

How the international media framed ‘food riots’

How the international media framed ‘food riots’ during the global food crises of 2007-12

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Abstract

This paper explores the framing of ‘food riots’ in the international media during the global food crisis period of 2007-12. This is an important issue because the international media’s overly simplistic treatment of food-related protests as caused by hunger leading to anger and violence, dominates public discourse, informing both global policy discourse and quantitative policy research into food riots. This paper draws on some basic analysis of a large news database to explore the effects of how food riots were framed in the international media. It confirms the overly simplistic ‘hungry man is an angry man’ thesis held across international media discourse as a whole. But it also notes differences within the media, and argues that those differences produce different effects depending on whether articles are intended to inform, analyse or advocate. Certain voices are silenced or subdued by the international media, but food rioters in the developing world appear to be treated with more sympathy than rioters in the North might expect, or than they receive in their own national media. Overall, the effect of international media coverage of the wave of food riots during the food crisis, particularly in 2008, was to indicate a global policy problem requiring global policy action. It therefore marked a political intervention on a global scale.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

How the media frames events has important effects on how they are perceived by the general public, and on the political and policy responses they engender. However, framings are themselves constructed in collaboration with their audiences, responding to as well as reinforcing pre-existing understandings of how the world works. Development studies has recognized the role of the news media in mediating (representing, articulating, negotiating) political interests to advance economic policy agendas (Coyne and Leeson 2004; Islam, Djankov, and McLeish 2002), but rarely examined the processes involved in such mutual construction of frames (although see Olper and Swinnen 2013). This paper aims to contribute towards understanding of the process involved in the representation, articulation and negotiation of a global political issue, namely that of the global food crises of 2008-08 and 2010-11. It aims to do so by examining the framing employed by the international media in its coverage of those food riots, and through a discussion of its sources and effects.

Media framing refers here to how the stories the media elects to tell, and the manner in which they do so typically achieves four things: implicitly or explicitly i) diagnosing the problem or issue in question; ii) analysing or pointing towards its causes or origins; iii) taking a position on the moral dimensions of the events, including the assignment of credit or blame to key actors; and iv) recommending socially desirable actions (Entman 1993). This paper employs the concept of media framing to explore the international media coverage of 'food riots' during 2007-12 shaped understandings of the motivations and means of protestors in directions that diminished their agency as political actors, but nonetheless amplified the political effects of those protests through the limelight cast by the international media, creating space for particular kinds of policy responses to emerge as inevitable or logical.

Recent work has highlighted the interpretative biases in international media reportage of 'food riot' protests in regions and countries, and the effects they create in terms of promoting particular kinds of policy responses as inevitable or logical. In their comparative analysis of international and national media coverage of food crisis protests in urban Africa, Sneyd *et al* find that the international media displayed a tendency to associated riots with poverty and hunger, on the one hand, and 'global profiteering' (e.g., commodity speculation); by contrast, the national media were far more likely to view protests as properly political events, expressing popular discontent with political governance, but also with economic governance,

in the targeting of food merchants, which they called ‘local merchant profiteering’ (2013).

They conclude that:

the international media assumes that the causes are based on the material availability and cost of food. Whether positing that international commodity speculators are driving the costs up, or whether there is an absolute food shortage, riots are acts of protesting hunger (Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013, 495).

By contrast, the African media,

seems to avoid such materialistic explanations and instead focus on the moral or ethical dimensions of profiteering along with a strong focus on the feelings of frustration by everyday Africans who are prevented from participating in the political and economic activities of their countries (Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013, 495).

In part because the international media explains food riots as caused in a simple way by high prices and scarcity, Sneyd *et al* argue, the obvious global policy responses are to expand production and lower prices (as was the goal of the Comprehensive Framework of Action adopted under the United Nations System High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis after the 2008 crisis). By contrast, the more political explanation embedded in the accounts of the national media points to very different policy rationales (which may be palatable to neither the international community nor national political elites) (Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013).

In their study of protests in Bangladesh in 2008, Hossain and Jahan conclude that the international media misrepresented these events when they labelled them ‘food riots’: food prices had been a factor, but the protests were wage strikes by workers in the garments export sector, part of a longer struggle that pre- and post-dated the global food crisis (2014). This misrepresentation was not merely a category error. It reflected a deep and substantive misunderstanding of the politics of food crises in Bangladesh, a country in which, due to acute political sensitivities around food crises resulting from a history connecting famine with political crisis (Hossain 2017), the political elite were at vast pains to protect the population against price spikes. By contrast, the wages of workers at the bottom of the global garments value chain were relatively unprotected against rises in the price of rice, and, as a new socio-political grouping, they had to date not won the subsistence protections enjoyed by the rural majority (Hossain and Jahan 2014).

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Both these critiques of international media coverage agree it missed a crucial understanding of the domestic politics within which ‘food riots’ could be made sense of. But perhaps the international media has no particular obligation to understand and explain domestic politics; in what was clearly a wave of similar protests around the world, most obviously connected to the steep rise in food prices, such coverage was entirely reasonable news story-telling. Nonetheless, whether the international media understands and reports accurately on the causes of food riots is likely to matter because we know that reportage of food issues influences public policy both directly (as Sneyd *et al* point out), by influencing public policymakers (who may think media coverage represents public opinion). It can also be expected to influence public policy indirectly, by shaping public opinion and therefore political support for different policies (Olper and Swinnen 2013). With respect to the political urgency of food price rises during the 2007-08 price spike, in the present instance, there are good reasons to believe that the apprehension of a ‘crisis’ in need of urgent global policy attention owed in significant part to international news coverage (Swinnen, Squicciarini, and Vandemoortele 2011). The metaphor of a wave of food riots spreading across 37 countries¹ successfully conveyed the sense of a tsunami of subsistence crisis washing across the developing world, no longer an unconnected series of disasters caused by underdevelopment, corruption and bad luck, but a shock with a common source in the global food system.

In their intriguing account of the rapid volte face in institutional perspectives from viewing world food prices as ‘too low’ to ‘too high’ during the 2007-08 global commodity price spike, Swinnen *et al* note the possibility that media coverage of the food price rises was ‘captured’ by aid agencies seeking to create public sympathy for their fund-raising efforts. They argue that there was:

¹ There are a number of possible sources for the claim that there were ‘food riots in 37 countries’ found in several academic, policy and news articles during the 2007-12 period. The earliest instances may be an extrapolation of a Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) report on the impending food crisis in 37 countries in December 2007, which warns of possible riots (FAO 2007). Schneider’s valuable early initiative (Schneider 2008) catalogued events in 2008. By 2014 a World Bank report concluded that there had been 51 food protest-type events (they are hesitant to use the term food riot, rightly recognizing its contested nature) in 37 countries in the 7 years between 2007 and 2014 (World Bank 2014).

a set of incentives for international organisations to emphasise the negative welfare implications [of food price rises] in their analysis and policy communications, and to put less emphasis on the positive effects (Swinnen, Squicciarini, and Vandemoortele 2011, 420).

With respect to food and agriculture, in particular, media coverage is known to shape the political support for particular policies: what might be termed more ‘democratic’ access to media is associated with more democratic agriculture policies, such as reduced taxation in poor countries (where more of the population are in the agrarian economy) and lower agricultural subsidies in rich countries (where a minority are farmers) (Olper and Swinnen 2013, 434). Frameworks for studying policy processes in food and nutrition take particular notice of media coverage of issues such as food safety (Resnick et al. 2015). It is possible that the universal relevance of food policies makes coverage of food topics particularly newsworthy.

International media coverage of ‘food riots’ also matters because news items count as data in the standard quantitative studies of such events; see for instance (Berazneva and Lee 2013; Arezki and Brückner 2011; Bellemare 2015; Hendrix and Haggard 2015; for a critical view, see Demarest 2015). Individual events in political event catalogues tend to be labelled and categorized before being analysed as part of larger datasets and in relation to other variables, typically indicators of democracy or regime types, conflict and security, food price movements, levels of economic development, and sometimes the social profiles of protestors. By their nature, and perhaps partly because of the data they include, quantitative studies rarely examine discrete ‘food riot’ events as processes of bargaining within larger episodes of contentious political negotiation (Tilly 2008; Auyero and Moran 2007; although, see Ortiz et al. 2013). So while such studies often offer valuable predictive power over the likely scale and distribution of unrest in response to dearth, their explanations of why food riots occur in some but not in other locations are necessarily incomplete (Auyero and Moran 2007; Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013; Demarest 2015).

The arguments of Swinnen *et al* indicate that the media is not a giver of frames, nor is the public a taker of the same: instead, these are constructed interactively, often on the basis of shared or made political and moral principles. These ‘moral economic’ principles about the ethical priority of the hungry over the rights to profit through the market come to the fore

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particularly powerful over the emotive matter of hunger (Hossain and Scott-Villiers forthcoming). An understanding of media framing is therefore both an analysis of what the media does, and why the media does what it does – the audiences to whom it is playing, and its presuppositions about their views and concerns.

Those views and concerns were shaped by the extreme turbulence of this period in recent world history, a ‘perfect storm’ of crises of finance, climate and food (Beddington 2009). The period in question spanned two major global food price spikes (Von Braun and Gebreyohanes 2012; Gilbert and Morgan 2010; Holt-Giménez and Patel 2012), a global financial crisis and economic recession that threatened to be the worst since the 1930s and a global wave of popular protests relating to subsistence shocks, austerity policies, and political and economic inequality around the world (Ortiz et al. 2013; Barnett 2011; Mason 2013). Understanding how the media covers protest politics is important because such coverage frequently provides the empirical basis for cataloguing and studying ‘contentious political events. This is particularly true of food riots. This paper analyses how the international media (mainly newspapers) covered events labelled ‘food riots’ during this period, and discusses the effects of such coverage. It highlights the implications for advocacy and global public policy debates about global food security proceeded at this time. It also raises conceptual and methodological issues for the empirical analysis of this particular mode of contentious politics.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section explains what is meant here by media framing, and sets out some of the debates from media and communications theory about how media frames political events, and the effects of such framings. Section 3 describes the methodological approach taken to the analysis. Section 4 sets out the main findings of the exercise. Section 5 concludes, with some reflections on useful directions for future research.

2. Framing as media effects

What do we mean by ‘framing’, and why might it matter to the analysis of food riots? Media framing is a core analytical concept in the study of media effects (Entman 1993; Scheufele 1999; Matthes 2009). Framing refers to the ‘agenda-setting’ effects of how the selection of topics, labels, narrative styles and imagery, and tone influence public discourse about a reported event. Framing is shorthand for the work done by the media 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' (Entman 1993, 52).

But the media cannot construct entire worldviews, enforce diagnoses of problems or impose moral meanings on audiences. Frames are both 'devices embedded in political discourse' and 'internal structures of the mind' ((Kinders and Sanders 1990), cited in Scheufele 1999, 106). The consensus in media framing theory has converged around a social constructivist conceptualization, in which the media and its audience mutually constitute the frames in use: the media 'actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events' while 'people's information processing and interpretation are influenced by preexisting meaning structures or schemas' (Scheufele 1999, 105). By framing as a media effect it is meant, then, that newspaper coverage is likely to shape how 'food riots' come to be constructed in public discourse, but that these effects interact with individual and group worldviews to acquire meaning. As framing is not an effect achieved by the producers of media alone, so it is necessary to examine how the pre-existing ideas of media consumers give shape to the frames applied by the media. To look at how pre-existing audience narratives may co-construct 'food riots', we need to take into account the influence of ideological positions, in particular views on the ideal roles of market forces in provisioning societies, and on the tone of international coverage, particularly any efforts to appeal to common moral concerns through 'human interest' framings, or to a sense of enlightened self-interest, through threats of contagious global crisis.

With respect to the framing of news coverage of riots, specifically, it is reasonable to expect that class interests, particularly protection of private property and law and order, will shape how corporately-owned media outlets represent such events. However, it is also clear that such framings are not fixed and may shift over time, as occurred in the UK press coverage of the riots of the early 1980s compared to those in London 2011 (Cavanagh and Dennis 2012). As Cavanagh and Dennis show, the 2011 London riots were framed as outright criminality, in contrast to the earlier generation of riots which were cast in terms of the effects of 'social problems. The mutual construction by audiences and the media of the 2011 riots, they show, was not only to treat rioters as criminal gangs and looters, but to discredit and delegitimize popular protest of all kinds, including lawful demonstrations and civil disobedience

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(Cavanagh and Dennis 2012). Much, but not all, media coverage reflected and fed a ‘tendency among political sources to depoliticise, criminalise and deligitmise (sic) voices’; not surprisingly, media outlets known to be on the right of British political beliefs were particularly critical of rioters (Kelsey 2015, 245). It is important to keep in mind that there are a number of different framings available, even if some are dominant, and to keep in mind that the media may have to negotiate what Kelsey observes as a ‘tension between condemnatory, on the one hand, and observational or empathetic analyses of the riots, on the other’ (2015, 245).

Riots may not in general attract greatly sympathetic media coverage, but there are reasons to believe food riots may differ. Myths about the ways humans respond to crises of survival, often ‘highly oversimplified and distorted characterizations of the human response (Tierney 2006, 73) are, it is reasonable to expect, likely to inform the framing of ‘food riots’. The old proverb, ‘a hungry man is an angry man’² has something akin to the status of a natural law, creating latitude for the desperate hungry to transgress the usual rules and law (Hossain and Scott-Villiers forthcoming). For instance, in her study of media reporting of the Katrina hurricane in New Orleans, Tierney analysed the highly racialized myths of looters in the US media, noting the reactions of those stuck within the ravaged city

were characterized as irrational (because they engaged in “senseless” theft, rather than stealing for survival) and as gangs of out-of-control young males who presented a lethal threat to fellow victims and emergency responders (Tierney 2006, 74).

By contrast with the American poor, rioters in the developing world may well be cast by the international media as more ‘deserving’ because they are assumed to be objectively poorer. Presumptions of ‘natural’ human responses to physical hunger among those deemed genuinely needy may contrast unfavourably, at least momentarily, and in the media and public perception of affluent societies, with the motivations of rioters protesting the immorality of socioeconomic and political inequality (Harvie and Milburn 2013).

² The fifth edition of the Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs dates its first recorded use to a Scottish proverb of 1641; other sources apparently include a play by Aristophanes, James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, and Bob Marley’s song *Them Belly Full But We Hungry* (Simpson and Speake 2009).

With these concerns in mind, this paper focuses on how different news sources aggregated by a prominent international news database (Nexis) framed ‘food riots’ and related protests during the global food crisis period (mainly 2007-2012). This exercise has been undertaken in an effort to understand systematic biases, gaps or resonances between the frames of collective action and those shaping news coverage of food riots. It aims to build on the work of Sneyd *et al* by extending the scope of analysis globally and examining more systematically the effects of media framing of the issues.

3. Approach to exploring media framing of food riots

To study the coverage of food riots in the international media we used the online search engine of Nexis® (nexis.com), the international news database. Nexis allows searchable access to 609 news sources, including aggregators and newswire services, as well as online resources. It includes a varying proportion of developing country news sources, but most of the major developed country and international news sources. A variety of search terms and approaches were adopted in the search strategy. For reasons of space, this paper focuses on the analysis of results from news coverage of incidents labelled ‘food riots’ during the period 2006-2016.

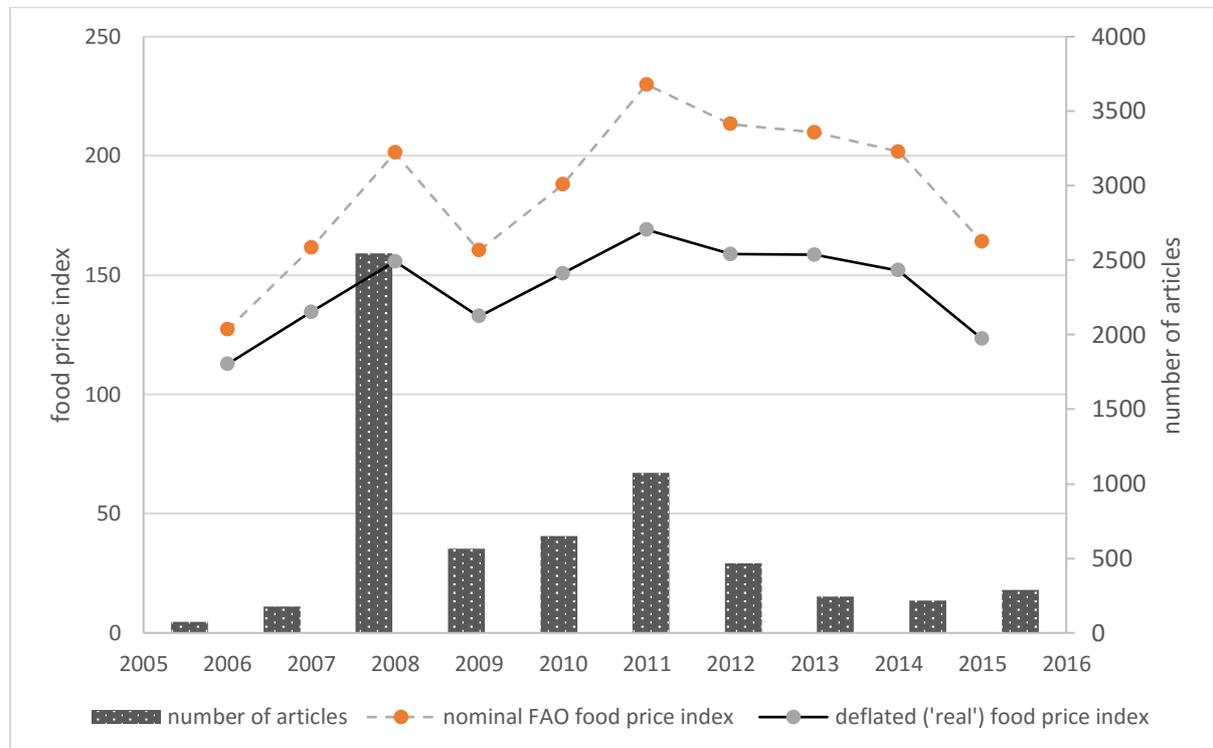
The search was worldwide, and included all available news sources in the Nexis database. A total identified 6301 news items that included the term ‘food riot’ in the period 2006 to 2016 was uncovered.³ Figure 1 offers a sense of the timeline of media coverage of food riots, set against the Food and Agricultural Organizations’ Global Food Price index for the same period. It shows that by far the greatest number of articles including mention of the term ‘food riot’ anywhere in the text during the period 2006-16 were published in 2008, when 2,545 news items were identified, the year of the first major price spike. But when global food prices spiked a second time, peaking even higher in real terms in early 2011, international news attention to food riots events fell to 1073 stories, only 42 per cent of the number of stories in 2008. In other words, if the extent of media coverage was linked to the

³ Some articles used the term euphemistically, perhaps to attract attention in a period where food riots had become common. For instance, the official response to teenage vandalism of a burger chain in Edinburgh, not long after the wave of global protests about food prices, was reported by the Daily Record as ‘*Yobs Not Locked Up Over Food Riot*’ (September 19, 2008, pp. 21).

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food price rises, this was only true in 2008, when such a spike could have been seen as novel, or newsworthy.

Figure 1 Number of news reports mentioning ‘food riot’ and FAO Global Food Price Index



Source: Authors' calculations from LexisNexis search results, January 24th 2017

Source: <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>; accessed January 31 2017

Note: 2002-2004=100

To explore the representation of food riots more closely, 156 articles from the peak period of the global food crisis (2007-12) in which ‘food riot’ featured in the headline and therefore could be assumed to be a core theme, were selected for analysis. This 156 represents more or less the full set of articles, with some repetitions and outliers excluded. A simple coding was applied to the articles using NVivo10 to enable frame and textual analysis. After an initial scan, a first set of codes classified articles according to the general article type, specifically whether they were a) factual accounts of protest events (who, what, where and why, etc); b) opinion pieces or analysis of the food crisis, or c) reporting on or providing a platform for advocacy, discussing or promoting particular policy responses to the food crisis. Just under half, or 76, of the articles were identified as factual accounts or news stories of protests, of which four also contained significant analysis or advocacy content. Of the rest, 59 articles

mainly contained opinion or analysis of the food crisis; 37 were advocating or giving a platform to advocacy for a policy response or course of action, while 16 did both.

Overall, then, while around half of the articles in the international press which headlined ‘food riots’ during this period were accounts of actual protest events, more offered opinion or advocacy. It should be noted that the Nexis database predominantly comprises international news sources, and does not even include all English language--newspapers from developing countries. This means that first response articles, when the events were new or unfolding, are likely to have been covered in local and vernacular media without making it into the international media as news stories. They may also have been covered using labels other than ‘food riots’. In reporting on a major global crisis such as the food price spikes of 2007-12, then, the international media may necessarily be playing the role of an aggregator and commentator rather than a source of breaking news.

4. The effects of framing ‘food riots’

This section addresses preliminary questions about the main frames within which food riots are reported, and the political and policy message they send. Taking into account Entman’s definition of framing, the analysis explores: a) the ‘problem definition’, b) the ‘causal interpretation’, c) the ‘moral evaluation’ and d) the ‘treatment recommendation’ that emerges from this body of news coverage of the political events relating to food in the 2007-12 period.

4.1 The problem of food riots

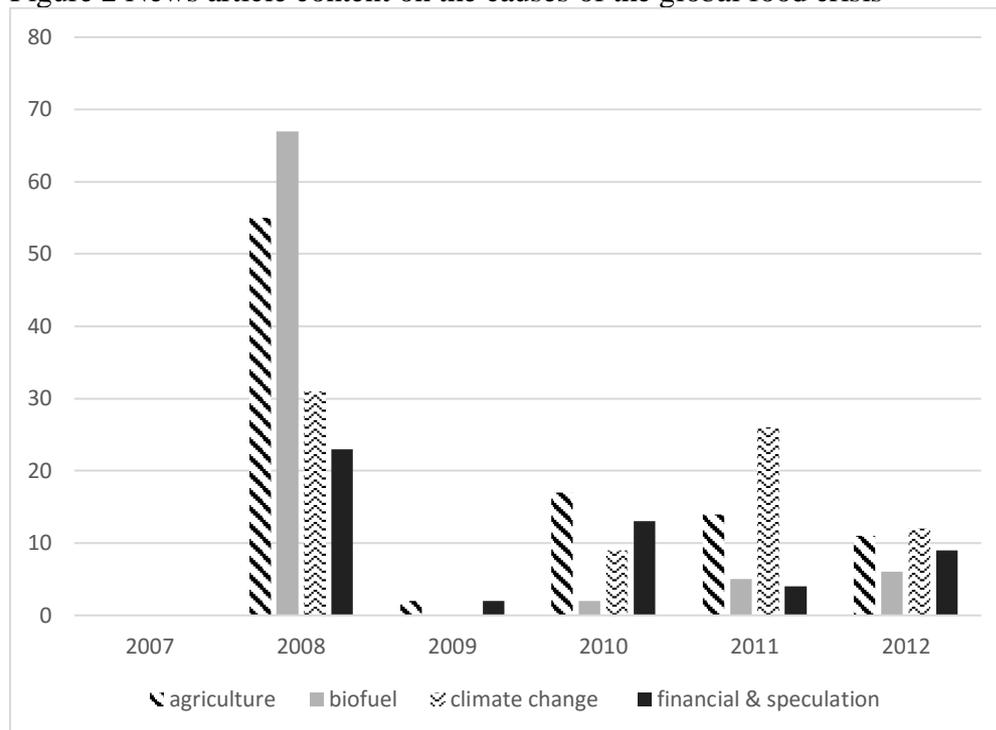
The broad definition of the problem within which the ‘food riots’ articles were framed was, unsurprisingly, the global food crisis. This was associated with the rapid rise of staple grain prices on global and national markets in the period 2007-2008, and again in 2010-11. As Figure 2 suggests, the causes of the global food crisis about which people were protesting changed as understandings of the nature of the crisis itself changed. Whereas in 2008 coverage focused on biofuels and financial speculation (from very different perspectives, see Headey and Fan 2008 and Ghosh 2010), in 2011, the immediate cause was understood to be linked to the effects of climate change, particularly drought in the US and Russia (see, for instance, Bar-Yam, Lagi, and Bar-Yam 2015). Whereas in 2008 the language was of a

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'global food crisis', by 2010-11, there was a greater emphasis on 'food price volatility' as a more enduring phenomena, and less on the experience as a systemic shock.⁴

⁴ Although more scholarly analyses of price movements found little evidence to support the view that regional or world food prices had in fact become more volatile over the period (Minot 2014; Gilbert and Morgan 2010). It is possible that 'food price volatility' was a convenient shorthand way explanation of why the world had faced two significant real food price spikes that affected global and national markets in such close proximity.

Figure 2 News article content on the causes of the global food crisis



Source: Author’s analysis of sampled articles from nexis.com

Note: frequencies are of numbers of times causes are mentioned, rather than numbers of articles in which they are mentioned

The intensity and scale of food-related protest in 2011 may have been as high as in 2008 (see, for instance Ortiz et al. 2013). However, the protests had substantially shifted from low- to middle-income, chiefly Middle Eastern-region countries by this time. There were far fewer articles headlining ‘food riots’ in this second phase of the crisis. What explains this decline in coverage of ‘food riots’ after 2008 – if indeed there was such a decline? There are several plausible explanations. The first is very likely the absence of novelty: food riots were hardly ‘news’ after the wave of protests in 2007-08. It should be noted that although we can agree that there were very likely a great many food riot-type events in the world in the period 2007-12, any claim to certainty or objectivity regarding such estimates must be subject to doubt. Some sources, such as the World Bank’s Food Price Watch report, define ‘food riots’ and briefly describe their methodologies for identifying such events. But all ultimately depend for their event counts on newspaper sources, making any effort to assess whether newspaper coverage of such events declined ultimately a hopelessly circular proposition. In one much-cited figure, there were food riots in 37 countries, either in 2008 alone (Borger 2008) or in the period 2007-14 (World Bank 2014). The magic figure, 37, quite possibly has its origins in the FAO’s late 2007 assessment that 37 mainly low income countries faced food crisis as world

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food prices started to climb (FAO 2007). Whatever the source and credibility of this figure, a reasonably well-informed consumer of international news would have found it difficult to avoid knowledge that there were food riots in the 2007-08 period.

A second possible explanation is that global policy efforts to address both the food insecurity of vulnerable populations and the wider issue of price volatility were in train by 2010-11, and this second round of price spikes may have been seen as more straightforwardly the result of the natural disasters associated with climate change. In other words, the facts of this second round of food riots had changed, and this had also rendered them less newsworthy.

Other reasons for this difference between 2008 and 2010-11 may include differences in context and of surrounding events. More of the protests in the later period were now taking place in middle income countries, including many in the conflict-ridden and predominantly authoritarian Middle East. The World Bank methodology for estimating food riot episodes only includes the very initial protests in the Middle East, prior to the more revolutionary and wider (and more middle class) uprisings that soon followed. These early protests were seen as having been triggered by high food prices (World Bank 2014; also Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam 2011). These are wealthier and more highly developed countries than the low income countries that dominated food riots in the first phase, so that the equation of food riots with 'hunger' may have been less obvious. The narrative of food riots in Middle Eastern countries may also have been rendered more complex by the greater familiarity the international media with political contention than is the case for the less developed countries of the earlier wave of food riots. Journalists may have expected more complex political realities, and found that the simple message sent with 'food riots' was a less good fit.

A further complication was that the world, and in particular, the rich world on which the international media chiefly reports, was by 2010-11 deep in the throes of the worst economic crisis it had seen in almost 80 years. While the second round of the food crisis was dramatic, there was no shortage of other news stories, including many of popular political protest around basic needs in the developed countries on which to report during this period. It is possible, then, that the 2010-11 food crisis was, in part, drowned out by the global financial crisis.

A narrower definition of ‘the problem’ of food riots, related to the problematic impacts and implications of mass popular subsistence protests. A significant number of opinion pieces and advocacy articles conveyed a strong sense of the ‘threat of food riots’, such as ‘Food riots ‘an apocalyptic warning’’, the headline of a 2008 Australian Broadcasting Corporation Premium News story (Barlow 2008), or the prediction that the world faced ‘an inflationary time bomb as shortages of food threaten to push prices to fresh all-time highs’, according to The Independent newspaper in August 2010 (O’Grady 2010). Of the substantial number of articles that were opinion or advocacy pieces, many warned that food riots would result should certain events occur (further price rises, natural disasters, failed harvests) or actions fail to be taken (price stabilization or consumer insulation in the short-term, agricultural investment or reform in the medium or long). A total of 82 of the 156 articles were coded as containing a prominent warning or reference to the ‘threat’ or ‘fear’ of food riots, most of which (66) had been classified as opinion or advocacy pieces; only 22 factual articles reporting on food riots included such warnings.

To whom or what do food riots pose a threat, and why or how? This was often left implicit, as if subsistence-related protest was in and of itself an obvious bad to be avoided at any cost. However, four specific threats could be discerned. First, at the local level, was the possibility of violence and a threat to human life. From the set of 156 articles, at least 100 people were reported as having been killed in food riots during 2007-12, and at least 2,000, including police, army and peace-keeping force members, were injured, more than 800 in Algeria alone. Unruly politics are in general a threat to the public authorities control of law and order, by their very definition (Khanna 2012).

Second, and again at the local level, such protests can disrupt economic and social life. Where food traders or markets are specifically targeted, there may be counter-productive effects in the short-term, as fearful traders hide or hoard goods. During the Mogadishu riots of May 2008, the 20,000 reported protestors were reported to have targeted food traders who demanded payment in US dollars instead of (often counterfeited) Somali shillings:

"We do not need cruel traders", "We do not need people who are in love with dollar yet we have the shillings," "We want our right to live," they chanted in the streets, where plumes of smoke rose.

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"We are going to demonstrate until they (traders) accept the Somali shilling... we cannot afford dollars," one protestor Hassan Said told AFP.

"And if they refuse to lower food prices, we will start looting their shops so that we can survive." (Abdinur 2008).

This Agence France Presse account of protestors' grievances (cruelty, corruption, official failure to curb rampant inflation), ideological justification for protest (the right to live, the struggle against inequality and injustice), and protest repertoires (bargaining over lower food prices or looting) describes a food riot much in the European 17th and 18th century tradition (Tilly 1975; Bohstedt 2010; Thompson 1991). Those European food riots typically 'worked' at the local level, if only to temporarily enforce a local moral standard onto food markets and some momentary redistribution. For the owners of local businesses and the public authorities tasked with protecting their properties and livelihoods, such an episode is disruptive and costly, as well as dangerous.

A third threat is to political elites. At the extremes, food riots are cast as 'a threat to democracy', as in Haiti in 2008. The then-President Rene Preval instructed food rioters to stop looting because the solution was 'not to go around destroying stores', blaming the country's dependence on imported rice for the food crisis. His intervention came at a crucial moment, although (as subsequent events suggest), lacked the desired effect:

The speech had been widely anticipated by observers who said Preval's response could determine the course of the demonstrations and of his government.

"I believe if President Preval talks to the people about the high cost of living, people will listen to the president and go home," said Sen. Joseph Lambert, a former senate president and a member of Preval's party. "If not, if there is an attempt at a coup d'etat to remove the president, things will get worse."

Food prices, which have risen 40 percent on average globally since mid-2007, are causing unrest around the world. But they pose a particular threat to democracy in Haiti, where most people live on less than \$2US (€1.27) a day (Katz 2008).

A short straight line is drawn here between the very low incomes of the Haitian people, the steep rises of staple food costs worldwide, and the risk to ‘democracy’, apparently represented by the US-backed Preval regime. Food-related protest after Pakistan’s worst ever floods in 2010 similarly stimulated fears that in the worst-case scenario, ‘the military might feel compelled to step in if protests got out of hand’ (Reuters 2010). Suggestions that food riots jeopardise democracy were rarer, however, than those associating the price crisis with loss of popular legitimacy by political leaders. In one telling instance, Bolivia’s Evo Morales reportedly cancelled a public appearance at the height of the 2011 crisis, fearing popular backlash engineered by the opposition (UPI 2011).

4.2 Causes of food riots

How do food price rises give rise to what the World Bank defines as a ‘violent, collective unrest leading to a loss of control, bodily harm or damage to property’ (2014, 6)? How does the international media frame the causes of food riots? Analysis using word trees found that news media commonly uses action terms to explain the causal relationship between price rises and social unrest - ‘provoke’, ‘spur’, ‘trigger’, ‘spread’ which framed food riots as simple mechanisms of societal response to dearth. In some instances, rioters’ anger was linked to shortages or unaffordability. In others, such as the Mogadishu example given above, the anger is linked to a perception of injustice that while they (the protestors) went hungry, others were (immorally) turning a profit (a contrast noted also by Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013). But a ‘food riot’ can be easily discerned as any protest by people who lack means in times of dearth, about which it is safe to assume the ‘trigger’ is the anger provoked by hunger and injustice.

The idea that food riots are somehow ‘natural’ is a particular political framing common to many on the left. Of the riots that hit three major Burkina Faso towns in February 2008, one commentator explained that:

"This reaction was expected," Laurent Ouédraogo, secretary general of the Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Burkina (CNTB) told IRIN, stating that the riots happened after anger welled up because of constantly rising prices for basics like food, cloth and petrol.

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"Misery does not wait and you see people witnessing everyday rising prices and they do not know what to do. The situation is like having matches near cotton that can catch fire at any moment," OuÈdraogo said. (IRIN 2008)

Like other trades union or leftist party spokespersons, OuÈdraogo is well-versed in the language of the popular threat from the discontented masses, and skilled at its use in advocating policy change (in this case price controls). Similar points about the threat from the hungry masses were made by trades unionists in the Philippines and leftist party spokespeople elsewhere.

But the inevitability of a threat from the discontented masses also appeared in the framing by or on behalf of groups strongly opposed to a leftist platform, such as the multilateral institutions. One finer-grained analysis contrasted views of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of a former Mexican maize farmer who had marched in the 'tortilla riots' of 2007 against Robert Zoellick, then-President of the World Bank, who argued that far from raising the price of corn, free trade agreements kept it low (Koop 2008). But free trade and other open market policies were endangered by popular anger. The 'apocalyptic' ABC Premium News article cited above reported the then-head of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, spelling out the reasons to be fearful of the effects of food riots, particularly in Africa:

"Hundreds of thousands of people will be starving," he said.

"Disruption may occur in the economic environment so that at the end of the day most governments, having done well for the last five or 10 years, will see what they have done totally destroyed and their legitimacy facing the population destroyed also."
(Barlow 2008).

Strauss-Kahn's fears recall the 1980s' heyday of the 'IMF riots' against structural adjustment, indicating that the global policy elite had learned that food riots have the potential to jeopardize the entire neoliberal development project (see Walton and Seddon 2008).

4.3 Moral judgements

In distinct contrast to press framing of the London riots or Katrina survivors, moral judgements of food protestors in these low and lower-middle income countries were muted, or implicitly sympathetic, in international media coverage. National media coverage tended to be less universally sympathetic. It is likely that closer proximity to events, local political interests and differences, and class or other social biases against particular protest groups within the media may contribute to this more heterogenous view of food-related protest. References to angry protestors drew attention to a simple ‘spasmodic’ (as E. P. Thompson (1971) called it) framing of the causes of food riots. By contrast, the many references to hunger and the ratcheting up of the subsistence struggles of people already on low incomes suggested a broadly sympathetic, perhaps even empathetic, view of the motivations of food rioters. A number of stories started with accounts of Mr or Mrs X who was struggling to feed their family this week, and giving them the space to tell their story. This ‘human interest’ trope may also have been necessary in order for international news outlets to turn what ran the risk of being an abstract statistical account of global trade and food insecurity into a news story with wider appeal. Yet this framing of food riots as the ‘rumbles of the belly’ has the overall effect of framing food rioters as driven to desperation – invoking a sense of a Hobbesian natural law of survival with the aim of achieving universal resonance. This can be seen in the adjectives used to describe protestors: almost half of all the articles described angry and violent situations using such terms. Only 16 articles referred to protestors as primarily ‘angry’, compared to 42 in which the key descriptor was ‘hungry’. The factual or news story accounts were more likely to use the descriptor ‘angry’, while articles featuring more analysis and advocacy preferred ‘hungry’, suggesting that the latter were more intent on persuading the reader of the moral cause of the rioters, by foregrounding the ‘natural’ justice of their struggle.

In this respect, the food rioters of the developing world are framed distinctly differently to the rioters and supposed looters of London and New Orleans (Cavanagh and Dennis 2012; Tierney 2006). This difference possibly reflects, as noted above, the absence of a perceived moral equivalence in the needs of the London youth or the New Orleans Katrina survivors compared with those of the ‘hungry’ third world protestors. It may also reflect the differences afforded by distance; as already noted, the national press was generally less sympathetic towards food rioters than the international media. And finally, as will be discussed next, it may relate to the extent to which presenting the ‘deserving’ hungry poor in a broadly sympathetic light, despite the violence food rioters unleash, in order to make a case for policy

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recommendations for further aid investments in agrofood systems and expanding food markets.

4.4 The ‘treatment recommendation’

The ‘treatment recommendation’ (Entman 1993) in how the international media frames food riots varies depending on a number of factors. One is location and role within the global food system. There seemed, for instance, to be a comparatively large number of Australian, Canadian and Irish news articles among the set, perhaps reflecting those countries’ roles as prominent providers of food aid to the global humanitarian and development system. Whether it was the first or second phase of the food crisis that was being reported on also shaped the diagnosis of the problem and the proposed solution, as has already been noted.

Broadly pro-market ideologies may have shaped the overall perspective on the desirability of free trade, but most of the analyses in the sample examined arguments pro and con open markets in the world food system. A tentative conclusion may be that the global food crisis and the threatening spate of food riots that followed in general weakened the case for the financialization of food commodity trade; it seems likely, however, that the more specialist business and trade presses (not reviewed here) would have offered a stronger free market-oriented perspective on problems in the food system.

Overall, there appeared to be a relatively strong pro-intervention tendency on humanitarian grounds, but this did not extend to support for or approval of national protectionist policies. This ideological and political bias was evident in the ‘expert’ views given space in these articles. Whereas many newspapers published statements and reports from the UN, IMF and the World Bank on the food crisis, the analysis and advocacy of groups such as farmers’ and labour unions or consumers’ associations rarely achieved great prominence in the international media, and were more usually relegated to the statement of key grievances at the moment of, or in predicting, the food riot. As Sneyd *et al* point out, recommendations that emerge from the ‘hungry man is an angry man’ thesis may not address the underlying political and economic inequalities being protested (2013).

5. Conclusions

This analysis of how the global wave of food riots was framed in the international media reporting makes a contribution to understanding of the role of the media during the recent

global food crisis by treating the framing by the international media as a matter of interest in its own right. It differs from the important analysis of coverage of the urban African food riots studied by Sneyd *et al* (2013) by treating framing as an effect of media as distinct from reading media coverage for its insights into causal mechanisms. Sneyd *et al* are correct to interrogate media coverage in this way: as Demarest also argues, the inaccuracies and structural biases inherent in media coverage of such events means that academic research based on such coverage must be limited in its power to unearth robust, nuanced causal explanations (Demarest 2015). It is important to examine media accounts partly because they provide the data for other, more scholarly examinations.

A key methodological conclusion is that, while highly imperfect registers of the range of contentious politics around food crises, media coverage of ‘food riots’ offers valuable insights into the kinds of subsistence protests that enter the space of public opinion via media coverage. That there are biases is obvious and inevitable. But international media coverage makes it possible for global public opinion to witness the global spread of conflict arising from food insecurity. This ‘scale-shift’ (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008) from localized grievances to similar struggles across the globe was dramatized in the international press in apocalyptic terms. These dramatic, documented shifts are unlikely to be an accurate count of all such protests. Biases against rural and small town areas mean national media almost certainly underestimate their total frequency, particularly where they are so frequent as to lack any newsworthiness at all. Newsworthy protests may be those that directly affect the interests of the elite or the audience, a subset of the total; these are in turn likely to be more important political events because they draw powerful groups into their struggles. If there are reasons to believe media coverage yields only a subset of the most important ‘food riots’, it was enough during the global food crisis of 2007-12 to document a spread of important grievances about food prices across the globe. The very global-ness of this wave of protests in turn created public space for deliberation over key issues in global food governance: climate change and renewable energy, trade and financialization, industrial vs. smallholder agriculture.

As Sneyd *et al* and others, such as Auyero and Moran (2007) have noted, it is difficult to understand the causes of food-related protests relying on media sources alone. Meaningful understanding of such contentious political events needs to situate individual events within their wider set of interactions between protestors and public authorities, implying the need for

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qualitative case study approaches using primary research to deepen understanding of and triangulate findings about the means and motivations and repertoires of subsistence protestors (Tilly 2008; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008).

But the media plays a role itself in the politics of the global food crisis, by framing food riots in particular ways. The focus in this paper has been less about pointing the inadequacies of and errors in such reportage, than in a preliminary way, attempting to make some sense of its effects as an intervention that shapes global public, political and policy discourse. The way in which the international media framed the food riots as a wave of protests pointed to a globalized political struggle over food security, which in turn drew forth debates and negotiations over the role for multilateral action to address global food security, emerging in direct response to the globalized spread of the protests. The language of ‘the threat’ posed by food riots to global socio-political and economic order is a dominant thread in the international press. The international press also featured a great deal of advocacy and opinion on these issues, often bringing the heads of multilateral agencies, the UN, the World Bank, associated specialist agencies into the global public space to offer their analysis. Yet in this analysis, protestors’ voices were comparatively muted. Their motivations were flattened out to the universal ‘natural’ stimuli of ‘hunger’ and ‘anger’. There were also finer-grained analyses in the international press, in which protestors’ voices spoke in broadly moral economic language, of rights to food and the responsibilities of public actors. And so despite its clear limitations in providing accurate understandings of the causes of food riots, there was a clear sense in which the reporting on the wave of food riots, in particular in 2008, created space for a properly global public discourse about what the world was beginning to recognize as a problem of global public policy.

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