

# Politics essays - media political protest



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## **Media Political Protest**

### **Politics And The Media**

Critically consider mainstream New's treatment of political protest and new social movements.

The late 1950's and early 1960's brought about political protests and social movements like no other, with martin Luther kings American civil rights movement being remembered as on of the most famous and successful social movements in history. The American civil rights movement gained a considerable amount of coverage from mainstream media resulting in people being largely familiar with the movement and its success.

It was then clear that there had always been a dynamic relation between mainstream media, political protests, and new social movements. From the 1960's onwards sociologists had began to study the theory around social movements and had developed many ideas and research on the relationship between mass media, protests, and movements.

When faced with a question such as one discussing mainstream news media, protests and new social movements one would have to define those concepts in order to take into consideration their significance of each other. Mainstream media has always been designed to reach to an extremely large audience across a limitless geographic, it is popularly circulated information distributed by newspapers, television, radio, and magazines.

Political protest or protests in general are a form of activism that involves individuals marching, demonstrating, for or against a political policy, action, or legislation.

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In protesting it is seen as a way of voicing opinion to further change a concept whether to influence public opinion or government policy. And finally new social movements are usually made up of groups of individuals or organisations that focus on certain social or political issues in order to influence social change, whether to cause, prevent or reform social change. The notion (new) social movement was given as they have only been largely recognised since the 1960's.

Diana,(1992) cited in ' *culture and politics in the information age*' by Frank Webster states that a way in which we could see social movements is:

*' A network of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organisations, who share a distinctive collective identity, mobilise resources on capital issues' .*

Most critics would agree that the relationship between mainstream media, social movements, and political protests is vital; however their relationship has never been easy and is still considered as difficult by many critics.

Social movements need mainstream media for exposure in order to expand and become recognised on behalf of their cause. In some respects the media also needs social movements as a vital news source and it is not surprising that both would exceed to reach their goals as it is apart of their nature and they must exceed to survive. However despite the fact that social movements seem to be useful for the media and are considered to be vital or important to the political landscape, with their ability to intercede with political elites and citizens, it seems that they have a disadvantage compared to mainstream media.

**As mainstream media have an advantage and the upper hand over social movements.**

This is elaborated upon by Gamson & Wolsfeld, (1993) cited in ' *Media society* '. They state that social movements need the mass media more than the mass media needs them, in publicizing their activities, mainstream media needs to cover social movements so that; they could gain support, validation as a major/important political players, and maximise the attention of spotlight of conflict to attract mediators or potential allies. On the contrary the media have alternatives to having social movements or protestors as a news source.

This does not seem to be the only disadvantage movements have with the media. It is argued that political protests and new social movements are covered in a negative light the majority of time. Gamson's *The strategy of social protests* cited in ' *social movements* ' states his study that found that groups were more likely to be successful if they were:

*' based on one issue, used violence, disruptive tactics, selective incentives, and came from a centralized, in factionalized and bureaucratized organisation.'*

However this would lead one to think that the coverage of a violent or disruptive protest would be extremely negative as even a non-violent protest gains a negative and violent label under mainstream Media's coverage the majority of the time critics would argue.

This is proven with actual studies such as Halloran's study.

Halloran et al, (1970) studied protestor's portrayal in the media with focus on the protest against the Vietnam War, he discovered that although it was a predominantly peaceful protest media portrayal of the protest was not positive and conveyed it as violent.

This was only one of many studies that revealed similar finding.

Another study by Chan & Lee, (1984) on the protests had found that the protestor's weather being violent or non violent, un-peaceful, or peaceful were represented as being ' the other' or in a ' them vs. us' notion.

However in some cases when protestors are not seen as extremely deviant and questioning of the ' status quo' they are sometimes covered in a fair light one example of this could be the stop the war coalition in 2003 against the Iraq war, The media can use this frame however more then often chooses not to.

There are two main attributes that influence a social movement or a protest being covered. these are the extent to which the movement is ' extreme' i. e. challenging in terms of questioning the status quo and how ' militant' they are in their tactics McLeod & Hertog, (1999) cited in ' *Manufacturing policies: the media's role in the policy making process*' state that the more militant a social movement is the more negative and ' critical' the media coverage. In talking of the word militant one means how much a socail movement is how radical and milantly tactical a movement is.

In general the idea is that protestors are more likely to be portrayed as deviant members of society rather than individuals who have a right to voice their opinions

The treatment of social movements has not been all that better either some have been covered in a positive light i. e. the civil rights movement, however most would argue that for that past few decades social movements have not been particularly prioritised or covered in a totally positive light either some sociologists such as Marxists would argue that social movements are not covered as it is another way for the ruling elites to keep in control of their social and economical status above the masses and that social movements should be able to vocalise their causes and be recognised.

*' The modern media have become central to the life and death of social movements'*. There have been many sociological theories upon the treatment of new social movements by the media. Many critics reemphasise the fact that the media is important for social movements, in particular Kelbowiz and Scherer (1988: 72) cited in *' Frames of protest: social movements and framing perspective'* state that:

In some instances, social movements have to compete to legitimize their status and be recognised in the media. Givevitch & Lay, (1985) cited in *' frames of protest'* states that in contemporary societies societal groups such as social movements and ideologies compete for the definition and construction of social reality within the media.

It is evident that it is more of a struggle for social movements to gain coverage let alone positive coverage; it is also evident that governmental organisations are far more likely to gain coverage easier and faster.

One reason for this is that they are seen as a vital and official news source and that they are very much legislatively based.

This is something that the media look to cover as the general population are concerned with and have interest in this aspect this is summarised by the following quote from sociologists who studied movement struggles compared to political organisations

*' In terms of access struggle, institutional sources and political authorities have an*

*' increased upper hand or advantage as they are considered as strong news sources'*

(White 1950; Galtung and Ruge 1965; Shoemaker 1991).

Social movements are coming against a hard opposition which includes collective actors such as counter movements, the state, and the media placing them in a *' struggle for cultural supremacy'* Tarrow, (1998).

social movements struggle includes not one but two battles, the first one being determining mainstream media coverage and the second being the way in which the social movement and the story is formed. This is called

framing, Framing is the way in which a story is covered or the way in which it is portrayed in the media.

It also means the extent the frame and the interpretation of the movement has been taken over by the media and how favourable the journalistic description bias is.

(McCarthy et al 1998, smith et al (2001) cited in ' *frames of protest*' state that it is regarded as difficult for movements to both gain coverage and do so under an ideal.

One concept that is seen as important for mainstream media is news value, social movements and political protest must offer high news value to be covered or framed righteously. They must be able to attain public interest and attention in order for the story to sell. This is because some aspects of journalism mainstream media in particular has become increasingly commercialised today and is more dependant on sales.

Herman & Chomsky, (1988) carried out research and came up with the propaganda model which consists of five filters that social movements or protest must survive in order to be covered. These include 1) the size, ownership, and profit the media could make from the story 2) advertising 3) sourcing 4) criticism and 5) anti-communist ideology, i. e. keeping the power in the hands of elites and serving their interests. This is seen as a way of emphasising news value and reinforcing authority by some marxist critics.

Consecutive to the propaganda model, a lot of research was done into news selection, and it is evident that there is a lot of research indicating that the main priority for media institutions is profit and audience interest.

Meyer, (2002) states that there is another filter which is called '*the rules of stage-managing*' which (as mentioned before) he says is based on how much the news can attract audience attention.

The fact that it is difficult for social movements or protests to obtain coverage means that they have to think of other ways of obtaining coverage one example is through emotion management which includes using concepts that would encourage sympathetic feelings for example sadness.

An example of this would be using pictures of victims of hurricane Katrina in 2006 or pictures of children affected by the Iraq war. This is just one of the concepts social movements have to use to gain media interest. Movements and political protestors have to develop all kinds of media strategies such as adopt public relations techniques and strategies to bypass the medias selection bias (Olivier & Maney 2000; McCarthy et al. 1998; smith et al. 2001; Miphial & Schiveingraber 1998)

*' An effective media strategy requires - at least to some extent - a willingness to cater to the often warped priorities and short attention span of the news media'* Despite what critics say about social movements having to change their techniques and this being bad, Salzman, (1998: 3) in the media handbook for activists cited in '*Media Society*' says:

It is not only Salzman who comments on this, others feel that if social movements adopt proactive planning despite the fact it may alter movement messages, it could lead to favourable media coverage.

Therefore sacrifices to social movement messages suggest that all in all the media wins and gains more based on what it needs. It also suggests that general consensus is important when trying to obtain coverage.

However one concept that has helped social movement organisations or political protestor activists is of course (the World Wide Web). With independent media sites such as 'Indymedia' and 'Schnews', it has given social movements and activists the chance to function through the web enabling them to write their own journalistic stories and publicize their movements, beliefs, and causes with the possibility of more visitors every day.

These internet sites also most productively enable social movements to be Trans global news sites, as people around the world can have access to their information mediums at the click of a button. Earl & Schussman, (2003) cited in '*Social movements and internetdiscourse*' state that the internet is incredibly useful to movements or activists organisations who want to log on to the web and publicize things such as protest information, they say that in general the internet can be seen as an 'organisational tool' for individuals optimistic for social change. Some critics feel that the internet has the ability to excel past mainstream media outlets and centered hierarchical forms of organisations Castello, (2000) says:

*' the net gives networks the capacity to decentralise and adapt the execution of tasks while coordinating purpose and decision.'*

The more movements and political protestors go online the more sociologists studying them follow them up and theorise their activities.

Almeida and Lichbach, (2003) cited in *' social movements and internet discourse'* did a study comparing four mainstream media sources with activist based internet data in both their coverage of the anti WTO protests in late 1999. They found that activist based websites had reported a higher number of international protests than mainstream media; they also found that they were less influenced by intense concepts such as large numbers of participants or violence etc than the main media outlets.

However they also found some limitations into the activist based websites which includes the variability of content and the necessity to confirm and legitimize occurrences. Therefore there are issues that suggest that while the internet is extremely useful for new social movements and political protests it also has its negatives. Another issue would be that people tend to get enough information from mainstream media outlets and tend not to look to other places for more information.

## **Conclusion**

In general despite some social and political protest success stories with the media it is evident that mainstream news of political protests and social movements have not been completely positive within the few decades.

Parati, (1986) cited in *' media society'* once said in summary:

*'discrediting techniques used by the media include down playing content in favour of emphasising the spectacle of an event, painting demonstrators as deviant and portraying under representative balance to a tiny number of counter parts, and undercounting the attendance at demonstrations'* have all determined negative coverage.

Because of this it would be impracticable to say that all new social movements and protests could be covered more, or that they could be portrayed in a positive light from today onwards, it is evident the more movements and activists in general questions the status quo the less likely it will gain coverage or positive portrayal (framing). Mainstream media and political protests/social movements have always had a less than easy relationship despite the notion of freedom of speech being denoted in the western world.

Marxists socialists critics would argue that one way that movements and activists would be able to voice their opinion more within mainstream media would be that they could fight against it and insist on a media reform i. e. a reconsideration of the way the media is conducted and the stories it publishes resulting in it being mandatory that new social movements and protestors capitalist or communists, right wing or left wing (aimed at positive social change) be recognised. Although unlikely this would enable movements to avoid adopting other messages or techniques to fit media needs.

Hackett & Carroll, (2004) state that it is about:

*'time for social movements to take collective action. To start with 'democratic media reform needs to be recast as an end in itself - a public good - not simply a means by which each movement can get its message out'.*

This suggests that while it seems that mainstream media treatment of social movements and protest is not very positive or accepting, many critics feel that social movements and protests should be made known in the interest of 'public good' in order for people to be able to voice more opinions freely and create better chance of realizing Habermas' concept of the public sphere.

In terms of the internet, for activists websites to be more successful as a major information source and to be looked upon as much as mainstream media outlets, more money would have to be invested in them to ensure information is official and promotion can be maximised.

Perhaps the result would be a more balanced media of information or people could be aware of hidden causes such as discrimination like unfair trade that some social movements try to publicise as much as possible as these issues are still on going.

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