

Self-Perceptions: Mass Media, the Internet and the Framing of Political Activism.

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The growth of the mass media has seen increased debate about the degree to which these technologies can influence our perceptions of distant events and the people involved in them. Much of the 'new' political protest - such as the WTO riots and GM crop destruction - operates outside of traditional institutional structures and communications technologies have played a key role in aiding the development of the social movements at the basis of a new and seemingly nebulous form of politics. In the west at least, however, television images of political demonstrations have tended to frame participants in negative terms. The paper argues that, although a number of high profile events have helped to generate coverage of activists' concerns, the portrayal of protest continues to frame collective action of this kind as undesirable. The paper examines the ways the mass media portrays political activism and the strategies used by activists to counter these representations. The role of new media technologies - the Internet, email and mobile 'phones - in bypassing the dominant discourse of television news in particular is explored. The paper is based upon analysis of social movement theories, communications research and interviews with political activists across a range of issues.

'Virtually everybody will agree on the importance of the media of communication in shaping the democratic character of society, but fewer, unfortunately, emphasize the importance of democratising the media' (Dahlgren 2001b: 64)

Introduction

Picture Seattle, Davos, Genoa or even Barcelona. What do you see? Unless you have close personal associations with these cities, it's likely that the images conjured up were of riots, street battles and violent mayhem. For most of us, our recent experience of these cities has been through mediated representations of demonstrations outside the summits of international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the European Union. It is unlikely that any television reporting we have seen has given much insight into the logic - as perceived by the demonstrators - behind these protests. Mainstream press coverage may have offered some additional detail, though there will have been little obvious empathy towards the protesters displayed. Some of the reasons behind this type of reporting are addressed in this paper. More importantly, though, the paper looks at the responses of activists to the perceived omissions of the mainstream media, particularly through the establishment of alternative information networks.

The 'fairness' or 'accuracy' of mass media reports on political activism are not the concern of this paper, nor are the versions of these events outlined in the independent

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media. Of more interest here is what might be missing from media reports of political protests and the implications this may have for the promotion, or otherwise, of political participation. this paper are questions about the implications of such segregation, particularly in the field of information provision.