

## **Student protests against Israeli action in Gaza: a cross-European analysis of newspaper representations**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

Research into student political activity across Europe has shown how the media can play a key role in shaping how such activity is framed. Newspapers have often focused on the violent nature of student protest, with the effect of diverting attention away from the specific concerns of students, and presenting students, rather than the issues that they were protesting about, as a threat to society. This article develops this analysis – of the role of newspapers in mediating student protests – by focussing on coverage of protests against Israeli action in Gaza, which took place in many European countries in the spring and summer of 2024, inspired by similar action on US campuses. It draws on articles from four European countries to argue, first, that there is considerable cross-national variation in constructions of protesting students; and, second, that it is erroneous to assume that the media always serves to delegitimise student protest.

### **Full paper**

### **Background**

Research into student political activity across Europe has shown how the media can play a key role in shaping how such activity is framed. Indeed, media representations can be understood as symbolic public spaces where struggles over meaning take place (Lainio, 2023). For example, emphasis within the Spanish press on the violent nature of student protest has had the effect of diverting attention away from the specific concerns of students, and presenting students – rather than the issues that they were protesting about – as a threat to society (Brooks et al., 2022). Moreover, press coverage of student political activity in the UK has also tended to construct students as a threat. In this case, however, it is longstanding traditions of intellectual debate that are presented as threatened – from students' desire for 'safe spaces' (spaces for discussion without the threat of violence, harassment or hate speech) and implementation of 'no platforming' (not providing a

platform to a speaker representing ideas deemed to be harmful) (Brooks et al., 2022; Finn et al., 2021).

The current paper develops this analysis – of the role of newspapers in mediating student protests – by focusing on coverage of protests, against Israeli action in Gaza, which took place in many European countries in the spring and summer of 2024. These were inspired by similar action on US campuses, and often involved encampments as well as occupations of university building and demonstrations. Specific student demands of universities differed a little from country to country, but typically included divestment from Israeli firms and the severing of ties with Israeli academic institutions. In many ways, this action differed from that taken by students in the recent past – as it focused on a geopolitical issue rather than one more closely related to higher education. Indeed, rising fees and other aspects of the marketisation of higher education were typically the target of student protests in the 2010s (Brooks, 2017).

## Methods

The article pursues a cross-national comparison by exploring how the protests were covered in newspapers in France, Ireland, Spain and the UK. It thus considers not only the nature of media coverage, but also the extent to which representations differed across national borders. Such an analysis is important because, as various scholars have argued, journalists not only reflect dominant understandings of what it means to be a student, but can also ‘help reconstruct ways of being a student for new generations’ (Williams, 2011, p.170). Specifically, it draws upon 90 newspaper articles from France, Ireland, Spain and the UK that were published between March 2024 and March 2025 (see Table 1). The articles in French and Spanish were translated into English, and all were then imported into NVivo. A thematic analysis was conducted using both inductive and deductive approaches. Each national set of articles was analysed in turn, comparing articles from newspapers from different political positions. Comparisons were then made between the four nations.

Table 1. Details of sample

Country	No. of articles analysed	No. of newspapers represented in sample	Average word length of articles
France	14	9	880
Ireland	18	5	691
Spain	15	2	802

UK	43	9	976
TOTAL	90	25	-

**Findings**

Across the 90 newspaper articles, students were constructed in quite divergent ways, to some extent reflecting the contradictory discourses that have been identified by other scholars (e.g. Conner, 2020; Lainio, 2023). While some of these differences can be attributed to the political persuasion of the paper (with left-leaning publications tending to be more sympathetic to the student protests than their right-leaning counterparts), many were associated with the country in which the paper was published. Indeed, three main responses can be identified: one which presented an almost wholly positive interpretation of student action, couched in celebratory tones, found in Ireland and Spain; a second, evident in France, which was also reasonably sympathetic to students, but often subsumed their action within wider concerns, with a focus on national political actors; and a third, which was much more critical of students, manifest in right-leaning newspapers in the UK (which constituted the majority of the UK sample).

Two key arguments are made on the basis of these findings: first, that there is considerable cross-national variation in constructions of protesting students, raising questions about the sometimes-assumed homogenisation of European higher education; and, second, that it is erroneous to assume that the media always serves to delegitimise student protest. In some situations at least, the media can serve to provide more celebratory accounts of student activism; this should be welcomed.