahmy *et al.* (2007), it becomes apparent that news organisations use different framing devices, inclusive of words and images, to construct newsworthy issues – a process of selection, amplification, and omission – and consequently influence people’s opinions and attitudes. Images are powerful framing tools because they are seemingly less intrusive than words, requiring less cognitive load in processing, and as such “audiences may be more likely to accept the visual frame without question [...] because they have the power to create stronger emotional and immediate cues” (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011, p. 50).

A relatively new wave of studies explores the role of emotions in journalism; how they are constructed and circulated through mediated texts (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021). To generate drama and compassion, and to bring the audience closer to the story, journalists tend to ask sources how they feel (Back, 2017). As Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 16) argues, “to understand the experiences of others and make large and often abstract political happenings come alive, it is necessary to tell people’s stories, although such storytelling can take many different forms.” This ‘affective turn’ has been attracting increasing attention in media and politics studies (see, e.g., Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). As Papacharissi (2015) argues, affect can act as a means of sense-making because it can inform a general understanding of the world around us.

Contentious politics is full of emotions and, as Jasper (2018, p. 2) puts it, “the world of protest is proving a real world testing ground for all sorts of feelings”. Protests are imbued with emotions (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001). As feeling-thinking communal interactions, these involve intense, entangled processes of empathic arousal and cognitive rationalisation converged on perceived injustices (van Troost, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). Consequently, studies have shown protesters experience and display a mixture of emotions (Benski, 2011), both pleasant and unpleasant in various situations of high and low arousal. Among the most prevalent surveyed being: sadness and frustration (van Troost *et al.*, 2013); anger, shame, and despair (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2004); and fear (Klandermans *et al.*, 2008). Despite this wealth of sensation, routine news coverage of protests is usually characterised by a limited and idiosyncratic representation of protesters’ emotions.

News media have often been criticised for framing protests and social movements in negative ways, particularly through an emphasis on violence (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004; McLeod and Hertog, 1992), with various visual framing devices being used to either legitimise or delegitimise protesters (Juris, 2005). According to several studies, protesters’ appearances – such as clothes,

hair, and age – have frequently been used as devices to marginalise protesters and belittle the cause of the dissent (Ashley and Olson, 1998; Gitlin, 1980; McFarlane and Hay, 2003). Research on mainstream media coverage of contemporary protests in Greece has revealed that there is an over-reliance on images of property destruction and generalised violence between riot police and protesters, even if that occurs at the fringes of a protest (Veneti, Lilleker and Reilly, 2018). Despite the fact that new technologies have facilitated activists as well as ordinary citizens in producing and circulating their own stories and images of such events (Gerbaudo, 2012; Bosch and Mutsvairo, 2017), mainstream media still remain a powerful source of information for a wider audience.

Case study: Schoolteachers’ protest, Greece

This chapter uses as its case study a relatively small-scale protest of schoolteachers, members of the Greek Federation of Secondary Education State School Teachers (OLME, in Greek), that took place in Athens, Greece, on 21st March 2014 and who marched towards the Hellenic Parliament and the Ministry of Education, demonstrating against impending dismissals. These protests constitute a compelling case study with regard to the visual media framing of small-scale protests. Although the layoff of schoolteachers was an issue of great political and social importance, not least in the context of understaffed schools across the country, mainstream media offered a limited and, as discussed below, indifferent coverage of the protest.

The objectives of this study are addressed by means of comparing and contrasting two sets of images of this protest. The first set of images comes from Greek mainstream media; in particular from the online editions of three Greek newspapers: *Kathimerini* (centre-right), *Ta Nea* (centre-left), and *Proto Thema* (centre-populist). The second set of photographs were taken by Marios Lolos, a Greek photojournalist working with national and international news agencies, who publicly posted the images on his social media page.

The images were analysed following a socio-semiotic approach, which enables a deeper understanding of the ideological underpinnings and political implications of semiotic choices and of meaning-making (Aiello, 2020). Here, the focus is dual; on both the *sign* and, as van Leeuwen (2005, p. xi) argues, on the “way people use semiotic ‘resources’ both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them [...] in the context of specific social situations and practices.” The selection of the images from the mainstream media was made based on a Google search using protest identifiers (e.g., cause and date). While this is not a systematic research method, the aim of this chapter is not to offer a conclusive account, but rather to reflect on the visual framing of smaller-scale protests and explore the significance of the depiction of emotions for news coverage of protest. It is important to note that due to copyright issues news images could not be reproduced here. Instead, these images can be found through the weblinks provided in the following section. Before proceeding to the analysis, it is also worth mentioning that the Greek media system is marked by interlocking interests among media organisations and political parties (Veneti and Karadimitriou, 2013). According to Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) widely used typology, the Greek media system belongs to the Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralistic model, which is characterised by strong state intervention and weaker professionalisation.

Analysis of the news media coverage in Greece of the school teachers' protest

With regard to the mainstream news images, some common patterns can be identified; there was a low number of photographs accompanying the reportage (varying between a single and just a couple of images) whose focus was on banner slogans and scattered protesters marching or engaged in group discussions. In most cases the photographs were taken from a crowd-encompassing distance. Such images of gathered and marching crowds are important because they provide information on the size of the protest and cues as to who participated. Moreover, images of banners also constitute part of the basic inventory of media depictions of protest for the reason that they are used to succinctly communicate the causes of the protests (Veneti, 2017). Such a selection of primarily descriptive images is common to news coverage of protest in accordance with the need to provide visual information about what is happening (Veneti, 2017). A practice that is also closely linked to the entrenched principles of objectivity in journalistic practice as well as to the established criteria of determining newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). In this case, a protest of a relatively small scale and primarily peaceful in character may not be deemed as newsworthy when compared to larger protests characterised by extended violent confrontations that more directly fulfil news value criteria of drama and conflict.

As Entman (1993, p. 52) argues, “[t]o frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described.” The representational power of photography is reliant on capturing the right moment concerning the focus of the picture and its compositional elements. Obviously, news reporting and the accompanied visual framing of the story should be able to provide information on the *where*, *who*, and *why* of the news item through such descriptive images as those discussed above. However, in the context of a protest there is always a more complex account concerning the people participating that also needs to be communicated. To do so, it is necessary for news photographs to transcend their traditional descriptive character and also be ‘explanatory’. The news images examined here constitute a rather incurious photo-coverage incapable of narrating the protest story. The sparse amount of images used primarily depict a dispersed, faceless crowd,¹ and give the impression of being undirected, non-specific shots which in some cases lack focus, consisting of illegible half banners or principally blurred content.² The overall effect is of an incomplete representation of the protest story. The pictures portray a protest against layoffs but fail to explain what these dismissals mean for these people.

While the selection criteria of the examined news media regarding the photographic coverage of this protest were apparently limited to provide only very basic information, studies have suggested that photojournalists seek to capture images that humanise protests (Veneti, 2017). In a qualitative study that drew on interviews with Greek photojournalists covering protests in Greece, Veneti (2017, p. 289) argues:

¹ See image in *Kathimerini* at: <http://www.kathimerini.gr/759170/article/epikairothta/politikh/olme-sth-voylh-oi-diamartyromenoi-ekpaideytikoi>

² See images in *Proto Thema* at: <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/363531/nea-24ori-apergia-tis-olme-gia-tis-apoluseis/> and *Ta Nea* at: <http://www.tanea.gr/news/greece/article/5099956/synexizontai-oi-kinhtopoihseis-ths-olme-en-opsei-apolysewn-ekpaideytikwn/>

“Photojournalists [...] aim to transcend conventional forms of news photography in a quest for the exegesis rather than the mere representation of the event. Such photographers hope to produce an aesthetic and cognitive interpretation of the event, one that departs from the conventional and stereotypical norms of news photography and, as such, one that can generate new ways of seeing and understanding. Such images may involve an unusual sensitivity, unanticipated juxtapositions, pathos, irony and visual lyricism. The central themes of these photos are usually the protesters themselves.”

To produce such images, professional photographers focus on faces, usually through close-ups, and aim to depict the protesters’ emotions. As Veneti (2017) argues, the value of these photographs is in the affective qualities that such images possess. Lolo’s photographs of this protest event reflect such a practice. Comparatively, his studies are much more incisive and manage to capture and effectively communicate several aspects of the protesters’ psyches. By focusing on people rather than impersonal crowds, Lolos manages to communicate the impetus of the protest, together with the distress, passion, and anger of the protestors involved in it. Lolo’s photographs are in more assiduous proximity to the photographic subject. Distance is of paramount importance in photography. According to Hall’s (1964, cited in Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 125) study on people’s use of space, there are different fields of vision, such that “[a]t intimate distance [...] we see the face or head only. At close personal distance we take in the head and the shoulders. At far personal distance we see the other person from the waist up. At close social distance we see the whole figure. At far social distance we see the whole figure ‘with space around it’.” Distance in photography has a direct impact on the creation or exclusion of intimacy. As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, such images capture moments of struggle and resistance, telling a story by juxtaposing determination with agony and anxiety. Closely related to van Leeuwen’s (2001) notion of iconographical symbolism – that draws on Barthes’ (1977) visual semiotics and Panofsky’s (1970) work on iconographic analysis – the repeating motif of the raising of fists in both photographs underlines the emotional state of the protesters and their social fight.



Figure 1. © Marios Lolos. **Reproduced with permission**



Figure 2. © Marios Lolos. **Reproduced with permission**

Lolos also portrays the human pain, sorrow, and perceived injustice with an accuracy and precision that permits communication of the protesters' emotions. In the close up of the woman's face in Figure 3, her distress and despair are evident, while her hurt rather than being overemphasised becomes part of a larger story that involves elements of solidarity and mutual agony brought to the viewers' attention through the presence of the man towards whom the woman leans.



Figure 3. © Marios Lolos. **Reproduced with permission**

The depiction of emotions, in being able to provide more information on *why* something is happening, allows for a more substantial understanding of the protest events. While photographs are needed that portray a protest's magnitude as well as the banners of the protesters' demands, for a comprehensive coverage of such events it seems essential to also include photographs that

depict protesters' emotions (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010). Images of protests constitute the building blocks for the generation of emotions by their viewers, and various studies (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 2008; Frosh, 2011) have supported the proposition that images influence their viewers and give rise to networks of mental associations. These networks mobilise viewers' subsequent intentions regarding acceptance of, identification with, or disapproval of the characters (in this case the protesters) and their actions (Hristova, 2014).

Photographs of demonstrations are important to protesters, as they can constitute both a means of providing the general public with information and an opportunity to convey demands to political leaders. As Sontag (2003, p. 104) comments, pictures are an "invitation to pay attention". It can be argued that Lolos' photographs constitute such an invitation. Comparing his photographs of the protest to those of the Greek newspapers, striking differences can be observed regarding the portrayal of the human presence and the overall messages that the respective photo-reportages communicated. The newspapers depicted this particular protest stripped of its political potential and in a visually indifferent manner. Such coverage discourages possible identification with the protesters and their demands, diminishing the possibility of the mobilisation of the people in support of such actions.

Concluding remarks

This chapter attempted to highlight the importance of the depiction of protesters' emotions in the news coverage of demonstrations. While considering the need to avoid excessive sensationalism and dramatisation, which can possess the power to unduly manipulate audiences (Campbell, 2007), this study suggests that a news story of protest cannot be comprehensively told if deprived of such images. Although there is a general, widespread reluctance within the mainstream media to portray protesters' feelings and actions (with a few exceptions in the case of unavoidable protests such as Occupy Wall Street in New York's financial district and Spain's Indignados anti-austerity movement), there are plenty of cases where media have been at the forefront of utilising emotionally charged photos (from terrorist attacks to economic ruination, such as the images of crying Lehman Brothers employees carrying their office belongings after the collapse of the financial services company at the peak of the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis). Emotions, in being to some extent socially constituted, are shaped by dynamic relations of power, making their mediated public articulation (such as protests) more than just a notification of individual feelings. This performativity reveals how emotions are socially narrated for larger, collective meaning-making purposes, and as such can facilitate audiences in making sense of complex world events (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). While the newsworthiness of small-scale protests cannot be compared to that of large impactful events, empirical research is still needed as to the editorial selection criteria of news images of all scales of protest (Veneti, 2022). Not least as many micro events may be local expressions connected to wide-felt macro phenomena. In view of studies having shown that personalised storytelling has "a powerful role to play in cultivating compassion and creating community" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 16), there is an identifiable civic need to better understand which forms of emotionality are valued by editors and (photo)journalists, and why.

In this chapter's case study, in the absence of any major conflict (street violence) and in the context of a small-scale protest, mainstream media news coverage was extremely limited and indifferent. By contrast, Lolos' photographs captured the affective atmosphere of the protest, its dynamism

and vigor, through portraying protesters' trauma and determination, and by doing so he provided a clearer connection between the protesters and the proximate cause of the protest (the dismissals of teachers). Photographs that accompany a news item are important as they provide a conceptual agenda for the viewer. As Sontag (2008, p. 23) aptly argues, "[p]hotographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy."

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