How Events Enter the Public Sphere: Conflict, Location, and Sponsorship in Local Newspaper Coverage of Public Events

Pamela E. Oliver  
*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

Daniel J. Myers  
*University of Notre Dame*

Protest events occur against the backdrop of public life. Of 382 public events in police records for one year in a small U.S. city, 45% convey a message, 14% involve social conflict, and 13% are standard protest event forms. Local newspapers covered 32% of all events, favoring events that were large, involved conflict, were sponsored by business groups, and occurred in central locations. The more liberal paper also favored rallies and events sponsored by national social movement organizations (SMOs) or recreational groups. Discussion centers on the ways these factors shape the content of the public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Public life happens in public places. In public, people who are not intimates may meet face to face and perhaps influence one another or a wider public. Street theater, street-corner speeches, marches, celebrations, vigils, leafleting, and other kinds of public acts seek to express collective sentiments or influence public opinion. Scholars around the world recognize the importance of public events for the public sphere, the abstract space in which citizens discuss and debate public issues (e.g., Alario 1994; Chaffee 1993; Koenen 1996; Sebastiani 1997). The link between public events and the public sphere is the mass media. Acts staged in public places may seek to influence only the other people in that space: passersby who will hear the speech, song, or chant, or read the signs. But, more often, these public events are oriented not only to those physically present.