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Reference
UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT: THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ATTENTION ON PROTEST POLICING*

Dominique Wisler and Marco Giugni†

Explanations of protest policing have neglected the "spotlight of the media." Based on data on repression and its media coverage in four Swiss cities from 1965 to 1994, our findings suggest that the mass media do have an impact on levels and forms of repression, along with political opportunity dimensions and levels of disruption. We identify two mechanisms. First, we show that the symbolic battles waged by protest groups and their outcomes affect the level of repression these groups face. More specifically, depending on whether the civil-rights or the law-and-order scenario wins in the public sphere, the police adopt different postures when facing disorders. Second, the police are also shown to be vulnerable to an increase of media attention during a protest campaign. When protest becomes a blind spot in the public sphere, repression increases.

The relationship between coercion and protest has received considerable attention in the existing literature.¹ Using different kinds of data (aggregate, time series, panels), scholars have focused above all on the impact of repression on mobilization (Booth and Richard 1996; Francisco 1995; 1996; Opp and Roehl 1990; Rasler 1996) and political violence (Koopmans 1997; Lichbach 1987; Moore 1998). Case studies have also documented this relationship (e.g., Jefferson 1993; Stark 1972; Waddington 1993). Depending on the theoretical perspective (rational choice theory, relative deprivation, labeling theory), individuals are expected to respond differently when facing repression. More or less complicated and opposite “curves” expressing the relationships have been hypothesized and, to add to the confusion, most authors found some kind of empirical support to each of them (e.g., Koopmans 1997; Lichbach 1987). These inconclusive results should encourage us to look for alternative or complementary explanations. A promising avenue of research involves inquiring into the role played by the mass media. Protesters may face harsher repression in the streets while, at the same time, being successful in attracting mass media and mobilizing public opinion in their favor. From a rational choice perspective, the encouragement they receive from media coverage may significantly alter and even countervail the deterring effect of repression. Despite early acknowledgment that protest is a “highly indirect process in which communication media and the reference publics of protest targets play critical roles” (Lipsky 1968, quoted in Rucht 1994), the impact of the mass media on

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¹ For stylistic reasons, we use coercion, repression, and protest policing as synonymous.
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protest has been largely overlooked in social movement theory and research.²

A similar neglect can be observed in the study of repression. Existing work includes
two sets of independent variables in the explanatory models offered. Certain features of protest
are expected to produce different levels of repression: the conflict’s intensity (Goldstein 1978;
Hibbs 1973; Goldstein 1978; Muller 1985), the level of violence (Duvall and Shamir 1980;
Hibbs 1973), the variety of protest strategies (Davenport 1995; Tilly 1978), and “cultural
deviance” (Davenport 1995). A second set of variables that have been discussed in the literature
on repression pertain to the state. Della Porta (1995), for example, conceives protest policing as
an output of the state. Others have combined both sets of variables. Davenport (1995) sees the
influence of protest attributes on coercion as mediated by the state’s perception of threat. This
perception, in turn, is believed to be a function of several structural variables: the state’s coercive
capacity, economic development, dependency, and political regime.

Della Porta’s model is more apt to catch variations of protest policing across
democratic regimes. She identifies two independent dimensions of the state that are shown to
have produced particular styles of protest policing in Germany and Italy: political coalition and
political culture (della Porta 1995, 1996). When the old left”—social-democratic and communist
parties—joined the civil-rights coalition in these two countries, protest policing became softer,
more selective, and more tolerant. Political culture is also found to affect the policing of protest.
Thus, protest policing is “dirtier” in Italy and more “legalistic” in Germany, reflecting two
different political traditions. The police are traditionally conceived as the longa manus of the
state in Italy, while there is a deep Rechtsstaat culture in Germany (see also Katzenstein 1990;

This body of literature largely neglects the role of the media as a determinant of
repression, although a number of case studies show that the media affect protest policing.
Wolfsfeld’s (1997) analysis of the Intifada shows that the revolt of the children in the West
Bank targeted international mass media in an effort to put significant pressure on the Israeli
government to find a political solution to the conflict. Similarly, Gamson argues in Strategy of
Social Protest that the police are reluctant to use overt repression in front of television cameras
(Gamson 1990). In democratic regimes, police forces seem indeed to be vulnerable to public
opinion and respond with tactical choices to shifts in public opinion.

The centrality of public opinion and media as a guideline for protest policing may even
have increased over the last decades, as the police institution seems to experience a change of
paradigm. Indeed several studies have shown that a new paradigm of citizen police has gained
ground in western democracies over the classical model of state police (Body-Gendrot and Le
Guennec 1998; della Porta and Reiter 1998; Winter 1998). Public opinion, in this new model,
replaces politics as a barometer of police legitimacy. Today, opinion polls measuring approval
rates of the police are conducted on a more regular basis. Furthermore, as regards public order
policies, the reaction by the mass media is constantly monitored and serves as a basis for
reforms. This is illustrated by a statement by the head of the Geneva police: “The media reaction
is received and analyzed, and when we feel we can improve, we do it” (interview, Laurent
Walpen, 24.11.1994).

We think that the mass media enter as an independent variable in explanatory models
of both protest and protest policing. Figure 1 outlines our general argument. While police and
protesters interact directly, they are both influenced by the political context and by the mass
media. In this article we focus on the determinants of repression and provide some evidence
suggesting how the mass media affect the policing of protest. Using data on both protest policing
and the media coverage in four Swiss cities, our argument unfolds in two steps. First, we look at

² There are exceptions, most notably in the work of Todd Gitlin, William Gamson, and Gady Wolfsfeld.
the effect of political opportunity structures and movement-related factors on the type and extent of repression. Second, these findings will serve as the basis for a discussion of the impact of mass media on protest policing. Before these analyses, however, we present a more detailed discussion of how the media spotlight is expected to affect protest policing.

**Figure 1.** The General Outline of the Argument

![Diagram showing the relationship between Police, Demonstrators, POS (Public Opinion Sensor), and Media]

**THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT**

The attention of the mass media, which we call "the media spotlight," may affect the policing of protest in at least three distinct ways. The first way consists of a weakening effect of the presence of journalists on the site of an event (Gamson 1990). Police forces are vulnerable to publicity and are likely to refrain from using excessive force under conditions of broad public attention. This point is also stressed by Geary (1985: 130), “There is little doubt that the increased visibility of public order policing has functioned to reduce violence.” Second, the police reaction to publicity can also be delayed. The police may react to levels of publicity that they observe in previous actions. According to this mechanism, when protest becomes a blind spot in the public sphere, the likelihood of repression increases. As long as the media are observed to report heavily on a protest campaign, the police are unlikely to use overt repression. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the police are likely to respond to public opinion as defined by repeated statements expressed in the public sphere (Neidhardt 1994). If most speakers in the public sphere adopt a law-and-order scenario, the police will likely interpret public opinion as supportive of a stronger hand in the streets. In contrast, if a civil-rights scenario dominates, the police will show restraint to protect their public image.

We can sketch in an ideal-typical fashion the opposite scenarios that are involved in a dispute over public order. The civil-rights scenario points to police provocation as being responsible for the escalation, whereas the law-and-order scenario puts the blame exclusively on protesters. While the civil-rights scenario antagonizes the police and describes demonstrators as initially peaceful citizens, the law-and-order scenario antagonizes the protesters and pictures police behavior as basically correct. With regard to the causes of violence (diagnostic frame), the civil-rights scenario maintains that it should be seen as the outcome of social change, whereas the law-and-order scenario adopts a “manipulation frame.” Violence is considered in this scenario as the product of the strategic agitation of a few clever and over-ideological leaders, and to have no structural basis. Finally, the two opposed scenarios also disagree over the interpretation of what has to be done, and by whom,
in order to redress the situation (prognostic frame). The civil-rights scenario stresses the need for reforms to restore the social peace, while the law-and-order scenario advocates repression by the police and the justice alike as appropriate means to restore the rule of law. Several authors have proposed analyses of these two scenarios along these lines (della Porta 1995; 1999; Kriesi 1984; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Murdock 1981; Trew 1979).

The symbolic battle over public order is waged as a struggle for access to the public sphere. Losing the battle can simply mean not becoming a dominant narrative voice. Depending on which actor or group of actors—grouped in the civil-rights and the law-and-order coalitions—have the greater access to the media, the symbolic battle is expected to turn in favor of either the police or the demonstrators. If the police and the government are only a marginal voice in the media, repression is likely to be moderate. In contrast, when these actors gain control of the public sphere, more coercion is expected.

**DATA AND OPERATIONALIZATION**

The data on protest and coercion used in this study originates from a broad study of protest policing in Switzerland. A set of about 2200 public demonstrations that took place in the four largest Swiss cities (Basel, Bern, Geneva, and Zurich) between 1968 and 1994 form the basis for the analyses that follow. Each event is characterized by a number of variables, both referring to the characteristics of the event and the behavior of the police during that event. The data was collected mainly in local police archives in the four cities. We acknowledge that police records have potential methodological problems such as a descriptive bias reflecting the interests and purposes of the institution. The police are likely to stress the lawfulness of their actions and the unlawfulness of protesters in such documents. Nevertheless, it is still possible to identify the kinds of behavior the police stress as justifying criminal charges and/or the kinds of charges the bring against protesters.

Data regarding media attention stem from two different sources. First, the Swiss protest-policing project included data on the coverage of protest events in several newspapers. Variables pertaining to the extent of coverage were coded for each event (the size of the press report, the location within the newspaper, etc.). Second, we made use of a separate dataset of the press reaction to 50 violent protests that occurred in Bern, Geneva, and Zurich between 1968 and 1998. These data were drawn from the content of newspaper descriptions (narratives) and the speakers that were granted access as narrative voices. The coded events were relatively similar. For example, all cases included the use of tear gas or rubber bullets by the police. The local newspapers selected in each city included both progressive and conservative political orientations. About 300 newspaper articles were collected. Each article contained information on the main label given to protesters (youth, rowdies, etc.), on the label given to the action (riot, accident, etc.), on the “speakers” (i.e., those explicitly named by the journalist as the discourse’s source), and on the space given in the article to their speech (i.e., the number of lines devoted to their speech over the article’s total number of lines).

The variables used in the empirical analyses, as well as their operationalization, are as follows:

1. **Protest policing.** This is our dependent variable. As we focus on repression as a specific state response to protest, we created three dummy variables measuring different levels of repression. The first indicator measures police intervention during a demonstration regardless of the protesters’ behavior. The second indicator defines the policing style, which is legalistic (as

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3 This research project was financed by the Swiss national fund and conducted by Dominique Wisler.
opposed to tolerant) when the police intervention occurs prior to any violence from the protesters’ side. That is, they intervene against illegal but peaceful protest actions (occupations, unauthorized demonstrations, traffic blockades, etc.). The third indicator measures the intensity of repression through the use of rubber bullets, a coercive means considered as controversial in Switzerland.4

2. Configuration of power. While in all Swiss cantons legislative powers regarding the police lies in the cantonal parliaments, some cantonal constitutions delegate police powers to municipal governments. This is the case in Bern and Zurich, which created large municipal police forces in charge of maintaining the public order within the city territory, while in Geneva and Basel there is only one cantonal police force. This complicated institutional configuration means that different levels of governments are involved in public order depending both on the city and on the type of power (executive or legislative), and has implications for our various measures of the configuration of power. Our first indicator of the configuration of power refers to the strength of the civil-rights coalition in the executive (cantonal or municipal depending on the city). It is a percentage of the seats held by the coalition in these governments. The members of the civil-rights coalition are the social democrats, the communists, the new left parties, and the green party. The second measure is the strength of this coalition in the cantonal parliaments (percentage of seats). We added a dummy variable for the police head, indicating whether the police department is headed by the right (1) or by the left (0). Fourth, we have a measure of the overt support given to protesters when they demonstrate. It is a dummy variable coded 1 when the supporting coalition is formed by outsiders such as parties not represented in the local government or citizen's associations, and 0 when it is formed by established actors such as governmental parties or unions. This variable is an indicator of the actual degree of support given to demonstrators by members of the civil-rights coalition for each event, whereas the first three variables measure a supposed or potential level of support.

3. Political culture. Based on further work on political discourse in the four cities involved in this study, we distinguish between two groups of cities (Wisler and Kriesi 1998, Wisler and Tackenberg 1998). In Geneva and Basel the dominant discourse identifies public order with social peace, whereas in Zurich and Bern public order is framed in the tradition of as the respect of the Rechtsstaat or rule of law. The resulting dummy variable gets the code 1 for the Rechtsstaat political culture.

4. Protest. The fourth set of variables pertain to the protesters’ characteristics and behavior. Several measures of disruption during demonstrations were created following the same procedure for repression. Specifically, we use three dummy variables indicating increasing intensity of disruption. First, we use a measure of violence, which includes damages both following or prior to a police charge or, in other words, both reactive and proactive violence. Second, because we are interested in the impact of disruption on repression, we need a measure that allows us to establish who set in motion the radicalization process, that is, whether the protesters have used violence proactively or reactively. The original dataset, which includes the interaction chain between police and protesters for each disorderly event, allows us to know which of the two actors made use of violence first. The proactive variable indicates that the violence was initiated by demonstrators.

To measure the intensity of protest we use the number of participants (i.e., the size of demonstrations). This variable is transformed in its natural logarithm. We also use a measure of types of social movements. Following Kriesi et al. (1995), instrumental movements act mainly with a strategic purpose, whereas countercultural movements put a stronger emphasis on the

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4 The local legislature in Zurich has attempted twice to ban rubber bullets, once in 1981 and again in 1991 after a demonstrator lost one eye due to a rubber bullet. However, as the executive is in charge of the public order, the federal court decided that the ban was unconstitutional.
(re)production of a collective identity, which become reinforced through confrontational interaction with other parties. This variable will provide us with a basis for the discussion of the media spotlight. A rather strong variation of protest policing across movement types can be accounted for by dominant representations in the public sphere.

5. Media attention. We created an indicator of press coverage as a proxy for public attention to protesters and the police. It is a numeric variable measuring the size of articles reporting on public demonstrations in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) and Der Bund. The article size is coded as a percentage of a full page in the newspaper. The bigger the articles, the more intense the spotlight of public attention. Our data on the NZZ concerns the full set of demonstrations, but the data of Der Bund is limited to the city of Bern. Data on the coverage of protest were collected in both newspapers through the consultation of the daily issues throughout the period considered (1968-1994).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND PROTEST POLICING

We begin our analysis by testing the impact on protest policing of variables pertaining to the configuration of power, political culture, and the movement characteristics. Table 1 yields results from logistic regression analysis for our three measures of repression on these three sets of factors. As the police intervene only insofar as there is some level of disorder, we have selected those actions in which disorders were present.

In general, we find weak support for the configuration of power argument. For none of our measures of coercion do the strength of the civil-rights coalition in the executive or the political affiliation of the head of the police department matter. The strength of the civil-rights coalition in the parliament is found to have a positive impact on the use of rubber bullets. However, this impact is negligible and disappears when controlled by the time factor. Rubber bullets were introduced in public order operations in Swiss cities only in 1980, and this recent introduction is correlated with a growth of the social democrats in the last twenty years. However, this relationship is artificial, as the social democrats (and the civil-rights coalition in general) controlled none of the parliaments under consideration. In the municipal parliament of Zurich, where they were in majority between 1990 and 1994, the social democrats sponsored a motion asking for the rubber bullets to be outlawed. The motion, supported by more than 60% of the municipal parliament, failed because, as we mentioned earlier, in Zurich public order competencies lie in the hands either of the municipal executive or of the cantonal parliament. In other words, due to the level of government involved in protest policing, the social democrats could not translate their recent gains in municipal parliaments into softer styles of repression.

Another reason why a stronger social democratic party seems unable to influence protest policing styles lies in the internal division of the party with regard to public order policies. Indeed, the 1980-81 violent protest campaign we analyze below produced major tensions within the party and, in Basel, even a formal split. In Basel, the socialist head of the police adopted a repressive line during this campaign and, strongly antagonized by the party’s left wing, decided in 1982 to create a new dissident socialist party. In Zurich, the party nearly split in the aftermath of the same protest wave. The progressive-oriented party headquarters withdrew their support of the four socialists seating in the city executive, arguing that they had supported the repressive policy of the bourgeoisie. The party presented new candidates in the
Table 1. Logistic Regression of Three Measures of Repression on Selected Independent Variables (Odds ratios)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Police Intervention</th>
<th>Legalistic Policing Style</th>
<th>Use of Rubber Bullets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Configuration of power:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of civil-rights coalition in executive</td>
<td>1.01 (.00)</td>
<td>0.99 (.00)</td>
<td>0.99 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of civil-rights Coalition in parliament</td>
<td>1.02 (.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.06* (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of police (1 = right)</td>
<td>1.14 (.00)</td>
<td>1.63 (.03)</td>
<td>0.72 (.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting coalition (1 = outsiders)</td>
<td>0.87 (.00)</td>
<td>2.00+ (.04)</td>
<td>0.92 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political culture:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order tradition (1 = Rechtsstaat)</td>
<td>1.43 (.00)</td>
<td>2.65*** (.08)</td>
<td>9.53*** (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movement-related variables:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence (1 = proactive)</td>
<td>0.07*** (.20)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.20 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>0.01 (.00)</td>
<td>1.11 (.00)</td>
<td>1.07 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement type (1 = countercultural)</td>
<td>0.70** (.09)</td>
<td>1.47+ (.04)</td>
<td>2.91*** (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>49.74</td>
<td>591.76</td>
<td>604.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² (Nagelkerke)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degrees of freedom</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>765</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The natural logarithm has been used for the number of participants in demonstrations. Standardized coefficients in brackets. *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; + p < .10

1982 city executive election, but they were all defeated. After these events, the conservative wing regained the upper hand within the party.

The political culture dimension of POS has a greater impact on forms of coercion. As we expected, a Rechtsstaat culture in Bern and Zurich translates into a more legalistic approach to disorders. The likelihood that police forces in these two cities are going to disperse an illegal but peaceful protest action increases by a factor of 2.6 as compared to Geneva and Basel. This difference is even more striking when we look at the use of rubber
bullets, which is employed almost ten times more in the “legalistic” cities. In fact, rubber bullets have never been used in Geneva. The more tolerant protest-policing culture in this city can be further explained by the dramatic events of November 9, 1932, when the Swiss army shot thirteen demonstrators dead at an antifascist rally. This has been actively and strategically memorialized the left ever since. Following the controversy that resulted from this intervention, the social democrats took the majority of seats in the cantonal government for the first time in the history of the canton. According to the police head in Geneva, the symbolic legacy of November 1932 makes it politically impossible and even suicidal for a police head to order to fire rubber bullets on demonstrators today (see Tackenberg and Wisler 1998).

What about movement-related variables? We can see in table 1 that a police intervention is more likely when violence is initiated by demonstrators than when illegal but peaceful protest activities are involved. However, proactive violence does not influence the use of rubber bullets. Movement type is the factor that has the most consistent impact on protest-policing style. Countercultural movements experience more repression as measured by all three indicators. First, controlling for proactive violence, they are 1.7 times more likely to be subject to a police intervention than instrumental movements. Second, police forces display a more legalistic behavior with this kind of movement. Finally, when facing countercultural movements, police forces show much less restraint about the use of rubber bullets. Indeed, they are almost three times more likely to fire rubber bullets.

In sum, our data suggest that substantial electoral gains by the social democrats at the city level have not translated into softer protest policing styles because of the insulation of the city parliaments from the decision-making process with regard to public-order policies. Moreover, there is a strong conservative wing in the Swiss social democratic party, a wing which has traditionally supported the law-and-order posture of the right. The political culture dimension of the POS has more explanatory power. The legalistic styles of the Zurich and Bern police forces mirror a dominant Rechtsstaat tradition in these cities. Moreover, historical events seem to set constraints on coercive means. Rubber bullets are banned from Geneva as a result of the thirteen demonstrators shot dead by the Swiss army in 1932. Finally, we find that movement characteristics influence the style of protest policing. In particular, we observe a clear tendency of all police forces to be more repressive against countercultural movements. We now turn to the media spotlight in an attempt to account for that.

MEDIA SPOTLIGHT AND PROTEST POLICING

In this section, we would like to suggest that in choosing their strategy the police respond in part to what we have called the media spotlight. We will first see how the different levels of coercion experienced by instrumental and countercultural movements can be seen as a systematic outcome of the symbolic battle waged by either of these two movements. Second, we will discuss how changes in media attention affect the level and forms of repression.

Using data pertaining to public discourse on violent protest events, we can observe the existence of a systematic descriptive bias of the press in favor of instrumental social movements. This bias can be seen from different angles: the relative amount of editorial space devoted to grievances and violence, the main labels used to frame disorders, and the relative access to the press of police and protest groups as speakers. Table 2 shows that the spotlight of the media focuses on grievances when instrumental movements are involved and on violent confrontation with police forces in the case of countercultural movements. Indeed, instrumental movements’ grievances receive 38% of the editorial space, those of countercultural movements only 13%. By stressing grievances, the press attempts to make sense of the violence by focusing on the deeper structural problems faced by the social group.
This discursive strategy is familiar to the civil-rights coalition. In contrast, the almost exclusive focus on disorders in the case of the countercultural groups decontextualizes the protest, emphasizes the public-order problem, and stigmatizes the law-breaking behavior of demonstrators. This strategy, in turn, uses cultural resources of the law-and-order scenario described earlier.

Table 3 shows that instrumental movements are less likely to be stigmatized in the press. When an assessment about the nature of violence is made, the most recurrent frames
in the case of instrumental protest either stress the globally peaceful character of the demonstration (27%) or, more frequently, propose an explanation of the violence as the outcome of an escalation process (42%). A recurrent image is that violence erupted after provocative behaviors on the part of the police or their tactical mistakes. These frames are typically sponsored by the civil-rights coalition. The main frames used by the press in the case of countercultural movements are quite different. The press either adopts a “proactive violence” frame, which emphasizes protesters' intention in staging the violence, or amplifies the actual violence level by using the label of “riot.” In both instances, no specific wrongdoing is attributed to the police and demonstrators are portrayed as the problem.

Finally, as table 4 illustrates, the article space obtained by different types of speakers varies greatly across social movements. Police and authorities (usually, the head of the police department) are rather a marginal narrative voice when instrumental movements are involved. Compared to the protesters and their allies, they obtain respectively 20% and 52% of the space. The opposite occurs for countercultural movements. Here police and authorities have a clear advantage over the other camp. They get 38% of the editorial space, as compared to 29% for protesters and their allies. A more detailed analysis indicates that the more traditional the protest group, the less the media are available to police and authorities. For example, in the case of farmers, police and authorities get only 13% of the editorial space.

Because the police are typically the dominant narrative voice when it comes to framing countercultural protest, they do not fear public criticism when they engage in confrontations against such groups. Furthermore, the police feel it is legitimate to use coercive means against countercultural groups to restore the public order. In contrast, because the

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5 Results not shown in the table.
police are systematically excluded as a public, narrative voice when dealing with instrumental protest, they refrain from using overt repression. Disregarding the rules of the media game can be quite costly for the police. They run the risk of becoming the target of public criticism, and losing both prestige and material resources.

Two relatively recent examples illustrate this point. The first example regards a large rally commemorating the anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident on April 24, 1987. 40,000 people marched into the streets of Bern and, after a group attempted to follow a prohibited route and initial incidents occurred at the police line, the crowd was dispersed by the massive use of tear gas and rubber bullets. The police action provoked a public outcry. One of the leading national newspapers titled suggestively: “The Catastrophe of Bern” (Tages-Anzeiger, April 26, 1987). The event had also political consequences. The local parliament in Bern was filled with motions condemning the police. The Swiss conference of the heads of justice (a coordinating body of the cantonal justice ministries) asked the police to revise their doctrine and set a number of procedures for the use of tear gas in order to prevent similar events from being repeated. The second example is another event in Bern which took place October 1996. The police dispersed a large demonstration of farmers after incidents occurred in front of the federal government building. More than 350 tear gas grenades were used. Once again, the mass media were very critical of the police. The media carried pictures of scared children and “burned” demonstrators for several days. Even the conservative NZZ—which usually a supporter of the law-and-order coalition—adopted a civil-rights scenario and did not hesitate to speak of “police provocation.” Following the controversy, two cantons (Geneva and Vaud) took steps to outlaw the use of tear gas.

Losing the symbolic battle in the public sphere results in a loss of prestige and, sometimes, of resources. Aware that their chances are poor to be heard in cases of instrumental movements, the police are cautious. Their actions are designed basically to avoid controversy. In contrast, as they are in a better position to impose their view on disorders involving countercultural movements, the police feel more legitimate to exert higher levels of repression. They perceive public tolerance towards countercultural disorders as low, and this translates into the adoption of a tougher line.

The police do not necessarily react only to winning scenarios in the public sphere; but, as Gamson (1990) pointed out, they are also likely to adopt a more cautious stance in the presence of journalists and, especially, in front of television cameras. We do not have data on the actual presence of journalists and television crews during protest events, but we can test a related argument that a diminishing media spotlight in the past is likely to result in increased repression. To ascertain this effect, we examine a protest campaign for autonomous youth centers that lasted from May 1980 to April 1982 in two of the four cities included in our study: Zurich and Bern. Based on police archives, we counted 73 demonstrations in Zurich and 31 in Bern. About half of these events turned violent.

To ascertain the impact of time on the level of press attention during the protest campaign in the cities under study, we conducted OLS regressions of the press coverage of protest on time, controlling for news value factors (table 5). The analyses are performed on the extent of coverage of the protest wave in the NZZ. In the case of Bern, we consider the coverage in the local newspaper Der Bund. The first column shows results for the whole period and the four cities. The analysis is replicated in the second column, but only

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6 In other Swiss cities, like Geneva and Basel, the movement did also mobilize, but at lower levels.

7 In another study based on the same sample of protest events, the main factors affecting press coverage were: violence, the number of participants, and the location of protest (Barranco and Wisler 1999).
Mobilization

for the protest wave. In the third and fourth columns, the analysis is restricted to the protest waves in Zurich (NZZ) and Bern (Der Bund). Over the whole 1965-1994 period, the size of articles in the NZZ appears to have slightly reduced. This can be explained by a diminishing news value of protest over time. However, the overall contribution of this factor to the selection of news is small (R=.044). While marginal in ordinary circumstances (as compared to the other factors), time becomes crucial in the case of a protest campaign. Press coverage is very intense at the beginning of the campaign and then declines progressively. This pattern can be observed across sources. Time ranks second after the number of participants in predicting the size of an article. The small number of observations may explain why the coefficients are not significant in the case of Der Bund. However, the regression coefficient concerning time is similar to that found for the NZZ.

Table 5. OLS Regression of Several Factors on the Size of the Press Coverage of Mass Demonstrations (standardized coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NZZ All Cities (full sample)</th>
<th>NZZ All Cities (campaign)</th>
<th>NZZ Zurich (campaign)</th>
<th>NZZ Bern (campaign)</th>
<th>Der Bund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>.239***</td>
<td>.206***</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>.295***</td>
<td>.352***</td>
<td>.428***</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>-.044***</td>
<td>-.248***</td>
<td>-.365***</td>
<td>-.226</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>.273***</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2180</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; + p < .10 The dependent variable is a numeric variable (percent of a full page)

Now we can address our main point: What is the relationship between media spotlight and levels of repression? Are the police, as Gamson (1990) argued, more vulnerable under the spotlight of the mass media? Do we see a shift in police practices when protest becomes a blind spot in the public sphere? Figure 2 displays the evolution of the size of press articles in the NZZ, the level of police intervention, and the frequency of rubber bullet use. It allows us to observe the changes that occurred during the protest wave in Zurich. Generally

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8 The article size is coded as a percentage of a full page in the NZZ. The natural logarithm is applied to the dependent variable in order to correct for its skewed distribution and to the number of participants. Violence is a dummy variable. City measures the distance from Zurich (Zurich=1, Bern=2, Basel=3, Geneva=4). Time is a continuous variable indicating the day of occurrence of the event.

9 The size of the press report is measured in decimals (1 means that the press report covers one full page). Police intervention is the fraction of events in which dispersion by the police occurred. The use of rubber bullets is the fraction of events in which rubber bullets were used.
speaking, we see that media coverage increased rapidly in the early months of the campaign but decreased more or less progressively later on. Repression appears to be somewhat inconsistent during the first months of the campaign, when rubber bullets were used sporadically and police interventions were not systematic—a pattern that has also been observed by Karstedt-Henke (1980) in the 1968 protest wave in Germany. In later stages, repression became increasingly consistent and intensive. If we look closely at the figure, we can see that an increase in press coverage in September 1980 is immediately followed by a dramatic decrease in repression in the following months, when the average size of articles decreases sharply. Later on, the decline in the intensity of the media spotlight is followed by quite a spectacular increase in repression. In addition, despite the intensification of repression in the later stage of the wave, the press does not renew its attention to the protest. Police repression is no longer highlighted by the media spotlight. During this later phase, it goes almost unobserved.

Table 6 shows results of a formal test of the relationship between media spotlight and repression using monthly aggregates of our measures of repression, violence, and the intensity of press coverage.\textsuperscript{10} We control this relationship for the level of past violence and the current amount of coverage of protest. The only significant effect is between past levels of media attention and repression. When protest becomes more like a blind spot in the press, repression increases. This pattern can be observed for two measures of repression: the proportion of interventions in situations of disorders and the use of rubber bullets. The shorter the press articles at time $t_{-1}$, the more likely the police are to decide to repress disorders and to use more controversial coercive means such as rubber bullets at time $t_0$. In both cases, the model explains about one quarter of the variance. Current levels of media attention and past levels of violence do not significantly influence the use of coercion.

\textsuperscript{10} We acknowledge that the choice of the month as the time-unit is partly arbitrary and linked to the specific case under study. In the case of Zurich, each month had an average of about three events, and we consider that to be a minimum number for the police to monitor a clear shift in public attention.
The demobilization and radicalization processes observed in the protest campaign in Zurich seem to be the result of the combination of decreasing media spotlight and increasing repression. In the later stages of the campaign, protest became more costly not only in terms of repression, but also in terms of public opinion. As a result, many protesters withdrew, while those who persevered became increasingly engaged in violent confrontations with police forces.

CONCLUSION

Media attention is an important factor explaining the policing of protest. When the mass media focus on a protest campaign, the police, as was predicted by Gamson (1990), tend to refrain from using overt repression. In contrast, when protest becomes a blind spot in the public sphere, the likelihood of repression increases. Moreover, social movements that are unable to make their voice heard in the public sphere are also more likely to experience repression than movements enjoying a better access in the mass media. The police, in other words, modulate their action in response to the systematic outcome of the symbolic battle that affects protest movements and varies across them. When the police disregarded public opinion, they paid a heavy price in terms of prestige and resources. Our data suggest that they have learned from these experiences.

As we argued in the introductory section, the importance of the mass media has probably increased over the years. Becoming more professional, the police have differentiated themselves from politics and are now in a better position to modulate their strategy in accordance to public opinion. The importance of mass media may have increased over the years for yet another reason. Indeed, the police seem to have lost the natural advantage they enjoyed in the past when it comes to interpret public order problems. The relative weight of the police as a public voice has diminished dramatically over the last thirty years in Switzerland (Wisler and Tackenberg 1998). To remedy this deficit, they increasingly resort to public relations. As many recent studies suggest (e.g., Waddington 1993; McPhail et al. 1998), the tendency of police to deploy preventive and negotiating strategies more frequently can also be interpreted as a response to their diminishing role as the dominant interpreters of public disorders.

In this article, we focused on the relationship between mass media and repression. However, the media spotlight influences the tactics adopted by protesters as well. Over the years, protesters have learned to use the mass media in their favor, and this may explain why the heavy clashes with police forces, quite frequent in the 1970s, have now subsided in most Western democracies. The shift to more limited violence, as well as to cheerful, mocking, and/or spectacular actions which are common features of many public demonstrations today, can certainly be interpreted as an adaptation to the mass media. Because provocation is often negatively judged by the press, actions that are more media friendly have become the rule today (see Doherty 1999). The mass media, as much as protest-policing strategies, seem to be part of the constitutive rules of protest repertoires, through various mechanisms that should be further explored.
REFERENCES


