Black Protests about Policing in the U.S. 1994-2010 as Portrayed in Mainstream Newswires and Black Newspapers

PAMELA OLIVER

ERIN GAEDE

CHAEYOON LIM

ANNA MILEWSKI

Note: This is a presentation of a work in progress. February 12, 2024. The full paper draft and data appendices are available from Pamela Oliver. Pamela.oliver@wisc.edu

Data

Larger project: Articles about protests from US mainstream newswires and 37 Black newspapers, 1994-2010.
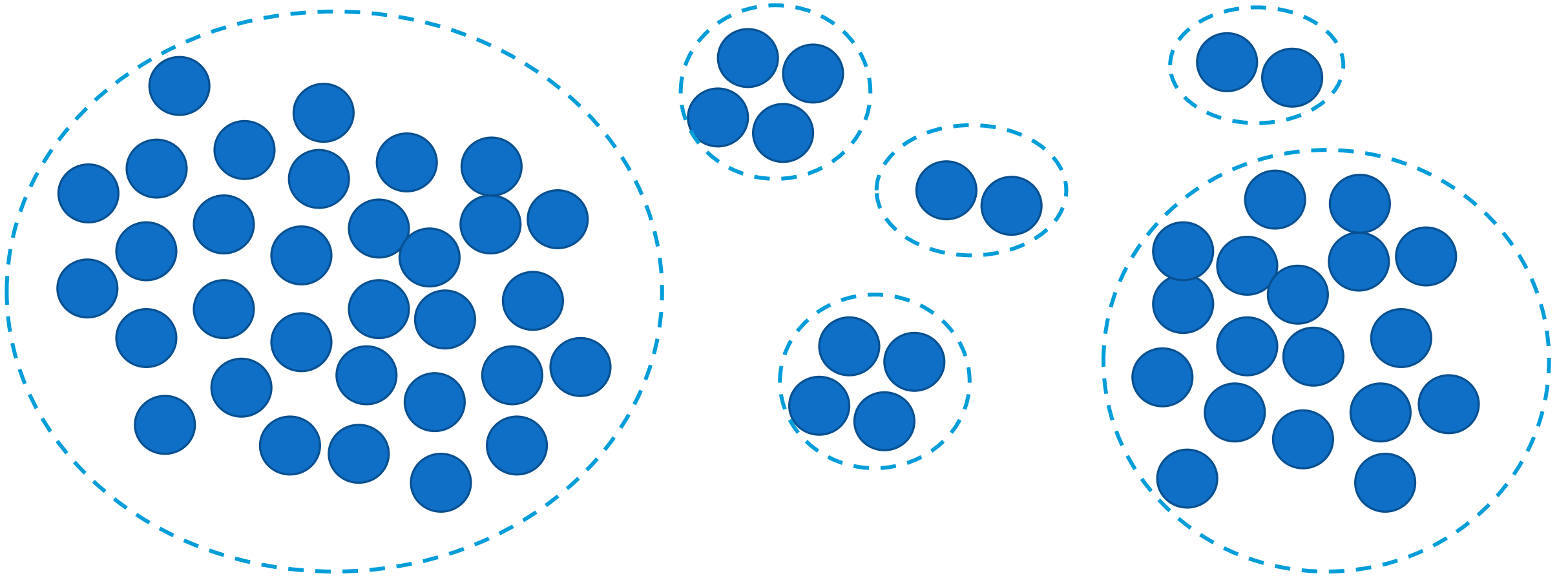
5,934 articles total

1,270 from newswires

4,664 from Black newspapers

(We have more Black newspaper articles partially coded for 2011-2020 that we hope to analyze in the future)
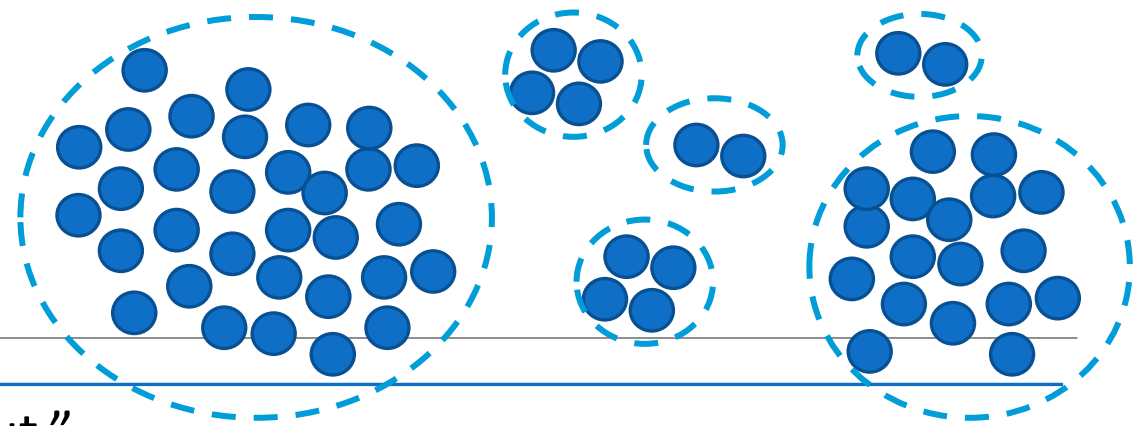
Event Issues (Broad)

Issue - broad grouping	Frequencies				Percents Within Coverage Type			
	BN only	NW only	Both	Total	BN only	NW only	Both	Total
1. Criminal-legal	1,194	228	211	1,633	19	26	40	21
2. White focused	242	179	64	485	4	20	12	6
3. Workers	1,114	63	29	1,206	18	7	5	16
4. Local	1,630	131	60	1,821	26	15	11	24
5. Black general	359	50	36	445	6	6	7	6
6. Group violence or conflict	115	70	20	205	2	8	4	3
7. National issues	1,286	61	53	1,400	20	7	10	18
8. Black history & solidarity	376	106	58	540	6	12	11	7
Total	6,316	888	531	7,735	100	100	100	100

Events in newspapers are structured by issue clusters

Issue Clusters

Issue clusters are what the events are "about."

Issue clusters can usually be readily determined in news articles about events.

Clusters vary greatly in size (number of events) and amount of news coverage.

Issue clusters about police brutality or racial profiling in general are usually campaigns in the social movement sense, protests organized by activists around the same goal.

The police violence issue clusters are usually episodes in the social movement sense, action-reaction sequences in response to the initial incident.

This paper: Protests about Policing

Police issue	Events		Issue Clusters (Episodes)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Fatality	668	64	111	40
Non-fatal brutality	164	16	70	25
Brutality as general issue	101	10	39	14
Racial Profiling	41	4	16	6
Other unfair treatment	51	5	33	12
Other	12	1	10	4
Total	1,037	100	279	100

Biggest Issue Clusters in these data

Police killing of Amadou Diallo in New York in 1999. 110 events, 73 newswire stories and 86 Black newspaper stories.

Police killing of Timothy Thomas in Cincinnati in 2001. 100 events, 74 newswire stories and 46 Black newspaper stories.

Police killing of Sean Bell in New York in 2006. 27 events, 16 newswire, 43 Black newspaper stories.

Annual National Day of Protest Against Police Brutality. From 1996 to 2013. 199 events, 1 newswire story and 47 Black newspaper stories.

Police killing of Oscar Grant in Oakland in 2009. 47 events, 24 newswire and 24 Black newspaper stories.

Police torture of Abner Louima in New York in 1997. 16 events, 23 newswire and 23 Black newspaper articles.

Police killing of Jonny Gammage in Pittsburgh in 1995. 32 events, 4 newswire and 28 Black newspaper articles.

Police killing of Patrick Dorismond in New York in 2000 (while Diallo protests were still happening). 32 events, 12 newswire and 18 Black newspaper articles.

Police killing of Tyisha Miller in Riverside, California in 1999. 23 events, 2 newswire and 16 Black newspaper articles.

Feedback appreciated

1. Literature. I have tried to be comprehensive, but the literature section is too long. Which sections seem more important or less important to the argument? (Slides do NOT review the literature, just list the topics of it)

2. There are multiple threads of argument, which should be highlighted? Which dropped? Any added?
   1. Selection & description biases in mainstream news coverage, importance for standard protest events methods
   2. Importance of Black voices & sources as data, not just as "other" (Also other oppressed voices)
   3. Specifics of police-media and police-protester interactions in the construction of "disorder"
   4. Positive accounts of what Black newspapers do emphasize
   5. Portrayal of anti-police protests before BLM

3. Results that seem most important or less important

Main Arguments

Anti-police protests: The police are both the social control agents and the targets. Protester "violence" usually arises in interaction with police who are especially reactive in anti-police protests.

Theorize mainstream media as elite-centric and White-centric.

News media rely on police as sources, mainstream news accounts typically emphasize the police perspective.

Protest event research relying on mainstream White-centric sources has an elite & pro-police bias

Mainstream White-centric sources are more concerned with disruption and disorder & police perspectives. (finding)

Black-centric sources are more concerned with the actions of Black protesters and the community and with promoting systemic critiques. (finding)

Literature 1: Media

Mainstream news relies on police & officials as sources

- Coverage of police uses police as sources
- Coverage of police use of force & police brutality cases
- Coverage of protests, police as sources + elite bias
- Coverage of Black protests, police as sources + racial bias + elite bias

Black-centric news sources have less elite bias

- Comparisons with White sources
- More use of Black people as sources, less reliance on police
- More emphasis on ongoing struggles, systemic factors

Literature 2 Disorder and Policing

Disorder (unarmed violence) is common alongside sustained nonviolent campaigns

Research on impact of disorder

- Tends to reduce support for the protesters
- Often increases support for benefits

Policing of protests

- Protester disorder/violence usually arises from police interactions, even provocations
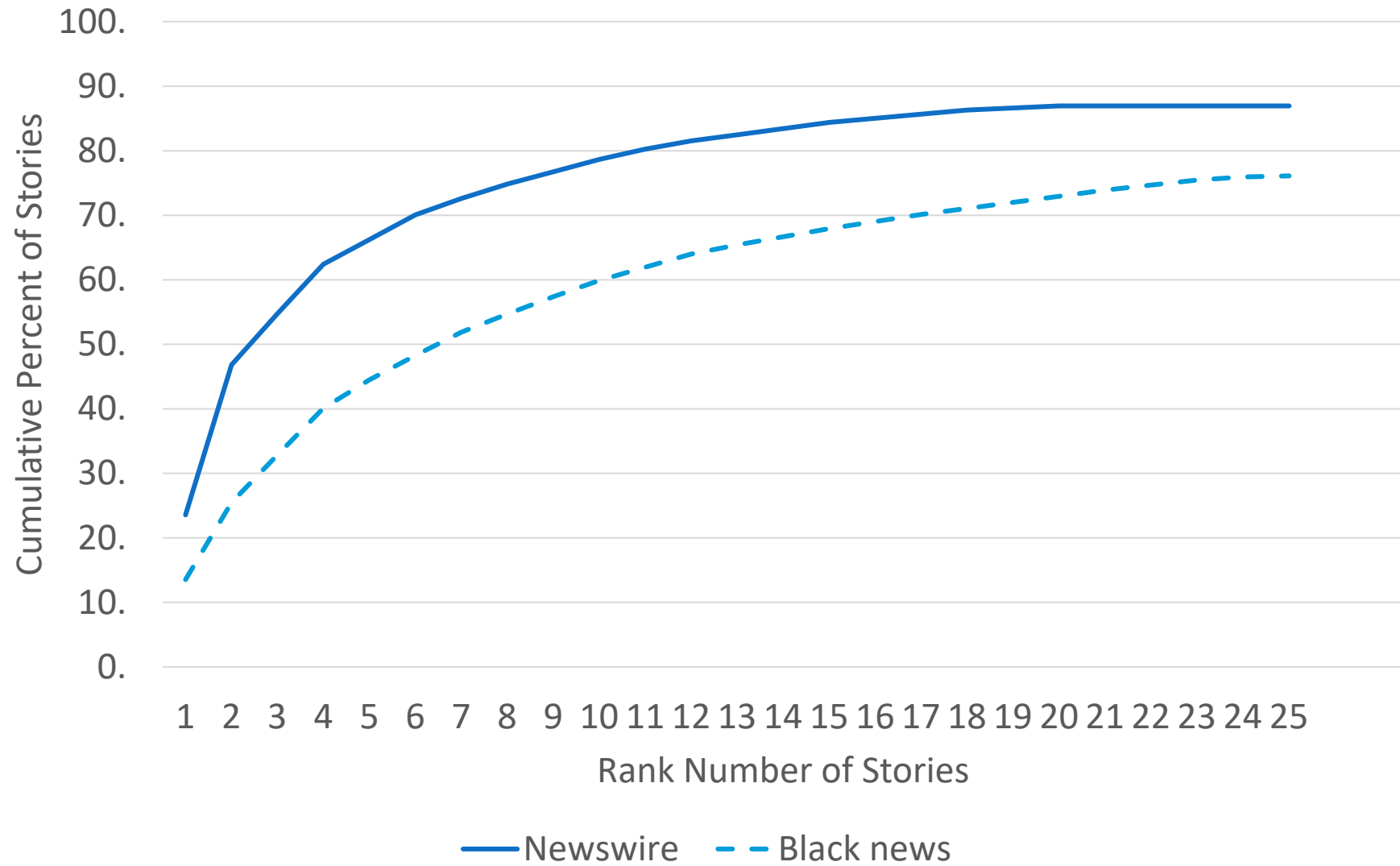
Perceptions of disorder

- Affected by opinions about issues
- Black people's protests seen as more disorderly with same actions
- Protesters are seen as violent even when victims of police or counter-protesters

Media rely on police for accounts of protester actions

General Data Patterns

1. News coverage is skewed
   1. 68% of issue clusters mentioned in only one news article, 91% in five or fewer articles, but 3 clusters (Diallo, Cincinnati, SeanBell) had 100+ articles, and 4 had 30-50 articles.
   2. 67% of events mentioned in only one article, 95% in five or fewer articles, but one event was mentioned 102 times (Cincinnati riot), and ten others were mentioned 15 to 46 times.

2. Newswires are more skewed than Black newspapers. (See graph)

Cumulative Percent of Stories about Issue Cluster

Cumulative Percent of Stories (y-axis): 0. to 100.

Rank Number of Stories (x-axis): 1 through 25

Legend: Newswire (solid line), Black news (dashed line)

Variables (Paper gives details & frequencies)

Estimated # participants (mostly small, only 9% 1,000 or more). Logged.

Cluster size: # events in the largest cluster the event is in (16% one event, 24% 2-5 events, 16% 5-10 events, 11% 16-31 events, 33% 41-93 events). Logged.

Specific policing issue: Fatality (64%), non-fatal brutality (16%), brutality as a general issue (10%)

Event type (Most Black, 4% pro-police, 1% other)

Event form (56% standard protest forms, 6% disruptive protests, 6% disorder, 17% non-protest gatherings)

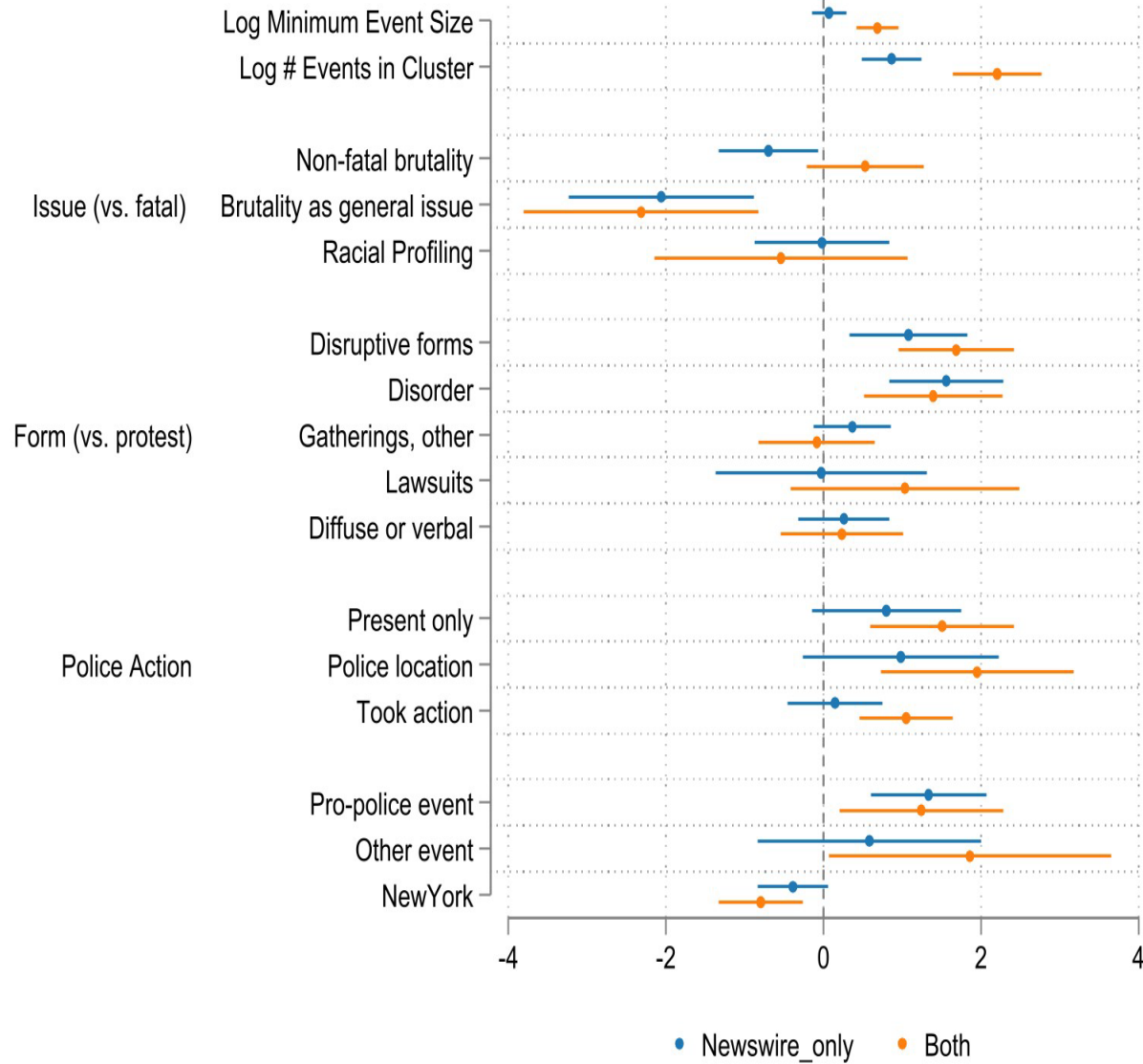Police actions (82% none, 4% present only, 13% took action)

Regression tables with numbers are in the paper

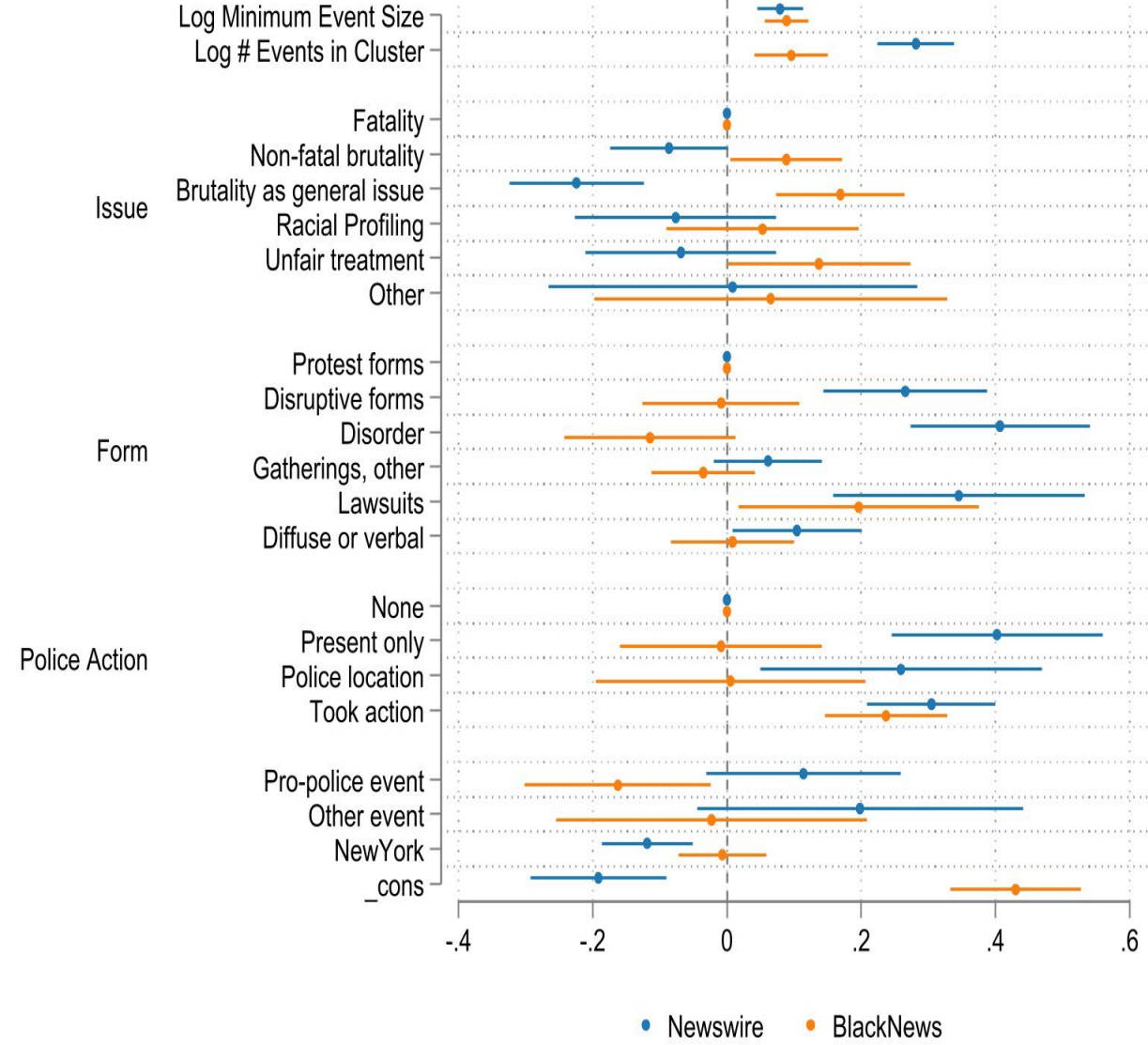# Selection Bias: Regressions Predicting Coverage

Multiple logit: predict whether an event was covered only by Black newspapers (reference category), only newswires, or both.

OLS: Dependent variable is the log of the number of articles about the event, separately for newswires and Black newspapers.

Log Odds vs. Black news only

Log Minimum Event Size
Log # Events in Cluster

Issue (vs. fatal)
- Non-fatal brutality
- Brutality as general issue
- Racial Profiling

Form (vs. protest)
- Disruptive forms
- Disorder
- Gatherings, other
- Lawsuits
- Diffuse or verbal

Police Action
- Present only
- Police location
- Took action

Pro-police event
Other event
NewYork

● Newswire_only   ● Both

Log # Articles

Log Minimum Event Size
Log # Events in Cluster

Issue
- Fatality
- Non-fatal brutality
- Brutality as general issue
- Racial Profiling
- Unfair treatment
- Other

Form
- Protest forms
- Disruptive forms
- Disorder
- Gatherings, other
- Lawsuits
- Diffuse or verbal

Police Action
- None
- Present only
- Police location
- Took action

Pro-police event
Other event
NewYork
_cons

● Newswire   ● BlackNews

Log Odds vs. Black news only

Log # Articles

Log Minimum Event Size
Log # Events in Cluster

Log Minimum Event Size
Log # Events in Cluster

Fatality

Size & Sustained Contention

Larger events and those that are part of larger clusters receive more coverage from both newswires and Black newspapers. Events in larger clusters more likely to be mentioned in newswires (either with or without Black newspaper.) Event size predicts newswire-only coverage but not coverage by both source types.

In mlogit (log odds), orange is newswire only and blue both newswire & Black news; reference is Black newspaper only.

In OLS (Log #), orange is log of number of newswire articles and blue is log of Black newspaper articles.

Log # Articles

Issue
Reference is protests about fatal incidents of police violence. Police brutality as an issue receives more coverage in Black newspapers and less coverage in newswires (Log# articles), is less likely to be mentioned in newswires at all (Log Odds, either alone or along with Black newspapers). Non-fatal incidents of brutality are less likely to be mentioned in both kinds of sources than in Black newspapers only (Log odds), and (Log #) receive less coverage from newswires and more coverage from Black newspapers. NOTE: the "unfair treatment" and "other" issue types had huge standard errors on the mlogit and are excluded from the plot of coefficients.

In mlogit (log odds), orange is newswire only and blue both newswire & Black news; reference is Black newspaper only.
In OLS (Log #), orange is log of number of newswire articles and blue is log of Black newspaper articles.

In mlogit (log odds), orange is newswire only and blue both newswire & Black news; reference is Black newspaper only.
In OLS (Log #), orange is log of number of newswire articles and blue is log of Black newspaper articles.
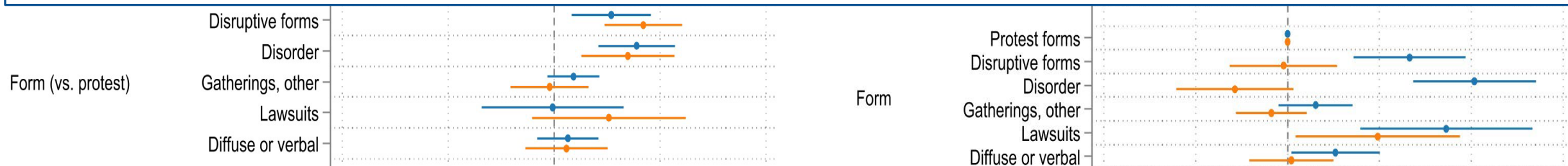
Disruption and Disorder
Reference is non-disruptive protests. (1) (log Odds) Disruptive forms and disorder more likely to be covered in newswires (with or without Black newspaper coverage. (2) (Log #) Disruptive forms and disorder are covered in more newswire stories but not in more Black newspaper stories. (3) Lawsuits covered in more stories than non-disruptive protests in both Black newspapers and newswires. (4) Non-disruptive protests receive no more news coverage than non-protest forms like meetings, forums, diffuse organizing, or verbal protests.

Log Odds vs. Black news only

Log # Articles

In mlogit (log odds), orange is newswire only and blue both newswire & Black news; reference is Black newspaper only.

In OLS (Log #), orange is log of number of newswire articles and blue is log of Black newspaper articles.

Police presence & actions

Reference is no mention of police. Any mention of police (even presence) is associated with event being covered by the newswires only and with more newswire articles. (Coeffients for coverage by both source types is positive but not significant.) Only police actions are associated with more Black newspaper coverage.

Police Action

Present only
Police location
Took action

Police Action

None
Present only
Police location
Took action

● Newswire_only ● Both

● Newswire ● BlackNews

Log Odds vs. Black news only

Log # Articles

In mlogit (log odds), orange is newswire only and blue both newswire & Black news; reference is Black newspaper only.
In OLS (Log #), orange is log of number of newswire articles and blue is log of Black newspaper articles.

Pro-police & New York
The small number of pro-police events are more likely to be covered in the newswires (Log Odds) with or without Black newspaper coverage and are covered in fewer Black newspaper articles (Log #). Events occurring in New York are less likely to be covered in the newswires and have fewer newswire articles (i.e., Black newspapers cover New York events not mentioned in the newswires, even though both newswires and Black newspapers disproportionately cover New York.
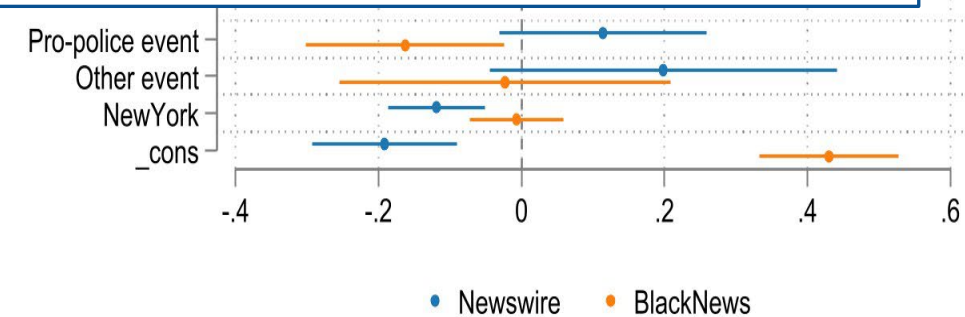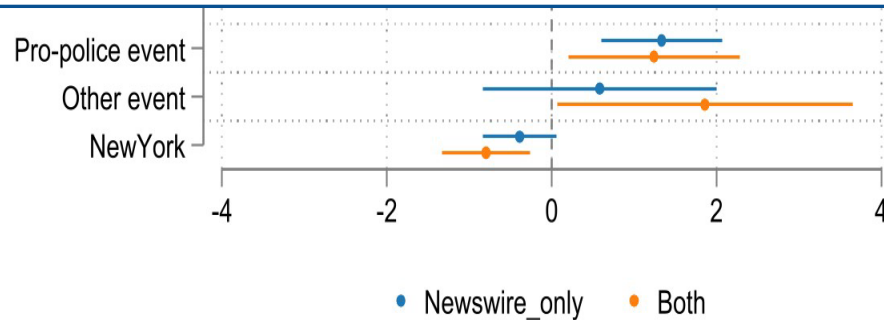
Description Bias: Content of stories

Keyword counts

Several metrics: present/absent and volume standardized to number of words. Whole article, first 200 words, headline.

Slides mostly present number of keywords divided by number of words in the whole article or first 200 words, then multiplied by 100,000 so everything is a whole number. (Same idea as a %, just per 100,000 instead of 100.)
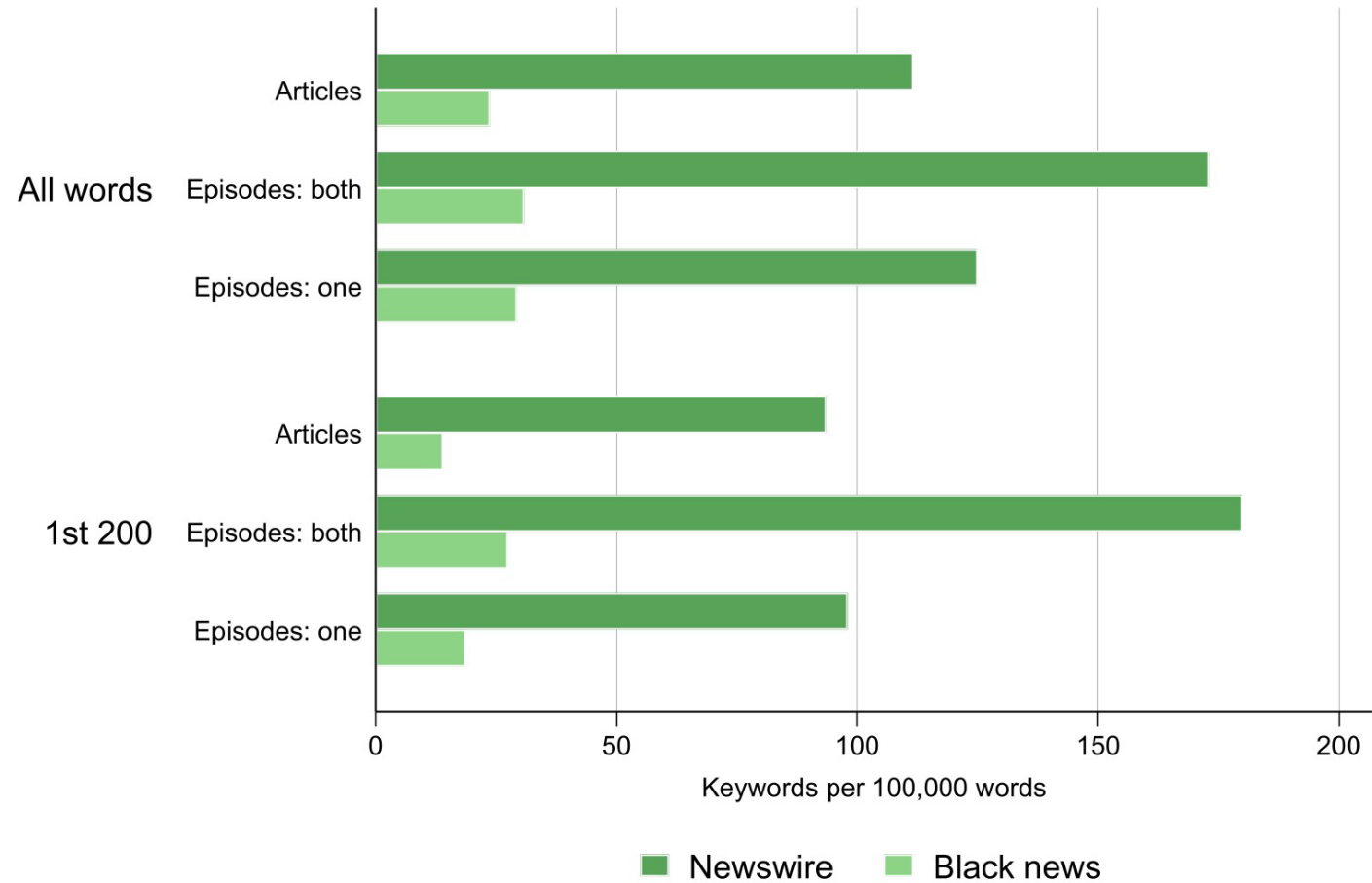
Three analyses compare newswires and Black newspapers
◦ all articles (weights the large clusters more heavily)
◦ the 34 clusters covered by both newswires & Black newspapers
◦ The 31 clusters covered only by newswires and the 218 clusters covered only by Black newspapers

An appendix gives all results

Slides & graphs in paper give selected results, with the paper talking about some results not shown in the slides.
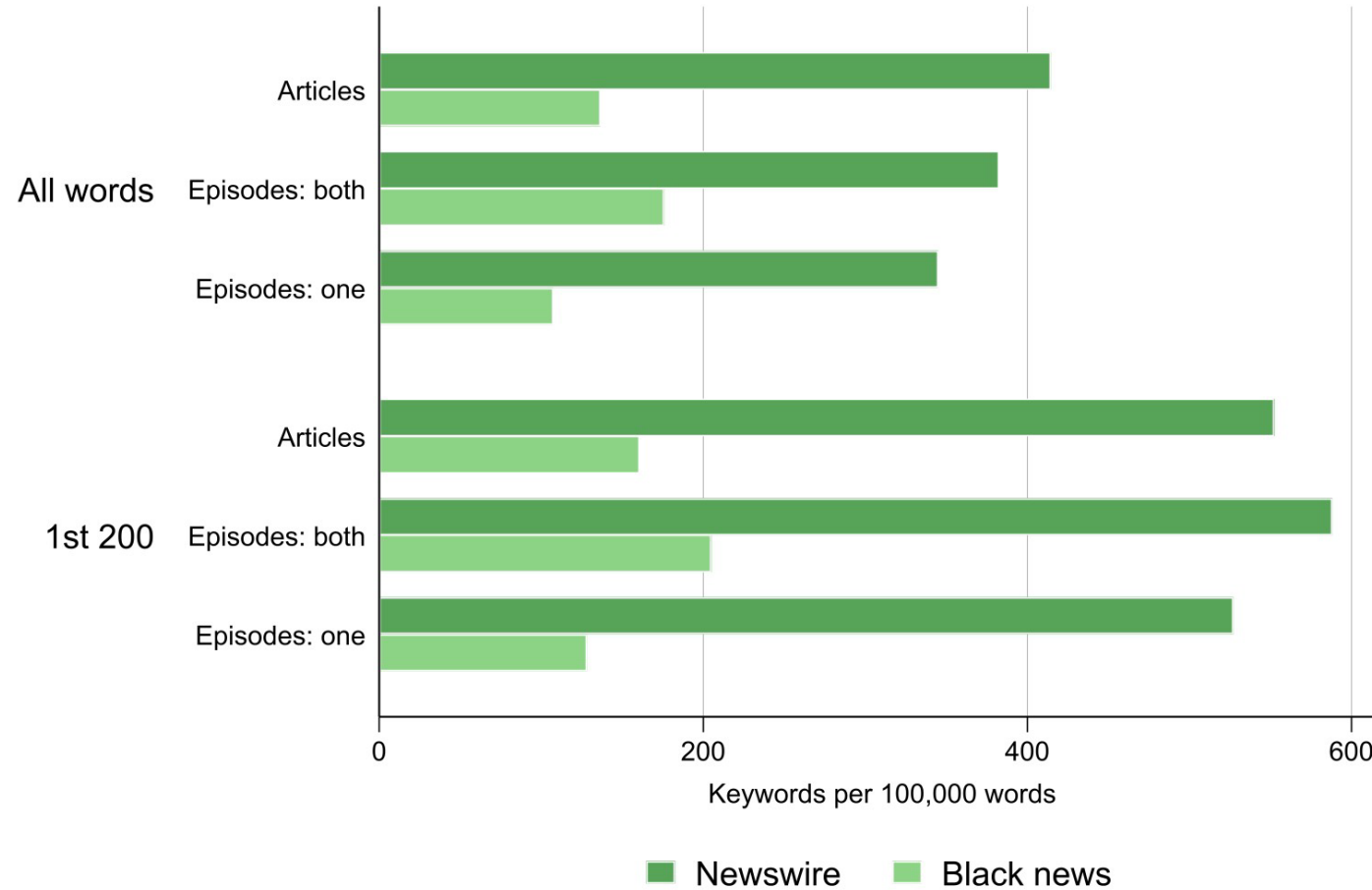
Newswires emphasize police & disorder/disruption
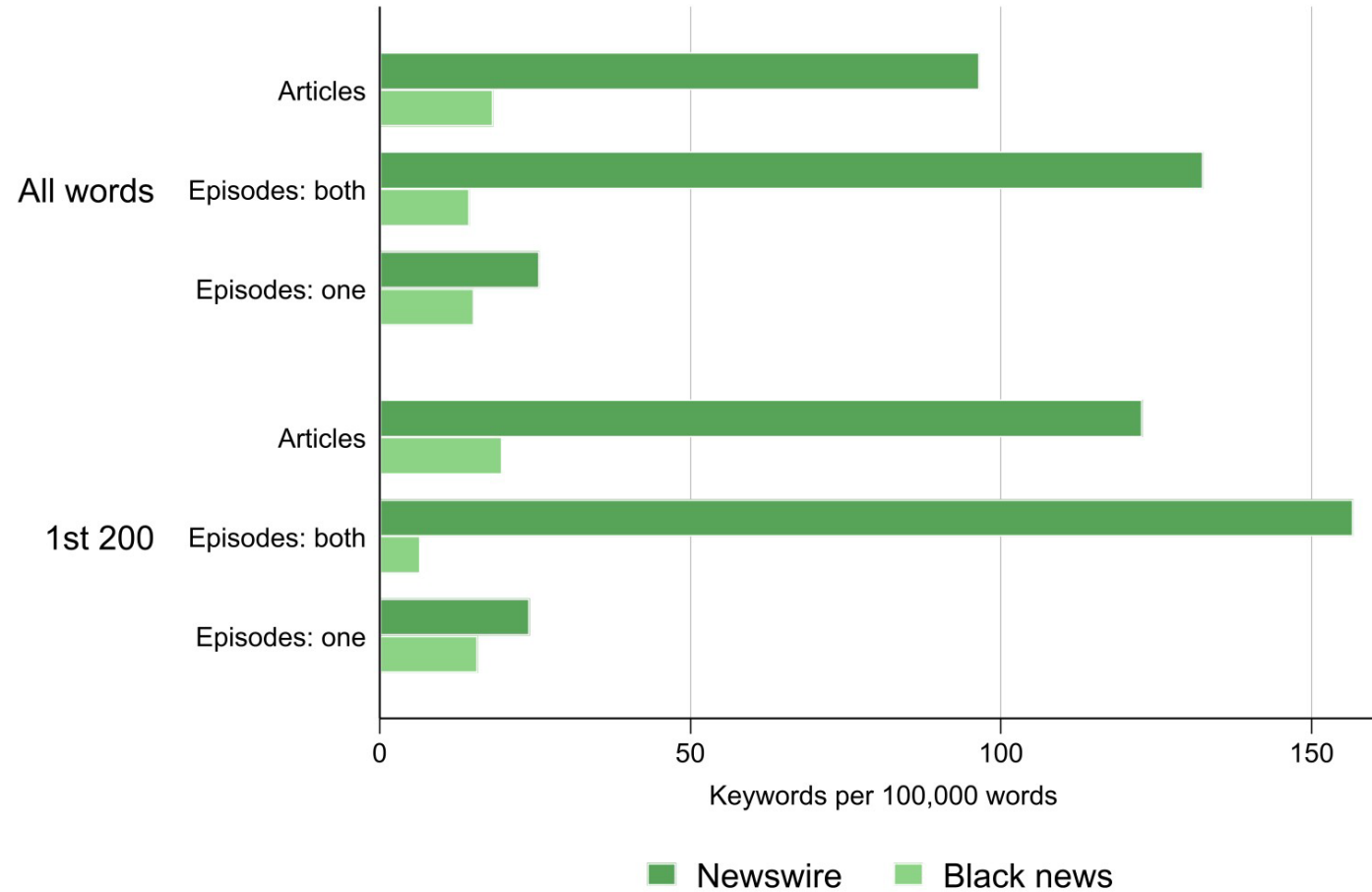
"Police said" keywords -- rate

All words
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

1st 200
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

Keywords per 100,000 words

■ Newswire ■ Black news

All differences significant except:

Disorder Keywords -- rate

All words
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

1st 200
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

Keywords per 100,000 words

Newswire   Black news

All differences significant except:

Police control actions keywords -- rate

All differences significant except: Ep-both 1st 200 Ep-both All words Ep-one 1st 200 Ep-one All words
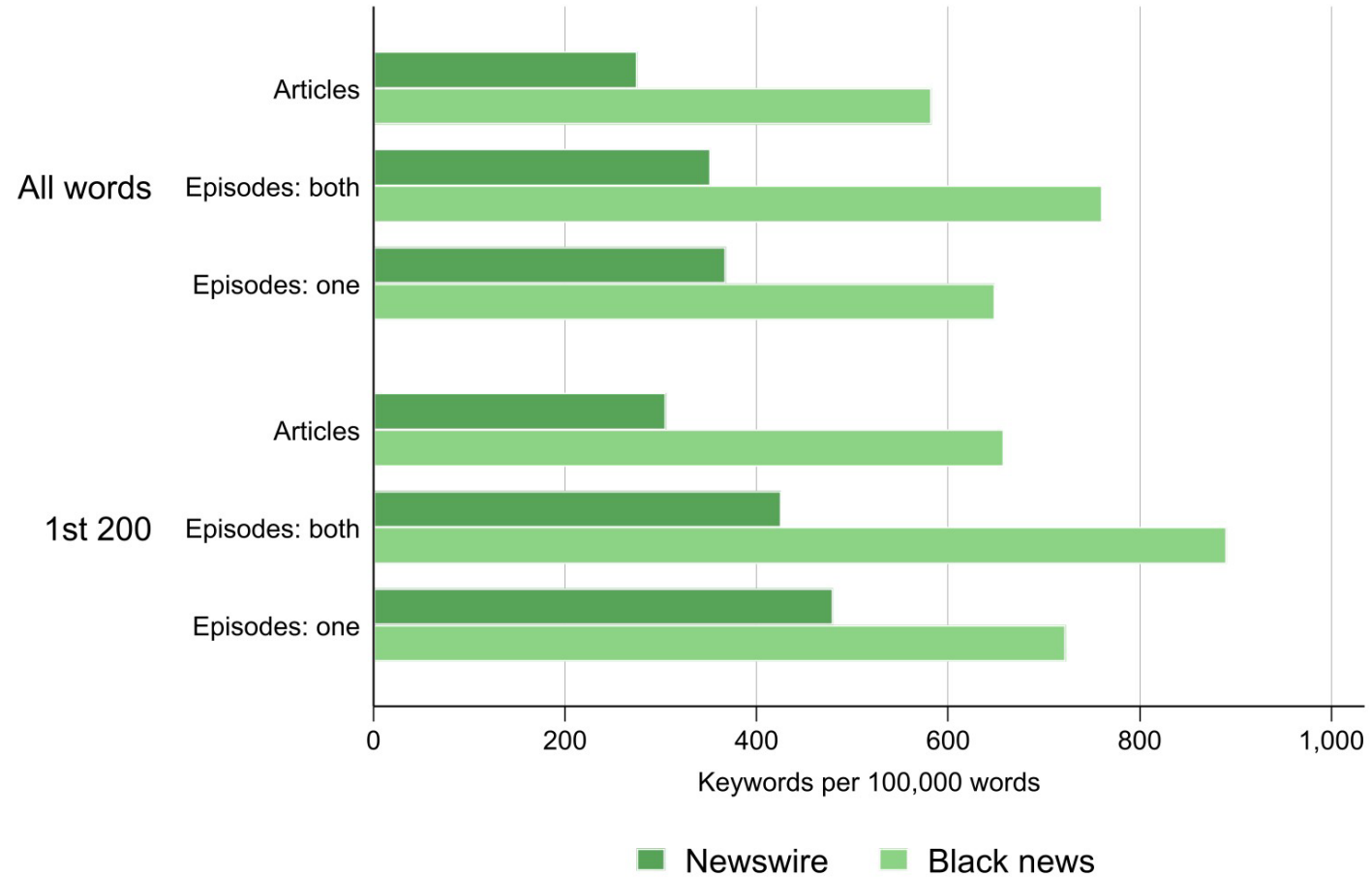
Black newspapers emphasize protest actions & community & systemic critique
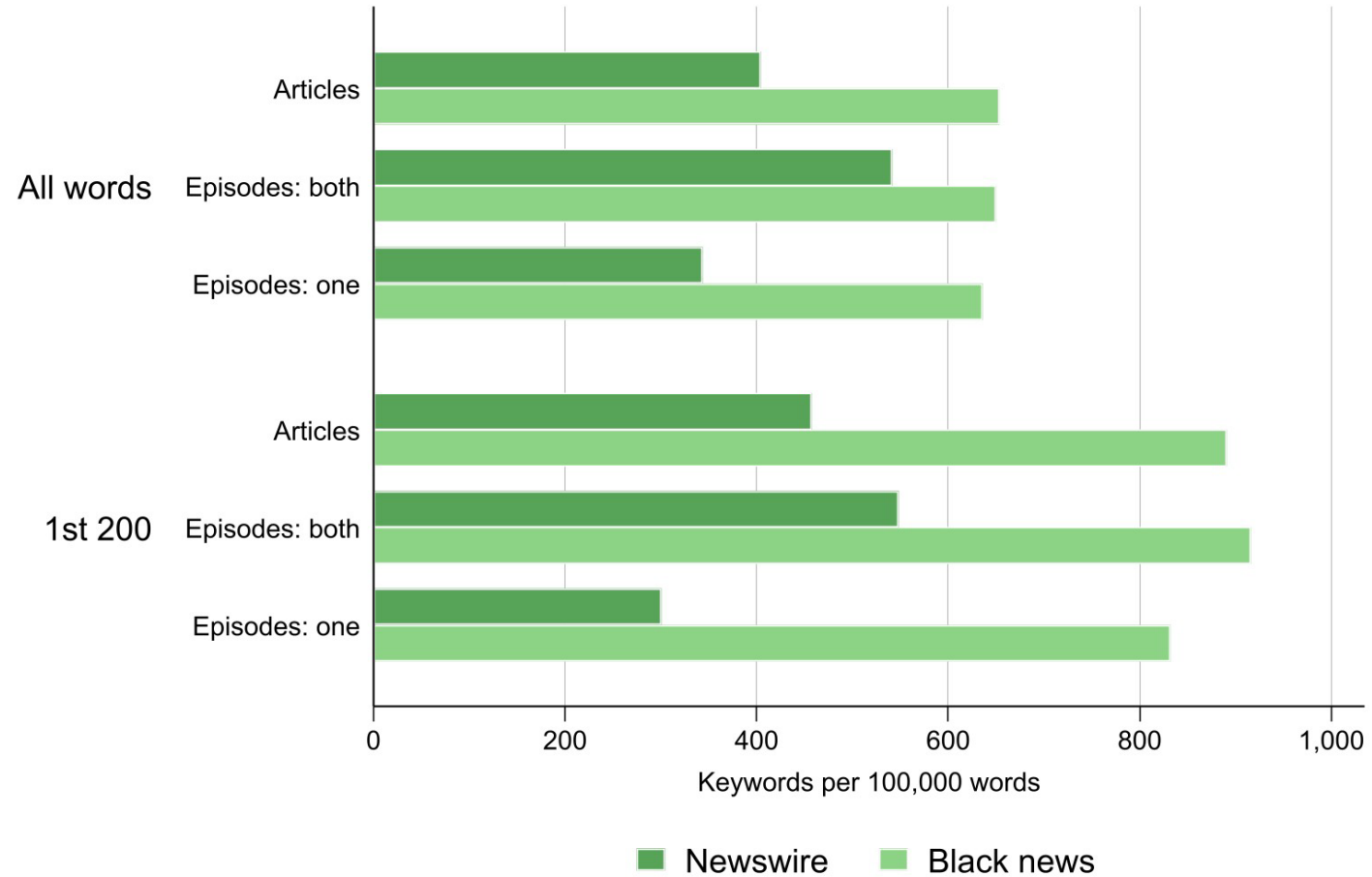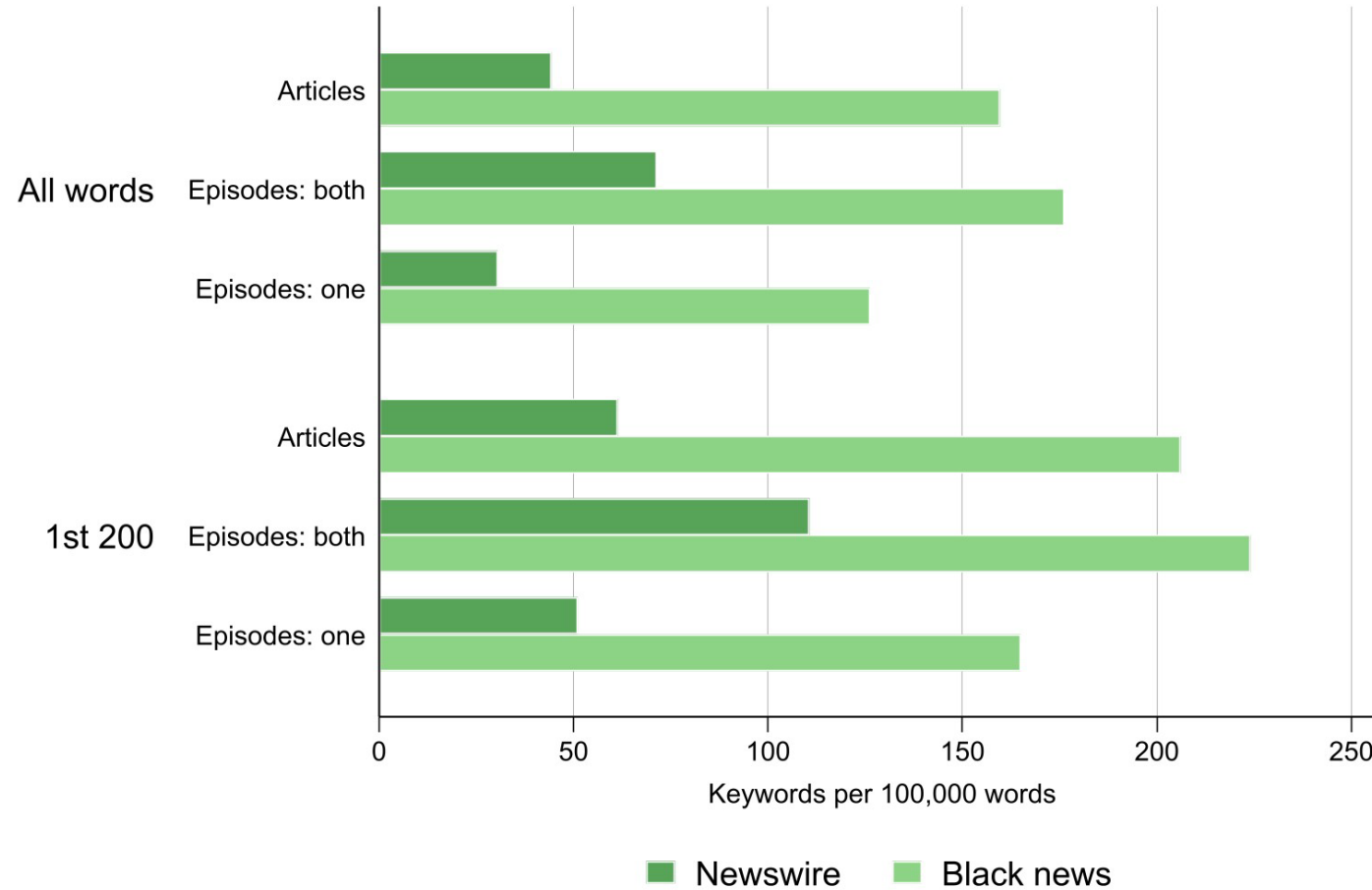
Community keywords -- rate

All words
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

1st 200
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

Keywords per 100,000 words

■ Newswire   ■ Black news

All differences significant except: Ep-one 1st 200

Brutality -- rate

All words
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

1st 200
- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

Keywords per 100,000 words

Newswire   Black news

All differences significant except: Ep-both 1st 200 Ep-one 1st 200

Crucial differences in tone

Angry vs. Outrage

Rate in first 200 words

Angry
angry

- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

Outrage
outrage

- Articles
- Episodes: both
- Episodes: one

0 20 40 60 80 100

Newswire   Black news
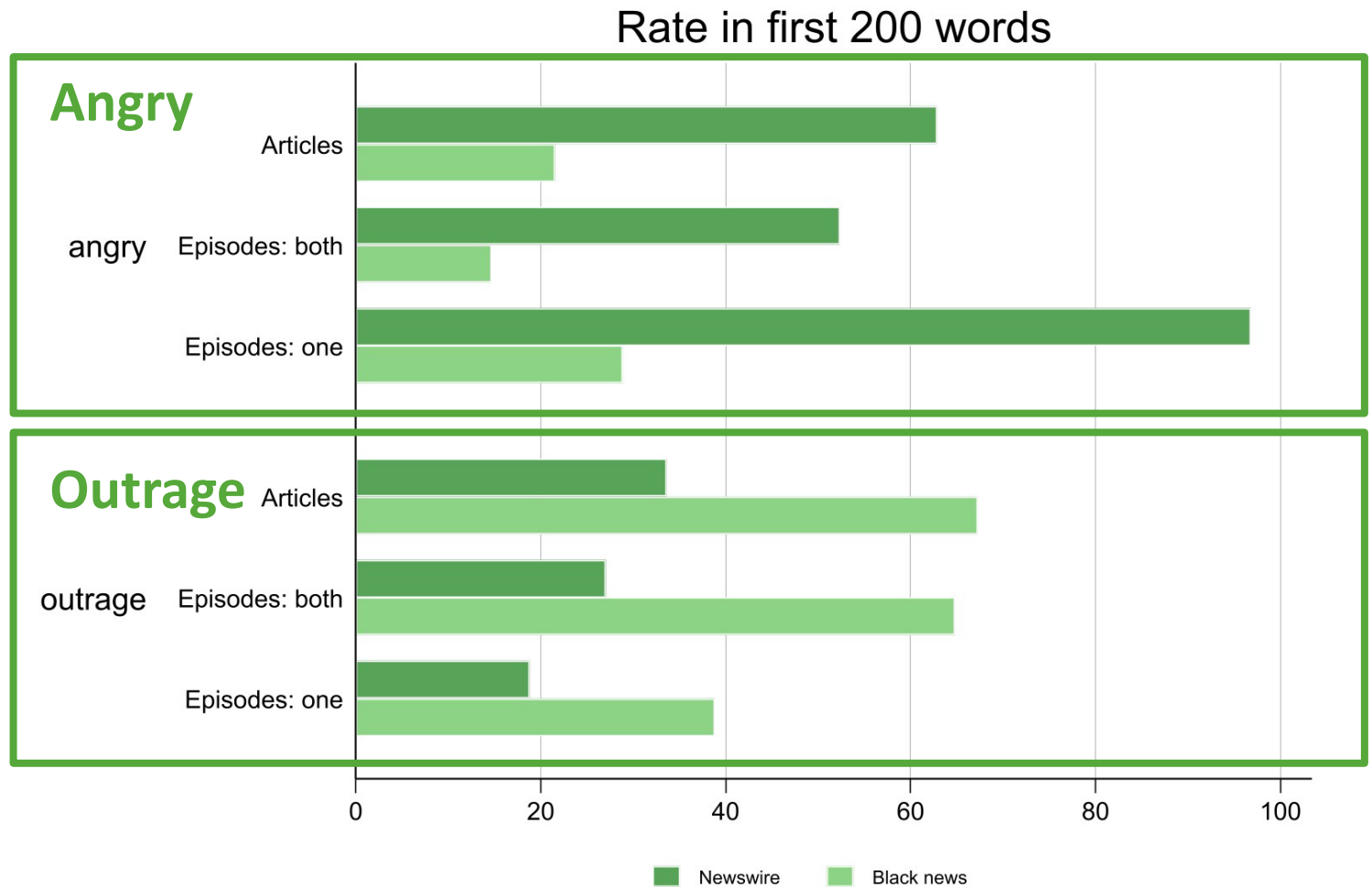
NW vs BN significant except for angry and for outrage Ep-one 1st 200

Conclusions

Methodological
- Relying just on mainstream sources privileges police as sources of information about protests
- Mainstream sources select for disorder and disruption and tend to talk more about the police
- (Police are often present and not mentioned in news reports, see Beyerlein). When do reporters mention police?
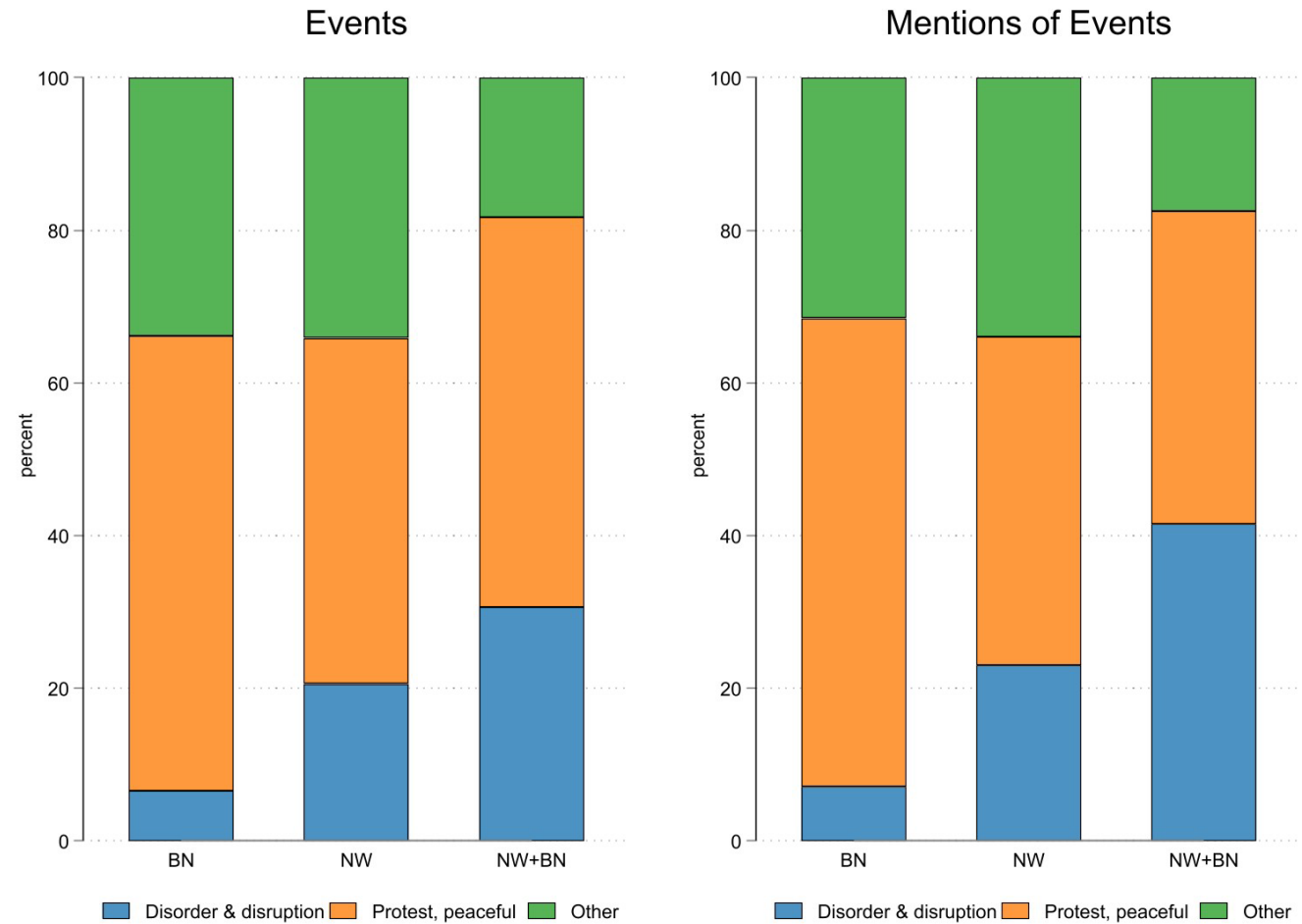
Black sources provide a meaningful and different angle on the ongoing struggle about policing
- Newswires much more concentrated on a few high-profile cases, Black newspapers cover more cases and exhibit weaker "media cascades"

Portrayal of Black movement in mainstream media and research that relies on it
- Over-emphasis on anti-police protests and disorder relative to the fuller range of Black protest activities.
- [Especially under-reporting worker protests and local community protests (e.g. over community violence). That's a different paper]
- What is the picture you'd get from different sources? (next slide)

Impressions from sources

Events

percent

BN   NW   NW+BN

■ Disorder & disruption ■ Protest, peaceful ■ Other

Mentions of Events

percent

BN   NW   NW+BN

■ Disorder & disruption ■ Protest, peaceful ■ Other

Thank you.