Article

Looking in the Mirror: US and French Coverage of Black Lives Matter in France

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Abstract

We demonstrate how sociological theories of discursive opportunity structures illuminate key elements of US and French media coverage of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in France. Fundamental discursive differences between the two countries shape the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy of claims made on behalf of racially identified groups. A textual analysis of thirty-five articles from each country that discuss BLM and France published between 2015 and 2020 reveals that the US journalists commonly identify BLM activists as members of marginalized communities, interpret French circumstances as similar to the racial dynamics found in the United States, critique France's "republican" model of citizenship, and are relatively positively disposed toward BLM activity in France. By comparison, French coverage largely eschews identifying actors by racial identities, avoids or rejects comparisons with the United States, and at times contains implicit or explicit valorization of the French color-blind republican model, with some authors casting BLM as a product of the excesses of the American system. Our findings demonstrate the relevance of discursive opportunity structure theories to comparative media analysis, suggesting that coverage of race-based movements abroad may respond to different dynamics than coverage within the United States.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, media, newspapers, discursive opportunity structures, France, the United States

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"The George Floyd affair is a mirror held up by the United States and people here see themselves in it. They recognize aspects of their reality that also exist in France."[1]

"French debates only interest the United States to the extent that they serve as a mirror to their own debates, in this case those about Black Lives Matter."[2]

Since its inception in 2013, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has become one of the most visible racial justice movements in the United States. Given the central role media play in shaping public and political perceptions of social movements (Cottle 2008), scholars have devoted extensive attention to media coverage of BLM (Banks 2018; Elmasry and el-Nawawy 2017; Kilgo and Harlow 2019; Kilgo et al. 2019; Lane et al. 2020; Leopold and Bell 2017; Mourão et al. 2018; Reid and Craig 2021). As the movement increasingly becomes a rallying cry for activists outside of the United States, it is important to understand whether the findings of existing research apply in foreign contexts. In other words, as BLM becomes a global phenomenon, how does coverage of BLM outside of the United States resemble or differ from coverage of BLM in the United States? And how does the US media coverage of BLM in a foreign country differ from domestic coverage of BLM in that same country? Answering these questions not only allows scholars to better understand media coverage of BLM around the world, but it also helps activists and citizens grasp how the media can shape public perceptions of racial justice movements.

In this article, we address these questions by examining how the United States and French media sources discuss BLM in France. France is particularly an interesting country for comparison because, like the United States, it has grappled with issues of police violence against non-White victims. The 2016 death in custody of twenty-four-year-old Adama Traoré sparked the "truth and justice for Adama" movement that has continued to this day. The May 25, 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis ignited further protests in France, linking the US and French experiences even more strongly. Here, we use an abductive approach and a qualitative analysis of seventy stories in the US and French sources that discuss BLM in France to understand how media coverage differs from patterns identified by scholars of BLM in the United States, and how it varies by the stories' country of origin.

While existing scholarship on BLM has revealed a great deal about the US context, it is not clear that the conclusions apply directly to the coverage of BLM outside of American borders. We identify sociological theories of discursive opportunity structures as a theoretical lens that facilitates cross-country comparisons in US and French media coverage of BLM in France. Our findings suggest that coverage of race-based movements abroad may respond to different dynamics than coverage within the United States and that such coverage differs significantly depending on its country of origin.

Applying the discursive opportunity structure framework, we identify key divergences in the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy of claims made on behalf of racially identified groups in the two countries (Koopmans et al. 2005). Reflections of these differences are present in both US and French journalistic coverage of BLM in France.

Relative to French journalists, US journalists commonly identify BLM activists in France as members of marginalized communities, interpret French circumstances as similar to the racial dynamics found in the United States, and critique France's color-blind model of republican citizenship. French coverage of BLM in France tends to be more skeptical of the movement and its goals than US coverage, at times casting BLM as a product of the excesses of the American system.

In the next section, we briefly review existing scholarship on media coverage of BLM in the United States. We introduce the discursive opportunity structure framework and illustrate some of the main differences between the US and French contexts. The following section discusses our data and methods. Subsequent sections review first US and then French coverage of BLM in France through a qualitative textual analysis of thirty-five stories from each country. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our study for understanding comparative media coverage of race-based social activism.

Frameworks for Understanding Coverage of BLM

Most scholars examining the media's coverage of racial justice movements in the United States have emphasized its negative nature, often drawing on insights from the protest paradigm framework (Kilgo and Harlow 2019; Lane et al. 2020; Leopold and Bell 2017). The protest paradigm suggests that the media have developed a "routinized pattern or implicit template for the coverage of social protest" (McLeod and Hertog 1999: 310) that tends to be antagonistic to social movements that challenge the status quo. This has been a particularly useful lens through which to understand protests centered around racial issues (Kilgo and Harlow 2019) and perhaps, especially with regard to BLM, where one set of scholars concludes that "all of the protest paradigm characteristics were present in coverage of BLM" (Leopold and Bell 2017: 731; see also Kilgo et al. 2019).

It is unclear, however, whether the protest paradigm applies in a straightforward manner to comparative coverage of BLM. Existing scholarship on media coverage of BLM focuses exclusively on the US context and was not designed to analyze coverage outside of the United States. While protest paradigm approaches have been applied in comparative examinations of the American and foreign media (Di Cicco 2010; Harlow and Johnson 2011; Shahin et al. 2016), research has also highlighted variations in the applicability of the paradigm depending on factors such as protesters' tactics, journalists' own preferences, or the perceived legitimacy of informal power negotiations (Boyle et al. 2012; Shahin et al. 2016; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2014).

The French context also raises specific issues. Studies of the US and French media markets show significant differences in the relative concentration of the French journalistic field, the propensity for US newspapers to structure stories around narratives when compared to the "debate ensemble" format in France, and the somewhat greater commercialization of the United States media compared to French outlets (Benson 2013: 21–67). There is also more variation in France surrounding the perceived social value of protest. European Social Surveys point to France as having one of the

highest rates of protest participation on the continent (Gallego 2007: 15; Vassallo and Ding 2016: 112). Political leaders and citizens often find such protests a nuisance, but many have accepted them as "an integral and even essential part of the democratic process" (Wilson 1994: 23). It is thus not clear whether the media will be uniformly or routinely antagonistic toward social protest when it occurs in France.

Focusing more closely on the national context is especially likely to be fruitful for an analysis of media responses to BLM. Even within the United States, some scholars have suggested that media coverage of BLM may be negative not just because of the protest paradigm dynamics, but because of the domestic "racial context" (Reid and Craig 2021: 293) in which "racial grammar" is used to "delegitimize the BLM movement and position their activists and protesters as 'bad' Black citizens" (Banks 2018: 710). The US-specific approaches like these invite scholars to consider whether similar insights may apply to the comparative study of media coverage of BLM.

Sociological research on discursive opportunity structures offers a theoretical lens through which to examine media representations of Black-led racial justice movements in diverse national contexts. This scholarship provides a bridge between longstanding work on social movement framing (Benford and Snow 2000) and studies of political opportunity structures (Tilly 1978). It aims to explain why some social movement frames are more successful than others in particular contexts, highlighting the repertoire of discourses that are especially likely (or unlikely) to gain traction in a specific time or place. As Koopmans et al. (2005: 19) summarize:

> Discursive opportunities determine which collective identities and substantive demands have a high likelihood to gain *visibility* in the mass media, to *resonate* with the claims of other collective actors, and to achieve *legitimacy* in the public discourse.

Koopmans et al. (2005) compare media coverage of claims-making about citizenship, immigration, and group identities in five European countries, including France. In keeping with France's self-described "republican model" that emphasizes a shared public discourse around "color-blindness" (Beaman and Petts 2020; Bleich 2000), they argue that it is "difficult to mobilize in support of particular identities" in France (Koopmans et al. 2005: 217). This is true even with respect to antiracist movements, which for decades tended toward universalist rather than particularistic forms of mobilization (Koopmans et al. 2005: 226–27; Goldman 2020; Talpin 2022).

By contrast, since at least the civil rights era, the "minority rights revolution" (Skrentny 2002) in the United States has normalized mobilization for equality and inclusion by groups defined by racial and ethnic characteristics, in what French commentators frequently call the "communitarian" or "Anglo-Saxon" approach (Montague 2013). Given these significant cross-national differences, the discursive opportunity structure framework raises the possibility that coverage of BLM in France will respond to different dynamics than those identified in scholarship about the United States. While US outlets covering France may identify people by their racial identities, French ones may use nonracialized terms to discuss actors and issues related to racism, discrimination, and police violence. The practice of US outlets engaging with the racial

consciousness of "Blackness" implied in "Black Lives Matter" may not be as prevalent in French sources sympathetic to the "republican" or "color-blind" perspective on societal relations.

A discursive opportunity structure framework also invites us to examine whether journalists in both countries accept or critique the other country's approach to pursuing racial justice. In the latter, US coverage of BLM in France may be relatively more positive than US coverage of BLM in the United States. It may also be more positive than French coverage of BLM, given common French discursive critiques of the American model of race relations. Our overarching theoretical goal is to understand whether the discursive opportunity framework offers significant insights into the nature of media coverage of BLM in France that may help illuminate the dynamics of media coverage in other locations.

Data and Methods

We used LexisNexis, Nexis Uni, ProQuest, and Factiva databases to collect stories mentioning BLM and French locations in five US and five French outlets for the eight calendar years from January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2020. To maximize the number of relevant stories, we focused primarily on major newspapers in each country. In the United States, we searched for articles in two left-leaning newspapers (*New York Times* and *Washington Post*), one right-leaning newspaper (*Wall Street Journal*), and one large-circulation centrist newspaper (*USA Today*). In France, our articles are similarly drawn from two left-leaning newspapers (*Le Monde*, *L'Humanité*), one right-leaning newspaper (*Le Figaro*), and one large-circulation centrist newspaper (*Le Parisien*).[3] These outlets are close analogs to the US sources in that *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* are the largest circulating national newspapers in the country, though *L'Humanité* has a much smaller circulation than the *Washington Post* and is associated with the Communist Party; in addition, *Le Parisien* is a regional newspaper rather than a national one, though it has a large readership in the capital region.[4] Given the overrepresentation of left-leaning newspapers available in major databases within the two countries, we also included a right-leaning television source in each location. We draw stories from Fox News in the United States and its analog CNews in France, using website stories to maximize consistency with newspaper articles. Even taken together, this range of sources does not reach a majority of media consumers in either country, yet it represents an important set of outlets for the qualitative analysis we pursue below.

Because some stories touch on BLM or France only in passing, we examine more closely the subset likely to draw an explicit tie between BLM and France. We identify all stories that mention BLM and French locations within the same sentence. We also select all stories from the US sources that mention BLM and French locations at least three times each, as well as all stories from the French corpus that mention BLM at least three times and French locations at least once. For any source that did not include at least three stories that met our criteria, we supplemented our data through a Google search that included the source name, "Black Lives Matter," and "France"; we then retained stories mentioning BLM at least one time and France at least two

times. Even with this additional step, there were still no relevant articles from *USA Today*. After excluding stories not drawing an explicit connection between BLM and France, our data include thirty-five stories each from the US and French sources. Table 1 summarizes the number of stories from each of our ten sources.[5]

We undertake a qualitative textual analysis (Brennen 2017; 203–39; Fürsich 2009) of each of the 70 stories. Our approach draws inspiration from scholarship that emphasizes the value of considering multiple theoretical perspectives in an abductive fashion. Fuhse (2022: 100) observes that no single theory can perfectly match the social world, and that different theories "make different aspects of the social world visible." We homed in on the value of the discursive opportunity structure perspective through a process of abductive analysis. Timmermans and Tavory (2012: 169) define this as a "qualitative data analysis approach aimed at theory construction." Rather than addressing the data with a "favorite theory," we proceeded according to their suggestion as "informed theoretical agnostics" relying on a careful reading of the stories themselves. This allowed us to notice findings that were "anomalous and surprising" in light of the protest paradigm, but that were legible through the discursive opportunity structure perspective (Timmermans and Tavory 2012: 169).

In keeping with this approach, we assess the presence and relevance of four key elements, namely whether and how stories: (1) label individuals by race or ethnicity; (2) draw or deny parallels between the US and French circumstances; (3) vaunt or criticize the US "communitarian" or French "republican" model of race relations; and (4) are critical or supportive of the BLM movement or related initiatives. The two lead authors read each story for each of these four elements. Our method is necessarily qualitative given the nuances in the texts of the stories that make precise quantification difficult and at times potentially misleading (Fürsich 2009).[6] Our goal is to convey a careful, informed interpretation of the principal themes and patterns contained in these 70 stories while also recognizing limits to generalization inherent in any analysis based on a small sample.

Table 1. Stories Discussing Black Lives Matter (BLM) and France, by Outlet.

Source	Stories
New York Times	19
Washington Post	8
USA Today	0
Wall Street Journal	5
Fox News	3
US total	35
Le Monde	13
L'Humanité	5
Le Parisien	6
Le Figaro	9
CNews	2
France total	35

US Stories About BLM in France

How do the US outlets cover BLM in France? Before turning to the thematic analysis, it is important to provide a brief overview of the type and pace of coverage. Most of the US stories we reviewed contain only a few lines on BLM in France, situated in the context of longer pieces on topics such as artists or intellectuals like Josephine Baker or James Baldwin, or, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, roundups of BLM activities across multiple developed democracies. Approximately a third of the stories had longer discussions of BLM and racial justice concerns within France. The pace of stories mentioning BLM and France picked up substantially after Floyd's murder, with twenty seven of the thirty five published after May 25, 2020, and seventeen of them appearing in the month following his death alone.

Examining the aspects highlighted by the discursive opportunity structure perspective, first, how do US outlets identify actors in stories? When US outlets publish about BLM in France, they communicate an acceptance of racial identities by commonly referring to activists and sources as "Black," or by indicating that Blackness plays a key role in societal tensions. On several occasions, for example, US newspaper stories specifically identified sources, protesters, and interviewees as Black. A *New York Times* article from June 4, 2020 referred to Adama Traoré as a "24-year-old black man," and another from June 14, 2020 quoted Isabelle Blanche and Océane Loimon, each of whom was identified as a "black protester." In other instances, US outlets conveyed perspectives that asserted or assumed that Blackness was a core cause of societal tensions in France, such as in a June 3, 2020 *Washington Post* article that quotes a Traoré support group on Facebook as saying "His name was George Floyd, who just like Adama died because they were black."

Fox News, the most right-leaning news organization included in the study, was also race-conscious when discussing BLM in France. Shortly following George Floyd's murder, a story from June 6, 2020 interviewed an employee of France's city hall who discussed his own experiences with racism. He was identified as being born in Martinique and was described as facing "racism for the color of his skin when his family moved to the mainland—treatment he sees echoed with his daughter, who has been targeted by classmates who mock her hair." While the tendency to use racial identities as descriptors of individuals or societal fractures is not ubiquitous, it is frequent, and far more common than in French outlets, as we discuss below.

Second, US journalists at times drew explicit parallels between racial dynamics in France and the United States. When protests erupted following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Adama Traoré was often discussed in US coverage as the French equivalent of George Floyd. This parallel was openly drawn by his sister and leader of the "truth and justice for Adama" movement, Assa Traoré, who was interviewed by a number of US journalists. One article in the *Washington Post* from June 13, 2020, described her role by comparing French and American circumstances:

Assa Traoré and her family have sought to transform Adama's name into a rallying cry against police violence in France. His death has been referred to as "France's Ferguson," and Assa has been credited as the key force behind France's Black Lives Matter equivalent.

The description of Adama Traoré's death as "France's Ferguson" constructs a clear analogy between the US BLM movement and events in France. Other US stories also identified the connections and emphasized similarities between the two countries, such as this *New York Times* article from September 17, 2020:

> This year, many of France's largest demonstrations, which were mostly peaceful, were inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and the killing of George Floyd in the United States, which forced the issue of police brutality to the front of the political agenda.

Third, US stories about BLM in France also at times included critiques of the country's embrace of "republican" values of "color-blindness," often by building on the notion that there were more similarities between the French and US situations than French official discourse acknowledged. This tone appeared in the August 8, 2016 *Washington Post* article in which journalist James McAuley spelled out the differences between France and the United States when it comes to race, pointing to institutionalized color-blindness and universalism as driving forces in the country:

> In the weeks since July 19, the question of how Adama died has turned attention on police brutality and structural racism in a proudly egalitarian society that considers itself so institutionally colorblind that it refuses—per a 1978 law—even to collect data on race or ethnicity in annual censuses or government-sponsored research.

The article not only reported on France's policy of not collecting such data, it also critiqued the French perception of race: "To the French state, race, as a quantifiable category but also a separate social experience, is not supposed to exist."

A December 28, 2017 *New York Times* editorial under the headline "France Fails to Face Up to Racism" also criticized France's approach by implicitly juxtaposing it with the US one. The editorial focused on French journalist Rokhaya Diallo (described as "black"), who was removed from a government advisory council after pointing out several instances of systemic racism in the country. She is positively framed as having produced the documentary "From Paris to Ferguson: Guilty of Being Black" that discusses ethnic profiling, and for identifying "institutional racism" in France. As the editorial noted, however:

> The term institutional racism, which in French is called state racism, is seen by many as an affront to the colorblind ideal of a universalist French republic. In France, it is illegal to classify people by their race or ethnicity.

It strongly criticizes the government for having "shamefully caved to criticism and dismissed Ms. Diallo," asserting that the move is a "blot" on President Macron's

would-be image as a "forward-looking, inclusive leader" and one that "highlights the pressing need in France for an open debate on racism."

Even a Fox News story on December 4, 2020 was explicitly critical of the French republican, color-blind model:

> French public policy focuses on French national identity as a means to integrate its minority populations and this approach creates an environment of systemic discrimination because there are no reliable indicators of social, economic or political inequalities.

The journalist subsequently quoted a professor from the University of New Hampshire, who further criticized France's relationship with race. American journalists from a variety of outlets thus tend to interpret BLM in France through a US race relations frame that is unsympathetic to the French republican model.

Fourth and finally, contrary to studies of protest coverage in the United States, stories about BLM in France have not typically highlighted lawlessness or cast protesters as violent. Many focused on providing the protesters' point of view, with journalists often interviewing activists and explicitly noting the peaceful nature of protests. For example, on July 17, 2020, the *New York Times* published a long, positive profile of Assa Traoré under the headline "Fighting Discrimination, A French Woman Becomes a Champion of Men." And a July 20, 2020 interview of European theater producers in the *New York Times* quotes Eva Doumbia, founder of a French theater company saying that BLM protests in the United States "reignited the issue of representation" in French society. US journalists regularly and consistently sought out marginalized community members to speak on behalf of issues related to BLM, while introducing few countervailing or skeptical perspectives.

US coverage of France also commonly framed BLM as a positive movement combating racial injustices. Stories that focused most intensely on BLM in France tended to discuss police brutality, racism, and systemic racism as endemic problems brought to light by protesters. A *Washington Post* article from June 13, 2020, for example, notes, "Christiane Taubira, a former justice minister and the only black woman to have held that post, said the reality of structural racism was undeniable, even in an officially color-blind society." Discussions of violence were infrequently linked to protesters and the handful of mentions of riots most often referred back to disruptions from 2005, not to contemporary unrest in France. A *Wall Street Journal* article from June 3, 2020 summarized this tendency, stating plainly that, "Most international demonstrations have remained peaceful and focused on racism." A *New York Times* article from June 13, 2020 went further by attributing violence more to law enforcement than to the protesters themselves:

> Amid the overwhelmingly young crowds, demonstrators waved signs reading, "No justice, no peace" and "Black Lives Matter," less than two weeks after 20,000 protesters had assembled in front of a Paris court for Mr. Traoré. The Saturday protests were organized by "The Truth For Adama," an advocacy group led by Mr. Traoré's sister, Assa Traoré. The rally remained largely peaceful, although police officers threw tear gas and clashed with protesters in the late afternoon.

In sum, the discursive opportunity structures perspective illuminates how US journalists identify individuals by racial markers and interpret societal conflicts through a race relations frame. It renders legible perceived parallels between French and US circumstances as well as critiques of the French republican, color-blind approach to fighting racism and police brutality. It allows us to understand the relatively sympathetic coverage of BLM in France, with US journalists conveying empathy for protesters and for activists whose viewpoints are consistently represented. In spite of some significant situational differences between the two countries, US journalists cover events in France through a quintessentially American lens.

French Stories About BLM in France

How does French coverage of BLM in France compare to US coverage? Among the thirty-five French stories that mention BLM and France in combination, approximately half contain just a few sentences connecting the two. These stories focus to a greater degree on the United States or other locations, touch briefly on reactions to BLM by French companies, or note in passing that BLM was a popular Twitter hashtag in France in a particular year, for example. Among those with a more sustained focus on BLM in France, four were published in the weeks following Adama Traoré's death and eleven were published in the month after the murder of George Floyd. A handful focused on French athletes and their reactions to BLM, racism, and police violence. There is thus a significant amount of variation within these stories and an increased pace over time, with only seven published between mid-2016 and the end of 2018 and the remaining twenty-eight appearing between June and December 2020.

Turning to the first point of the thematic analysis of elements identified by the discursive opportunity structure framework, French outlets were notably more reluctant than their US counterparts to identify French actors by their racial identities. Journalists more often described individuals by their profession than by any racial markers. A December 6, 2016 Le Monde article, for example, identified Adama Traoré's brother Samba Traoré as an "electrician," and activist Almamy Kanouté as an "educator and cofounder of the Emergence movement." References to the November 2020 police beating of Michel Zecler called him a "producer" without mentioning that he is Black.[7] Even descriptions of Adama Traoré shied away from using the word Black. Of the four articles published in the aftermath of his July 2016 death, three describe him simply as a twenty-four-year-old, or as a resident of Boyenval or Beaumont-sur-Oise.[8] The fourth obliquely indicates his race by way of his family's geographic origins, noting that he is "a man of Malian origin."[9]

French sources do not, however, have a blanket prohibition against specifically mentioning race. Several stories referencing the United States referred to the "black community" or described individuals as "African American" or George Floyd as a "black man." Noting racial identities was simply uncommon when describing events or actors in France. Of the fourteen stories we analyzed that mentioned Adama Traoré, for example, only two explicitly noted that he was Black. The most frequent mentions of race in French journalism were quotations from scholars, activists, or

private individuals, such as an interview in *Le Monde* with scholar Audrey Célestine who discussed the "overrepresentation of individuals from poor neighborhoods, often black or of North African origin" with respect to deaths in police custody, or a French dancer whose father thought ballet was "a White sport." When journalists identified interviewees, however, they typically did not note their race, even in stories about protests or social issues that were associated with BLM.

With respect to the second thematic point, French stories were apt to avoid or deny direct parallels between the French and US situations. Even actors who were willing to acknowledge analogs between the two countries often did so with caveats and circumspection. A June 6, 2020 *Le Monde* interviewer asked La Rumeur rappers Hamé Bourokba and Ekoué Labitey to respond to a quote by the vice president of the National Assembly Hugues Renson that "our republican model is fortunately very far from the American segregationist past." Earlier in the interview, Bourokba had noted that George Floyd's death was a "mirror held up by the United States" in which French people recognized themselves. To this prompt, however, he responded that "we are not idiots to the point of saying France is the United States," and noted that France was relatively shielded from "the raw violence of the American model."

Third, in keeping with the above vignette, reflections on the extent of the similarities or differences between French and US circumstances sometimes took place within broader discussions of the two countries' models of race relations. The French model was explicitly contrasted with the perceived drawbacks of the US approach in a November 3 *Le Monde* article in which President Macron directly compared the French republican model with the "multiculturalism" of "Anglo-Saxon societies," seen as representing a "juxtaposition of communities" lacking a "common project."[10] He defended "the beauty" of the French republican model, where people have "the same representation of the world because we are citizens of the same country." In a November 5, 2020 *Le Monde* article, he went on to criticize academics for encouraging "ethnicization" of social issues, which he asserted can "only lead to a secessionist outcome" which would "break the Republic in two."[11]

Fourth, French coverage was decidedly more mixed in tone than US coverage of BLM in France. Many French stories conveyed multiple sentiments about BLM as a movement. In the immediate aftermath of Adama Traoré's 2016 death, for example, a July 25 article in *Le Parisien* opened by emphasizing neighborhood "scuffles," the presence of military and police personnel "crisscrossing the terrain" and cars "set ablaze." Nevertheless, the same article quoted a local protester's frustrated complaint, "whatever the police say, I don't believe them," and reported Bagui Traoré's statement that he saw his dead brother and "a soldier with a bloody t-shirt" at the police station. It noted support for the Traoré family from celebrities such as the actor Omar Sy and rappers Kery James and Youssoupha, and from the Socialist Party, which called for "transparency" from the authorities. It ended by stressing that the family had consistently called for calm in the neighborhood.

The most positive articles were extended interviews with progressive scholars or activists (many of whom would be identified as Black in a US context). Political sociologist Audrey Célestine was interviewed not only by *Le Monde* but by *L'Humanité*, a

newspaper that also interviewed sociologist Kevin Vacher. These scholars emphasized the role of BLM in drawing attention to the racial dimension of police brutality and systemic racism more broadly. Extended interviews with authors Guy Darol or Alain Mabanckou about their recent books touched on the role of BLM in raising consciousness about how class and race overlap to create forms of oppression. The interview transcript format—which Benson (2013: 57) calls "a staple of French newspapers"—has thus at times foregrounded the perspectives of actors who are highly sympathetic to BLM in France.

Not all stories about BLM were evenhanded, however. In particular, the right-leaning broadsheet *Le Figaro* more frequently published articles that were critical of BLM and associated themes or concepts such as White privilege or "wokeness." A small number of *Figaro* articles focused on violence or relied on interviews with police or establishment leaders unlikely to express sympathy with protesters. However, the most prominent critiques of BLM in *Le Figaro* were longer pieces by public intellectuals, columnists, or journalists that attacked the philosophical premises of the BLM movement in terms that are more consistent with the discursive opportunity structure perspective.

Shortly after the murder of George Floyd, for example, *Le Figaro* published three pieces in a highly critical vein. In a June 11, 2020 interview, philosopher Alain Finkielkraut disparaged the "mimetic frenzy" of French activists carrying "Black Lives Matter" and "I can't breathe" placards. He condemned concepts like institutional racism and White privilege, asserting that antiracism has gone off track by becoming "autoracism," which "is the most appalling and grotesque pathology of our time." An opinion piece by author Thierry Wolton from June 17, 2020 took a similar tone, as did journalist Laure Mandaville's June 18, 2020 article called "The dangerous prophets of Black Lives Matter," which denounced the movement's focus on "white privilege" and "vestiges of a 'racist' past."

In subsequent months, *Le Figaro* contributions continued to emphasize the perceived dangers of the American model of race relations. In an October 28, 2020 opinion piece, lawyer, activist, and essayist Gilles Goldnadel asserted that "America suffers from the disease of acute multiculturalism and affection for minorities, inevitably abused." For him, an "ideologically instrumentalized neurosis" has given rise to BLM, a movement that "rages" in the United States and is "idealized" in France. On December 20, 2020, *Le Figaro* published an article entitled "'Cancel culture', 'woke', when the American left goes crazy." While it principally reviewed the US culture wars, it concluded with a warning that cancel culture and "wokism" represent a "revolution that eats its young" that is implanting itself in French universities, and that "in the United States as in France, the ideological war is only beginning."

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis of coverage of BLM in France contributes to a broader research agenda that focuses on media representations of race-based social movements

and protests. So far, most scholars have gravitated toward examining coverage of BLM in the United States given the movement's prominence in that country over the past few years. Several studies have highlighted the value of the protest paradigm for generating insights into coverage of BLM. Here, we undertake a close reading of stories about BLM in France from both US and French sources. Our abductive approach reveals potential limitations of applying the protest paradigm outside the US context and the potential value of the discursive opportunity structure perspective for understanding coverage of race-related protest in a cross-national context.

Based on a textual analysis of thirty-five US and thirty-five French BLM stories set in France, our study suggests that many noteworthy aspects of coverage would be missed by a straightforward application of the protest paradigm. For example, whether journalists identify participants by their perceived race when reporting on race-related protests differs significantly across the two countries. US reporters tend to identify individuals and issues specifically by race, whereas their French counterparts commonly avoid doing so. US sources are prone to draw parallels between the French and US situations when discussing BLM in France and to criticize France's color-blind republican approach. French outlets rarely and only partially draw analogies between France and the United States and convey a greater level of support for the country's "republican" model.

In addition, a baseline proposition of the protest paradigm is that coverage of race-based protests that challenge the status quo will be delegitimizing (Leopold and Bell 2017; Kilgo and Harlow 2019; Kilgo et al. 2019). Our analysis shows that the US stories are often surprisingly positive about BLM initiatives in France. Naturally, there is variation among publications, and there is indeed significant negativity in French articles from *Le Figaro*; yet even these stories tend to focus on national cultural differences as the primary source of the perceived danger, which is more in keeping with the discursive opportunity structure framework than with the protest paradigm. US-based analyses of BLM that emphasize the distinctive national racial grammar and racial context of the United States (Banks 2018; Reid and Craig 2021) also dovetail with core elements of the discursive opportunity structure perspective. Our analytical and theoretical framework thus reveals important aspects of coverage of BLM that would likely not be noted through a protest paradigm analysis.

There are, of course, limitations to qualitative approaches based on a small sample of articles. Such studies primarily probe the plausibility of theories rather than provide conclusive evidence that one or another theory holds more broadly (Fuhse 2022; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). In our cases, to enhance the internal validity of our findings, it would be valuable for future studies to assemble additional stories about BLM in France and to assess them through large-n quantitative methods. This can be done either by greatly expanding the number of sources in each country or by waiting to gather more data published after the end of 2020, presuming that race-related protests in France remain in the news in both locations for the foreseeable future.

Our study's focus on coverage of one country also suggests caution is in order before drawing broader conclusions about the relevance of discursive opportunity structure analysis cross-nationally. Such analysis is likely most helpful in policy and social domains where dominant public rhetoric differs across countries, as is the case with race in the United States and France. To probe the external validity of our observations, it would be instructive to compare coverage of race-based protests in the United States, Britain, and Canada to those in France, Germany, and Switzerland. With some important internal variations, each of those sets of countries has relatively similar discursive opportunity structures with respect to race that differs from the other set. The United States, Britain, and Canada have long recognized race- or ethnicty-based movements as a valid part of the national political fabric, whereas France, Germany, and Switzerland have traditionally downplayed the social value of mobilization based on racial or cultural differences (Koopmans et al. 2005: 69–73).

Looking beyond media coverage, discursive opportunity structures may also help us understand patterns within protests themselves. For instance, France's republican model likely encouraged Assa Traoré to distance herself from BLM in 2016 and to declare that the family was "not defending any racial cause."[12] However, when asked in 2020 about George Floyd's death and how the US BLM movement can influence French developments, she stated in an October *Antidote* magazine interview, "we are all Black Lives Matter … Here, like there, it is the Blacks, the non-whites that are getting killed" (Rhrissi 2020). While this rhetorical shift is notable, France's discursive opportunity structure may limit its resonance: her 2020 statement was not widely covered by any of the five sources we examined, and several late-2020 stories in *Le Figaro* strongly criticized the importation of race-conscious US approaches to social problems.

It is also worth emphasizing that discursive opportunities are not fixed over time. They are subject to contestation by individuals and social movements. We do not anticipate a rapid or thoroughgoing change to France's "color-blind," "republican" approach. But when individuals like Assa Traoré mobilize BLM activists in France, they are building on the work of other associations and movements to test the limits of the discursive system. These steps are then reflected in and potentially reinforced through mainstream media coverage. In this way, the media can be a force that catalyzes wider change in public perceptions and social movements about racial justice in France and beyond.

Our analysis suggests that as the BLM movement takes root outside of the United States, the most prominent theoretical framework explaining coverage within the United States may not be easily transferable to developments elsewhere. Protest paradigm scholarship that has emphasized negativity in representations of the US BLM movement may not allow for a full understanding of the nature and tone of coverage of BLM abroad, either by US or foreign journalists. The discursive opportunity structure framework is likely to be a more fruitful theoretical paradigm for comparative research given its focus on how contextual factors can shape the visibility, resonance, and legitimacy of discourses in different national settings.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Hamé Bourokba, rapper and antiracist activist, quoted in *Le Monde*, June 6, 2020. All translations from the original French in this article were conducted by the lead author.
2. François Heisbourg, special advisor to the Foundation for Strategic Research, quoted in *Le Monde*, November 3, 2020.
3. For information on newspaper circulation, see https://www.acpm.fr/Les-chiffres/Diffusion-Presse/Presse-Payante/Presse-Quotidienne-Nationale and https://www.acpm.fr/Les-chiffres/Diffusion-Presse/Presse-Payante/Presse-Quotidienne-Regionale. Note, the left-leaning newspaper *Libération* is not available through in newspaper databases across the timespan we examine.
4. In addition, as Usher (2021: 162–93) demonstrates, the *New York Times* has ambitions to be a global newspaper in a way *Le Monde* does not. Usher (2021: 191) also stresses, however, that "place still matters" and that "the Times is still the *New York* Times," suggesting its national and local focus continue to affect its coverage.
5. Information of each article is available in the online Supplementary material.
6. For example, French sources rarely refer to French individuals as "Black"; however, at times, they use coded language ranging along a spectrum from implicit to explicit ethnic or racial references, such as "populations with an immigrant background," "populations with a diversity background," "North African origin," or "Malian origin." Summarizing such references with categorical codes would elide such subtleties that are better captured through qualitative description.
7. *Le Figaro*, December 9, 2020; *Le Monde*, December 12, 2020.
8. *Le Parisien*, July 25, 2016; *Le Parisien*, August 19, 2016; *Le Monde*, December 6, 2016.
9. *Le Figaro*, July 25, 2016.
10. *Le Monde*, November 3, 2020.
11. *Le Monde*, November 5, 2020.
12. *Le Monde*, December 6, 2016.

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