
More than a decade ago Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey demanded that ‘1968’ be turned from a historical event into a topic of historical analysis. Since then student protests in Western Europe and beyond have received enormous academic attention. While early studies tried to understand ‘1968’ as a ‘social movement’, assuming a certain cohesion of events with a collective actor driven by ideas and strategies, the most recent research shows more interest in ambivalences. It frames 1968 as a diffuse and therefore powerful phenomenon, focusing on everyday life, popular culture and media history. Within this framework Meike Vogel has published a PhD thesis, supervised by Gilcher-Holtey, which scrutinizes television coverage of protests in West Germany. Arguing that the mass media not only displayed but actually shaped the events, while in turn the protest movement shaped and changed television, Vogel analyses 1968 as a political communication event (Kommunikationsereignis). However, she also accepts the term ‘movement of 68’ as a suitable label for the events (p. 79). This is one of a number of places where the study lacks clarity. It primarily convinces due to its broad empirical basis and its important theme.

As Vogel rightly points out in her introduction, the connection between ‘1968’ and the media has often been emphasized, if not yet analysed in detail. She herself managed to build a database referring to 380 television broadcasts of the events, 205 of these as audio-visual sources unearthed in a variety of television archives. In addition to this material, Vogel uses written sources such as files on television production and programming, journals and newspapers, as well as publications of the protest movement. Based on this material, the book emphasizes the entanglement between politics and media, while admitting that these spheres are not distinct realms. Culture, the author observes, always has a political dimension, while politics is a communicative act in which subjects try to voice and install their interpretations. The media therefore does not depict political events wrongly or rightly, but rather demands scrutiny as an element of politics itself. This is perfectly plausible but not new, making the effort invested in laying out theoretical assumptions which are not necessarily tallied in the actual analysis appear somewhat surprising.

The first chapter sketches institutional developments within West German television and the debates surrounding it, adding reflections from journalists until the late 1960s. The section provides helpful background information for newcomers to the field, though it relies heavily on secondary literature. One main argument, however, is needed to introduce the following theme: under Allied influence, West German television was established as an institution whose journalists developed a strong sense of independence from state intervention, and a feeling of political obligation to contribute to a democratic society.
Chapter 2 turns from television to the student movement. Which image of mass media did activists have and how did they try to shape media coverage? Vogel argues that the student movement, influenced by political thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas, was primarily marked by a deep scepticism about mass media. The attempt to set up alternative channels of communication (Gegenöffentlichkeit), by-passing the mass media, was not however very successful. Both conclusions seem a bit hasty. That Dutschke, for instance, did not address the camera while in dialogue on TV surely does not mean that the camera had little influence, or that he was unaware of his media presence (p. 130). Rather his actions could be viewed as a staging of intense and earnest face-to-face discussions meant to be seen as witnessed rather than created by mass media. Still, beyond the question of the extent to which strategies existed to influence the media, and how far their detailed goals were reached, a broader argument is more convincing: that the resonance of media activity can hardly be seen as the result of an intentional endeavour.

Media interest was nonetheless tremendous—especially after 2 June 1967, when student Benno Ohnesorg was assassinated by a West German policeman. In Chapter 3 (pp. 133–72) Vogel describes the media coverage of this event and the days surrounding it. While West German television busily reported a state visit by the Shah and his wife, news broke through of students demonstrating against the couple, and later of the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg. Thus the long prepared-for ‘media event’ of a state visit competed with the emerging ‘news event’ surrounding Ohnesorg (p. 136). Coverage of the two events contrasted not only in terms of topic but also in terms of style and narrative form: a ceremonial representation of a state visit emphasizing honour, affirmation, and law and order competed with agitation and scepticism. It was this contrast, Vogel concludes, that produced irritation. It led to a challenge of values as well as to a polarization of the viewing and listening public.

While, in France, student demonstrations were scarcely covered, West German television dedicated many broadcasts to them, making the events especially present during the summers of 1966 and 1968. Chapter 4 analyses these broadcasts and focuses on their ‘visual framing’. Some media depicted the student protests in terms of peace and order (Ruhe und Ordnung), and accordingly presented the students as disturbers of the peace (Ruhestörer). Others framed the events as creative chaos, a ‘healing disorder’ (heilsame Unordnung), thus contributing to a rather more positive image of the actions as a vital force with the power to revitalize West German democracy.

Chapter 5 points out the extent to which both the labelling of the protest movement and its depiction within television were contested and in constant flux. The label ‘extra-parliamentary opposition’, still in use today, was established between 1966 and 1968 even though it was criticized by some student activists and some media journalists alike. But the media themselves were also at stake. Journalists were accused of having fuelled the protests through their coverage. In 1967, and also in 1969, the political role of television was vividly discussed. As a result, and despite many journalists defending their way of covering the events, television stations developed internal rules for ‘proper’ political reporting.

On the whole Vogel successfully presents 1968 as a Kommunikationsereignis in which politics and culture, television and protests, mass media and face-to-face communication were closely intertwined and inspired a dynamic neither foreseen nor controlled by
journalists or activists. Her findings show that while television framed—and to some extent helped create—the student movement, it was deeply challenged and transformed by the protests themselves. Protests and critical television journalism, Vogel notes in her conclusion, might both be seen as beneficiaries and strengtheners of each other.

However, that the events on 2 June 1967 ‘quasi sparked the communication event’ (p. 133) underestimates longer trends within West German communication culture, for example the gradual but lasting appreciation of apparently rational discourse both inside and outside radio and television, which made possible the communication spike around 1968. Taking the role of television seriously, as an actual, if permeable, protagonist of the events, is an approach that could have been taken further, or rather more literally. What do we know about the materiality of outside broadcast vans, strips and microphones? What did this equipment actually look like and what did it ‘do’ when it appeared at a demonstration? To what extent were protests ‘framed’ not only by media narration strategies, but by altered conditions in face-to-face communication once ‘the television’ was present? How were cameras and microphones received by people who—whether or not they were educated in contemporary mass media theory—were simply unused to TV, and possibly intrigued to be appearing on it? And who was actually watching TV at home, and how? Proceeding to questions such as these, future research can profit from the impressive empirical findings and immense database Vogel provides. The work of placing media at the heart of 1968 has only just begun.

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