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Social conflict and the media
Contesting definitional power

Jonathan Cable

The technological advances that have occurred in the last 50 years have dramatically changed how moments of social conflict become defined. This is nowhere more evident than in the coverage of the English riots in the summer of 2011. It was not just about 24-hour rolling news bringing the fire into people's living rooms. The internet played a massive part in shaping the coverage. Social media and mobile phone technology in particular (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry Messenger) were partly blamed for the organization of the rioting but it was also a significant aspect of journalists' armory for reporting the riots as well as acting as a source for public information (LSE/Guardian, 2011: 30–33; see also Allen, 2013: 120–51). This stands in direct contrast to the world of the early 60s with its two television channels and a small number of radio stations.

With this in mind, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the media have reported social conflict, with a particular focus on protest and demonstrations since the 1960s. This will show that advances in technology over this time have not been matched by developments in the reporting of social conflict. This will be achieved by examining the media coverage of protests, mass demonstrations, direct action and 'violence' at protests. The chapter begins by presenting a broad examination of the attraction and news value of social conflict to the media and will then move on to examine specific case studies to demonstrate the common themes throughout the media coverage of social conflict.

The attraction of social conflict to the media

Before talking about protest events, it is worth looking closely at some of the base elements of media attraction to social conflict, which is to talk about deviance, crime and violence. The sources of the discussion around these particular facets of social conflict are drawn from classic studies that have interrogated these issues in relation to the media, and are still relevant today. Taking the first of these three topics, deviance, is to examine Stanley Cohen's ideas around 'moral panics' and the media's role in contributing to and covering them. Cohen sets out the following three main roles of the media in relation to moral panics:

1 Setting the agenda
2 Transmitting the images
3 Breaking the silence, making the claim

(Cohen 1972: xxviii–xxix)

How this works in practice is through the media process of first, selecting events that are newsworthy and which have an element of deviance to them; second, reproducing the assertions of claims-makers to either heighten or diminish the level of moral panic; and finally, the media may become claims-makers themselves and attempt to produce a moral panic (ibid.: xxviii-xxix). The second point in the list is particularly important in relation to protest as it involves the views of the media towards their sources and who is allowed to make claims. Cohen points out that our ideas about the world have been filtered through the mass media and, in addition, the information that leads to these ideas is open to a plethora of perspectives (ibid.: 9). The power to define introduces a hierarchy of subordinate and superordinate groups. Becker illustrates this point using deviance as an example:

> In the case of deviance, the hierarchical relationship is a moral one. The superordinate parties in the relationship are those who represent the forces of approved and official morality; the subordinate parties are those who, it is alleged, have violated that morality.
>
> (Becker 1967: 240)

If we take this hierarchy and apply it to social conflict the superordinate group is composed of those entities with the power for change, for example a politician with the ability to transform political policy. The subordinate, on the other hand, is the protest group who are challenging the superordinate to make change happen. In other words, they do not have the necessary power to achieve change by themselves. How the relationship between these different actors affects the definition of protest events and issues is what Becker terms a "hierarchy of credibility". What the hierarchy refers to is "any system of ranked groups, [where] participants take it as given that members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are" (ibid.: 241). In political situations such as protest politics, an alternative way of referring to the hierarchy of credibility would be to talk about political standing. Public officials, for instance, will have a higher standing than challenger groups simply due to what they do.

Moving on from deviance and bringing crime and violence into the argument, Hall et al. note that there is a certain societal consensus which defines the legitimate and illegitimate ways for people in society to behave (1977: 64). Crime, they note, is the interruption of societal consensus based upon the rule of law and perceptions of what is acceptable and unacceptable (ibid.: 66). They go on to state that crime's place in the news can be explained because the way it is reported "evokes threats to but also reaffirms the consensual morality of the society" (ibid.). The consensus mentioned here also applies and extends to politics and challenges to consensus politics again raise the specter of a division between legitimate and illegitimate politics. For

protest groups, this is reflected in the perception of their politics and protest actions, where actions can be seen as "illegitimate and 'deviant'" and any challenge to the political consensus is seen as "potentially violent" (Murdock, 1973: 156–57). What this chapter will now demonstrate, using historical examples of protest movements, is that protest fits into the event-based nature of news as follows:

1 There is a news threshold – in other words a protest needs to meet some particular characteristics before being reported
2 News attention is concentrated on what form a protest takes, what happened, who was involved and this is to the detriment of explanations of why a protest is happening
3 The focus on the even makes media attention short-lived and transitory
4 Finally, explanations of the issues coincide with mainstream political consensus.

<div align="right">(Murdock, 1973: 163–64)</div>

These characteristics of the news coverage of protest are at the very heart of academic debates where the common argument is that the more spectacular the protest activity the more media attention a social movement receives. However, the spectacle causes the media to critically divorce protest activities from their corresponding politics and this, in turn, removes the overriding context of why people are protesting (Rosie and Gorringe, 2009a; Wykes, 2000; Gitlin, 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003). This goes further than just a negative portrayal of the protest action, it also leads to disapproving media coverage of the protesters themselves (Gitlin, 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003). Furthermore, the media coverage of social conflict tends to follow Hall et al.'s 'signification spiral', which is a self-amplifying sequence around a set of events or people (1977: 223).

Bearing in mind the list already presented (see Murdock, 1973: 163–64) the following should be added to the general characteristics of the reporting of social conflict: escalation and amplification where something or someone is made to seem more threatening; identification of an issue or concern to include the identification of potential threats (Hall et al., 1977: 223); convergence where two acts are linked together (ibid.: 223); prediction of what is going to happen at an event (Cohen, 1972: 31); finally, symbolization with particular reference to stereotypes (ibid.: 35). To show how these common threads have manifested themselves in the reporting of protest over time, this chapter will now explore several specific protest events and actions.

Anti-Vietnam protest, 1968, London

On 27 October 1968 anti-war activists held a mass demonstration in London to protest against the Vietnam War and this event attracted approximately 100,000 protesters (Nehring, 2008: 131). Previous large-scale protests had been held in London in the previous year in July and October of 1967. These protests, as well as the demonstration in March of 1968, were characterized by protesters confronting

the police, violence and numerous arrests (ibid.: 130). It was, however, the mass student protests which occurred in Paris in May 1968 that would be instrumental in fomenting the political and press preconception of the 27 October demonstration, predicting it would be inherently violent (Halloran et al., 1970: 92). The protests in Paris, in particular, sent a schism through mainstream political consensus. As Halloran et al. mention, the political and media bewilderment about the anti-war protests up until this moment was turned into anxiety:

> [T]he mid-sixties witnessed the first rupturing in the fabric of cultural hege-mony so effectively woven since the war, as groups appeared at the margins of the political spectrum to challenge dominant definitions of social and political issues.
>
> (Halloran et al., 1970: 89)

Against this backdrop, the reporting of the protest in the press before the demon-stration occurred was filled with concern about potential violence. What Murdock found when analyzing the press was the reporting of suspected violent plots in the run up to the demonstration which served to juxtapose the peaceful nature of the march with an expectancy of violent behavior (Murdock, 1973: 160). This type of coverage is then coupled with the contextualizing of a demonstration from within this theme of anticipated violence, and in so doing, it helps to transform the protesters into an 'outsider' group and create an opposition narrative where 'us versus them' becomes the societal consensus against militant outsiders (ibid.: 161–62). As a con-sequence, the participants at the protest are presented as actors in a spectacle of violence and therefore the press coverage empties the protest actions of their poli-tical content (ibid.: 165). Similarly, Halloran et al. (1970: 90) found that when the protest did not turn as violent as the press had predicted, the majority of peaceful protesters were effectively contrasted to the minority who were violent. These themes, as already mentioned, have characterized the reporting of protest ever since and will be detailed further in the following examples.

The miners' strikes of the 1970s and 1980s

The miners' strikes that hit Great Britain in the 1970s and 1980s were backdropped by an era of rapid economic change. The traditional industries that the British economy was built upon were gradually contracting from the 1960s onwards, and when

> the process of structural economic change accelerated, particularly after the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, the implications for trade unions of the decline of their manufacturing and public sector strongholds became clear.
>
> (Phillips, 2006: 206)

The militancy of the strikes as perceived by the press and politicians implied that the miners were laying down a substantial challenge to political consensus (ibid.: 201).

There were, however, big differences between the media treatment of the strikes in the 1970s and those of the 1980s. According to Routledge, the miners were able to obtain a lot more favorable press coverage in the 1970s and were sought after to give comment on events (2009: 157). The coverage changed when it came to the strikes in the 1980s where the majority of the press was supportive of the Conservative government of Margret Thatcher (ibid.: 157). Press hostility was fueled by the strong, combative leader of the National Union of Miners, Arthur Scargill, who became a figurehead of the strikes (Williams, 2009: 38). This press focus on these two strong personalities reduced the arguments to a battle between two people, rather than dealing with the deeper issues affecting the miners (ibid.: 38, 40). The detailed concentration on conflict, a hostile media environment and attention to personalities are aspects which would be repeated during the protest camps at the Greenham Common missile base.

Anti-nuclear protest at Greenham Common

The protests at the missile base at Greenham Common were a slightly different challenge to political consensus when compared to the examples already mentioned. What made the Greenham Common protests different is that the camp developed into a women-only camp, which meant that the challenge to the political order came from 'ordinary women' who were not necessarily prevalent in undertaking acts of this type (Couldry, 1999: 338). In its formative years, however, between 1981 and late 1982, the base protest received very little media coverage (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985: 197). Then, in April 1983, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament held protests at the military bases of Burghfield, Greenham and Aldermaston (ibid.: 265).

These protests featured heavily in news coverage in both the press and broadcast media and protestors briefly had access to the news where their actions were highlighted (ibid.: 270–71). After the 1983 protests, according to Couldry (1999: 342), the camp was relatively ignored. Instead, the "women's refusal to tailor their activities to the needs of the media" (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985: 202) meant that it was their challenge to societal norms that became the focus. Women during this time period were not generally seen to be involved in this kind of publicly mediated protest action and the Greenham camps were a challenge to the "'common sense' expectation of 'ordinary women'" (Couldry, 1999: 339). Again, what this shows is that being represented as outside of the perceived political and social consensus becomes a point where the media can focus their attention, using it as a means of deconstructing and divorcing protest from its politics.

Mass mediated protests from the 1990s and 2000s

It would be naïve however to suggest that social movements are unaware of these reactions to their activities. Quite the opposite, the use of spectacular protest strategies both recognizes and exploits news values at the same time and it is this spectacle that Gamson and Mayer argue as the primary news value of protest:

> Spectacle means drama and confrontation, emotional events with people who have fire in the belly, who are extravagant and unpredictable. This puts a high premium on novelty, on costume, and on confrontation. Violent action in particular has the most of these media valued elements. Fire in the belly is fine, but fire on the ground photographs better. Burning buildings and burning tires make better television than peaceful vigils and orderly marches.
>
> (Gamson and Meyer, 1996: 288)

The spectacle in this respect is what appeals most to the visual requirements of news reporting. This means that protesters are blurring the lines between political expression and media spectacle. What follows as a consequence is that the major news values of protest revolve around four particular aspects of spectacle:

1 Size of protest, i.e. the number of people participating
2 Degree of disruptiveness or radicalness
3 Creativity or newness of the form of action and its accompanying symbolic elements
4 The political weight or public prominence of individuals or groups supporting or actually participating in the protest.

(Rucht, 2013: 257)

It is the use of protest as theatre which turns activists from political individuals into actors on the media stage, and which brings attendant dangers. Wall goes as far as comparing protest action to a 'performance', where "activism, even in its most serious form, is a method of performance that must be developed and improvised" (1999: 96). Sticking with the theater metaphor, one way of losing the interest of the media is by not staying in character but this very emphasis on the theatrical also raises the specter of activists being turned into celebrities.

This is one of the major disadvantages of spectacular protest tactics, as, Gitlin argues, "celebrated radicals become radical celebrities; four-star attractions in the carnival of distracting and entertaining international symbols" (1980: 162). The environmental activist 'Swampy' from the mid to late 1990s is a good example of this. He was involved in protesting against the expansion of Manchester's airport in 1997 by tunneling underneath the roads surrounding it (Wykes, 2000: 73). In doing so, his actions caused him to become a by-word for environmental direct action and, over the course of his protest, the media coverage moved from being about the protest into a focus on the lives and lifestyles of its young activists. This shift in focus was able to remove the political angle of the protest because it "dislocated the debate from the public to the private" (ibid.: 85). The key point that should be taken from this section is that protesters are not using the spectacle merely as a political photo opportunity which can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture. The next part of the chapter will look more closely at a specific social movement, the Global Justice Movement its their use of symbolic direct action and 'disruptive protest'.

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The global justice movement

The Global Justice Movement is responsible for protest actions all around the world against issues ranging from government trade policies to transnational corporations. It is most noted for its mass demonstrations against international government and monetary summits such as those by the Group of 20 (G20), the International Momentary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The movement gained international prominence when it made its North American debut at the WTO's Third Ministerial Conference in December 1999 in Seattle. The event has been considered the "coming out party of a movement" (Klein, 2002: 3). The main reasons for the vast amount of attention that caught the mainstream media, police and political elite unawares were the sheer scale and sophistication of the protests. The size and diversity of the protest groups were the biggest surprise, justifying them being considered a 'movement'. The participants ranged from trade unions, religious groups and Non-Governmental Organizations to autonomous non-hierarchical anarchists.

The Seattle protests were characterized by human blockades, running battles between the police and protesters and symbolic acts of vandalism against corporate icons of Nike, Starbucks and McDonalds (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002: 138). Violence in this instance served a paradoxical role. In DeLuca and Peeples' research into the demonstrations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle, 1999 they found that instead of protesters becoming divorced from the issues, the violence gave a voice to the voiceless and opened up debates about WTO policy and public order policing (ibid.). They state that the disruptive protest contained all the "necessary ingredients for compelling the whole world to watch" (ibid.: 130). Most importantly, they argue that the violence did not succeed in "stealing the limelight of legitimate protest, the compelling images of violence and disruption increased the news hole and drew more attention to issues" (ibid.: 139–42). Therefore, this is not to say that activists have no control over their media representations but, on the contrary, that activists can use the media for their own ends.

How these types of protest actions are reported in the news media, especially in the build-up to a mass demonstration, has a telling impact on the construction of how a protest is perceived. In a similar vein to the other protest events already mentioned, Rosie and Gorringe argue that: "anticipatory coverage is, if anything, more important than how an event itself is reported" (2009b: 2, 9). The creation of a dominant media narrative which anticipates violence decreases the amount of attention paid by the media to the issues under protest and shifts focus onto the protesters themselves. As has been shown in this chapter the prevalence of this type of constructed anticipation of violence is nothing new. Halloran et al.'s research into the coverage of the 1968 anti-Vietnam War protests in London demonstrated that the press in particular focused on a small minority and expected the kind of violence which had been seen at other protests in 1968 (1970: 139). The use of comparable demonstrations in the construction of media coverage of an imminent protest is an attempt at negatively contextualizing a mass demonstration.

However, this context is constructed as unfavorable to the majority of peaceful protesters because the protest references selected by the media are often events that

were heavily characterized by violence (Rosie and Gorringe, 2009b: 2, 9). Wahl-Jorgensen looked at the dominant themes of media coverage surrounding the 2001 May Day protests in London and found that these themes could be divided up into three categories:

1 Law and order – Protesters as a problem of policing
2 Economy – The negative impact of protest on the national economy
3 Spectacle – Focus on the irrational and spectacular aspects of Global Justice activism.

(Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003: 131)

Furthermore, it was found that the emphasis of the coverage was the systemic belittling, ridiculing, depoliticizing and preoccupation with the consequences of protest (ibid.: 142). The issues under protest became divorced from the protest itself because the spectacle of protest attracted the most attention and conflict or violence is especially effective at generating coverage. To exemplify this point, following the Group of 20 (G20) protests in London, Rosie and Gorringe wrote an article which stated that the majority of peaceful protesters were ignored in favor of what the media termed 'extreme' elements (2009b: 3, 9). These representations, however prevalent, are now heavily contested thanks to digital technology and the capabilities of the internet. These platforms allow an electronic platform to challenge these portrayals and transmit differing perspectives on protest events.

The internet, social media and social conflict

Before concluding this chapter it is worth taking a look at the influence which contemporary media technologies and practices have on the coverage of social conflict. To conceptualize what this means in practice it is useful to bring DeLuca and Peeples' research back into the argument. In their research into the WTO protests in 1999 they introduced the idea of the 'public screen' which took the Habermas concept of the public sphere and updated it for new technologies and a changing societal landscape (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). They define it as a "metaphor for thinking about places of politics and possibilities of citizenship in our present moment." The 'screens' in this case refer to television, the internet and newspaper front pages (ibid.: 121). Nine years after this original conceptualization they returned to the concept to argue that the advent of Web 2.0, smartphones, digital cameras and tablets has fundamentally led to new forms of social organization and brand new ways of perceiving events (DeLuca, Sun and Peeples, 2011: 145).

There are several positives and negatives that can be associated with the internet and social conflict. In the realm of activism it is clear that there is much potential for the organization of protest. That said, the audience for activist websites and social media outputs tends to be mostly activists and to reach the wider public, protesters need to enter the more traditional media of print and broadcast (Rucht, 2013: 261). The internet also allows for the challenging of the dominant perspectives of an event

presented by the mainstream news media. This occurred during the G20 protests when the newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson died. The initial reports in the press however were unclear as to whether Tomlinson was a protester or a member of the general public. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* wrote: "Protester dies after a day of violent clashes" (Edwards et al., 2009: 6). This type of narrative changed when a week later the *Guardian* published a mobile phone video of Tomlinson being pushed over by a member of the police (Lewis, 2009: 1). This led to debates and a questioning of the police public order tactics around protest.

The inquiry that was instigated into police tactics by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) revealed a perhaps underappreciated result of protester internet communications. The HMIC document "Adapting to Protest" talks about activist online sources as being central to the gathering of police intelligence (2009: 42). The report goes further to state that it had observed, "unprecedented levels of communication between disparate protest groups" (ibid.: 42). Finally, the police document explains that intelligence for what protests were going to happen was garnered from "open source materials" (ibid.: 101). This underlines something of the positive and negative impacts of the internet on protest events.

Conclusion

What this chapter has shown is that the common thread running through the media coverage of social conflict over time is that the antagonists have been consistently demonized, depoliticized and depicted as deviant. However, this is not always the case. There are sometimes instances which present a balance to this portrayal and the changing technological landscape has increased the ability of social actors to challenge the dominant news frames and narratives. This has meant that the 'official' line from powerful centralized institutions such as politics, corporations and the police is constantly being challenged by alternative forms of media. This was never more starkly evidenced than in the death of the newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson as asserted above. These developments have also meant that accountability and definition of events can be contested almost instantly. It is the advent of these types of technologies that requires the researching of social conflict to go beyond what is in the newspapers or on broadcast media and delve into the world of social media to fully grasp their different perspective on events and how they are being portrayed in the contemporary world.

Further reading

The first four recommendations set the initial groundwork for the research into social conflict ever since. First Cohen's (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* examines the way in which the media defines groups as a threat to society. This is complimented by Hall et al.'s (1977) *Policing the Crisis* which takes Cohen's ideas and applies it to street crime in the UK. In doing so Hall et al. uncover the definitional power of authoritative social and political actors to control the debates around

contentious issues. The next two are specifically about anti-Vietnam War protests, one concerning the UK, the other America. Halloran, Elliott and and Murdock's (1970) *Demonstrations and Communication* was one of the first in-depth accounts of the media coverage of a major protest event, and showed the levels of predictive violence, depoliticizing and sensationalizing of mass demonstrators in the media. Gitlin's (1980) *The Whole World is Watching* on the other hand shows the trajectory that the American anti-war movement took and is an influential text on the construction, actions and deconstruction of the anti-war movement in America. For more recent work about contemporary research in this area, Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy's (2013) *Mediation and Protest Movements* and Cottle and Lester's (2011) *Transnational Protests and the Media* provide a broad range of chapters across a variety of subjects.

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