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REPORTING PROTESTS AND
THE PLANETARY EMERGENCY

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Due to declining participation levels in traditional civic organisations such as political parties and trade unions, protests have become in liberal democracies a way for citizens to mobilise identities, strengthen collective solidarity and make visible their concerns and demands in the hope of securing social change. Protests are expressions of contentious collective action, and aim to reconfigure public discourse boundaries by outlining what is possible and appropriate to see and say (Lester and Cottle, 2022). They are especially relevant for groups that lack both time and material resources to channel their claims institutionally, who perceive themselves as far from the centres of power, and who are suspicious of state bureaucracy (Stokes, 2020).

Although governments, politicians and academics often talk about the 'right to protest' as an essential component of civic life, that right is not absolute. Authorities restrict it using excuses such as maintaining public order, protecting national security, and preventing crime. Those in power consequently hold that protests are a valid method of political expression as long as they are 'peaceful' (Butler, 2020; Wall, 2023). Some scholars have echoed this view, arguing that non-violent demonstrations have proved to be more successful than violent ones, and that the latter undermine long-term structural change,

discourage potential supporters' engagement and crystalise opposite positions (Fishman, 2024).

The contingent nature of collective action, and the attempts by governments to control and deactivate it, nonetheless make it difficult to objectively agree on what 'peaceful' or non-violent protests are, especially when activists rely on a 'logic of damage' to make their grievances visible (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Such logic encompasses an array of often law-breaking actions, from traditional non-violent civil disobedience to more radical deeds (Scheuerman, 2022). Complicating matters further, authorities usually ignore 'peaceful' expressions of dissent and draw on ever-expanding definitions of 'violence' to clamp down on civil liberties (Doran, 2017; Moss, 2022). As Butler notes, '[s]tates and institutions sometimes call 'violent' any number of expressions of political dissent, or of opposition to the state or the authority of the institution in question' (Butler, 2020, p. 2). Are consequently marches, sit-ins and strikes a disruption to everyday life or a valid political expression? Is blocking traffic, gluing oneself to a road or throwing soup at a work of art a crime or the exercise of a right? And if these actions are crimes, should only law-abiding demonstrations, previously coordinated with the police – but also predictable and easy to contain – be allowed?

Recent discussions on this topic have looked closely at environmental movements (e.g. Moss, 2022; Scheuerman, 2022; Berglund, 2023). In the UK, groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil – all formed between 2018 and 2022– have been both celebrated and condemned for their reliance on 'non-violent civil disobedience' to call for governments and corporations to urgently act on the climate crisis. Their actions have included slow marching, blocking traffic, gluing themselves to bridges or buildings, vandalising works of art in museums and galleries, interrupting media events, tunnelling under construction works, and being arrested by the police, among others (Berglund, 2023; Fagerholm, Göransson, Thompson and Hedvall, 2023). Recent conservative British governments were highly critical of these activists, calling them 'shameful', 'attention seekers' and 'irresponsible crusties', and expanded police powers to criminalise many of their tactics (Moss, 2022; Cristiano et al., 2023).

'Peaceful' or not, protests are essentially acts of communication, with individuals publicly gathering to direct attention to a cause (Wall, 2023). Failure or success to communicate grievances therefore happen not only on the streets but also in and through forms of media. Yet the media – understood as technologies and organisations – are a contested field, where authorities, activists,

journalists, corporations and other actors construct and circulate competing frames and understandings about the legality and legitimacy of collective action, as in the case of environmental activism (Lester and Cottle, 2022; Russell, 2023). The media are consequently an arena where the goals and aims of social movements are supported, discarded or ignored, as well as a space where 'the discursive battle about what is defined as "peaceful" and what as "illegal" or "violent"' (Terwindt, 2014, p. 165) occurs.

This chapter examines these tensions by looking at the visibility of protests by XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil on legacy and social media in the UK. Drawing on 74 television reports and 1,112 Instagram posts from between 2019 and 2023, the chapter scrutinises the different frames employed by news organisations and environmental activists to represent collective action. The findings show that both news organisations and activists emphasised disruption and depicted protesters as the main source of disorder, thereby stressing the *form* rather than the *content* of protests. This is an important limitation, which risks obscuring more complex debates on the climate crisis. Despite this shortcoming, the fact that activists provided visibility to – and acknowledged responsibility for – their own disruptive actions, sheds light on important questions about the limits of collective action in liberal democracies, especially in a context in which states are increasingly criminalising and restraining public expressions of dissent and defiance.

The contested legitimacy of collective action

The right to protest is considered a cornerstone of liberal democracy but its boundaries are difficult to outline. In the case of the UK, there is no explicit right to protest, yet the European Convention of Human Rights – incorporated into UK law through the 1988 Human Rights Act – protects freedom of assembly and expression (Moss, 2022). In practice however, the legitimacy and legality of collective action is highly contingent, and depends on a combination of factors, such as grievances, political opportunities, protesters' tactics, as well as demonstrators' ability to direct and sustain visibility to their causes (Della Porta, 2008; Cammaerts, 2015; Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018). Protests and state responses to them have also become increasingly complex. Activists have expanded their *repertoires of contention*, relying not only on marches, boycotts and strikes, but also on symbolic tactics and digital self-mediation (della Porta, 2023). In parallel, the *repertoires of containment* of the police have become multifaceted. Security forces have nowadays a broader range of

techniques to deal with collective action, from repression and escalated force to 'softer' and more paternalistic approaches, such as negotiated management, non-lethal weapons, preventive arrests and increased surveillance (della Porta and Reiter, 1998; Gillham, 2011).

The above debates point to a deeper friction in liberal democracies, namely the tension between order and liberty. From the perspective of order, protests can effectively give visibility to marginalised groups and potentially act as correctives for democratic shortcomings. Yet on occasions they represent an unpremeditated, violent threat to liberal institutions, that may even overthrow democratically elected governments (Stokes, 2020; Fishman, 2024). Peace and tranquillity should therefore be prioritised when there is tension. From the perspective of liberty, although violence pitched directly at individuals is condemned, law-breaking actions targeted at property are seen as legitimate tactics that increase the visibility of a specific cause (Scheuerman, 2022). Moreover, demonstrations arranged in coordination with the police can be easily neutralised, and containment tactics based on negotiated management may be disguised attempts at surveillance and control (Gillham, 2011; Gilmore, Jackson and Monk, 2019). Hence, 'peaceful' expressions of collective action do not guarantee that grievances will become visible.

The unresolved tensions of what constitutes legal and or legitimate dissent are nonetheless exploited by those in power. In the UK, the 2023 Public Order Act increased police powers by establishing that causing serious disruption by tunnelling or locking-on, obstructing major transport works and interfering with key national infrastructure – all actions employed by environmental movements – are serious criminal offences (Cristiano et al., 2023; Nickolls, 2023). This legislation has been criticised by lawyers, scholars, journalists, NGOs and transnational organisations, arguing that the new punitive measures are highly disproportionate (Moss, 2022). United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, stated that the legislation was 'deeply troubling' and mostly targeted individuals taking part in peaceful demonstrations about human rights and environmental issues (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023).

Former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak justified this legislation as a means to protect the 'lives of the ordinary public' from disruptions caused by a 'small minority' (Prime Minister's Office, 2023). Yet in the same speech he stressed that the right to protest was 'a fundamental principle of our democracy'. Consequently, in the UK and elsewhere, governments navigate the tension between criminalising and protecting the right to protest by categorising

demonstrators into two groups. On the one hand, they identify 'bad' protesters, who are allegedly young, driven by crime and disruption, and draw on law-breaking tactics. On the other hand, they describe 'good' protesters as supposedly workers and families, who are driven by clear and 'noble' ends, and rely on law-abiding and predictable tactics (della Porta, 1998; Gillham, 2011; Gilmore et al., 2019). Yet this distinction is based on a short-term perspective, acknowledged by environmental activists (Scheuerman, 2022), which prioritises the maintenance and protection of current social, political and economic arrangements, at the expense of ignoring the slow-burn, long-term, and all-encompassing world threat of the climate and ecological crisis (Cottle, 2023).

The mediated visibility of protest

The media have become essential technologies and institutions to manage the visibility of collective action, with consequences for authorities' responses, audiences' perceptions, and the tactics adopted or abandoned by demonstrators (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019). Those who do not take part directly in protests, become aware of them in and through different kinds of media, and what is shown or concealed through these media is key to enhancing or undermining the legality and legitimacy of protests (Cammaerts, 2024). At the same time, the media have a key role in communicating environmental issues, ideally warning and informing, but often ignoring or marginalising, the climate crisis and wider planetary emergency (Cottle, 2023)

Legacy news organisations still have a wide reach and remain a battleground for narratives produced by authorities, activists, corporations and ordinary citizens on both protests and the climate crisis (Lester and Cottle, 2022; Russell, 2023). In the case of activism, scholars have noted that news media often draw on a 'protest paradigm', a set of journalistic frames that marginalise the causes driving people on to the streets, while heightening the visibility of disruption and violence by demonstrators (McLeod and Hertog, 1999). These frames predominantly underscore the drama and sensationalism of specific, 'episodic' stories centred on riots, confrontations with the police and the oddness or carnival atmosphere of demonstrations. Although more legitimising frames, which give visibility to 'thematic' stories about context and grievances, can potentially emerge, these are infrequent (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019; Wouters, 2015). It is noteworthy that legacy news reporting on the climate crisis echoes the above approach, with an emphasis on specific, isolated 'newsworthy' events instead of broader, complex and long-term perspectives (Cottle, 2023).

While the 'protest paradigm' remains the default analysis position to examine the mediated visibility of unrest (Harlow and Brown, 2023), recent scholarship has called for subtler perspectives. As Cottle (2008) asks, '[d]o the media always, invariably and necessarily impose "definitions of the situation" on protests and dissent which de-legitimize the protesters' aims and coincide with dominant interests?' (p. 856). Studies have provided nuanced answers to that question, observing that legacy media, both local and foreign, occasionally recognise the legitimacy of demonstrations, including those focussed on environmental topics (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Cammaerts, 2024). They have also noted that the reliance of legacy media on legitimising or delegitimising narratives is contingent (Harlow, Kilgo, Salaverría and García-Perdomo, 2020), and that the interests of news organisations may conflict with those of authorities (Shahin, Zheng, Sturm and Fadnis, 2016).

The protest paradigm also assumes that journalistic emphases on damage distort the supposedly 'peaceful' nature of protests, and that a focus on disruption necessarily leads to delegitimisation (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Yet this perspective glosses over how activists, as part of their repertoires of contention, occasionally act outside of the law, as environmental groups have done (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Scheuerman, 2022). Moreover, citizens sometimes justify 'non-peaceful' protests for being more efficient than 'peaceful' ones (Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018). Authorities in turn, as part of their repertoires of containment, use the excuse of 'violence' to justify restrictions on civil rights and neutralise collective action, as has been seen in the UK and elsewhere (Doran, 2017; Moss, 2022).

Environmental protests in UK television and Instagram

Studies on protest news coverage frequently examine newspapers, overlooking how television is a more popular source of news (Robertson, Chirioiu and Ceder, 2019). In the UK, despite declining audiences, television remains the most consumed and trusted legacy source of news, way above print media (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson and Nielsen, 2023). Television features such as the focus on images, personalisation, simplification and the emphasis on episodic stories, seem to favour a fragmented, dramatic and spectacular version of the world rather than a broader, nuanced and thoughtful picture (Cottle, 2023; García-Perdomo, Magaña, Hernández-Rodríguez and Ventín-Sánchez, 2023). Scholars have noted however that television, especially in societies with

public broadcasters, has the *potential* to avoid these marginalising features, for instance, by shedding light on grievances driving collective action as well as by glossing over political and corporate interests seeking to downplay the climate crisis (Wouters, 2015; Debrett, 2017).

The above observations are important in the UK context, where television is characterised by a mixture of a strong public service broadcaster, namely the BBC, and commercial stations – both publicly and privately owned – such as ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. British television is highly regulated, with newscasts expected to be impartial, fair and balanced, although BBC is under greater scrutiny than commercial broadcasters (Cushion, Kilby, Thomas, Morani and Sambrook, 2018). Activists nonetheless approach television – and legacy media in general – with suspicion. They often rely on self-mediation tactics, such as flyers, posters, theatre, community radio and digital platforms, in order to coordinate actions, make grievances visible, provide supposedly more balanced viewpoints, and direct attention to episodes of police abuse (Lester and Cottle, 2022; Cammaerts, 2024).

Although digital media were originally praised for apparently facilitating the coordination and communication of collective action (e.g. Shirky, 2008), less celebratory perspectives have emerged in recent years. Scholars have stressed that digital media can be used as instruments of surveillance by authorities, that technology corporations are guided by commercial interests rather than progressive politics, that digital platforms often provide hyper-visibility to voices poisoning debates on the climate crisis, and that activists seeking social media visibility may echo legacy media by stressing the drama and spectacle of protests at the expense of grievances and context (Poell, 2014; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Russell, 2023). Moreover, legacy and digital media have increasingly fuzzy boundaries. Contents produced by mainstream media organisations are accessed and recycled via social media, and audiences often share, comment and contest these contents in and through digital platforms (Chadwick, 2013; García-Perdomo et al., 2023; Cammaerts, 2024). In addition, legacy news organisations have partnered with social media platforms, or have adopted online or hybrid models to deliver their journalistic content (Russell, 2023).

However, differences between legacy and digital media persist. Generational divides remain in terms of consumption, with older audiences preferring legacy media – especially television – and younger ones counting on social media such as Facebook, but increasingly YouTube and Instagram, as sources of news (Newman et al., 2023). Production costs and access to mainstream television remain prohibitive for activists, who continue to rely on digital platforms,

notwithstanding the commercially driven nature of the latter (Poell, 2014). As a result, it is worthwhile to examine how mainstream journalists *represent* environmental protests as well as how activists digitally *self-mediate* their expressions of dissent (see also Cammaerts, 2024).

With that aim, two undergraduate students were trained as research assistants to collect and analyse content from legacy and social media. For television, the 10 p.m. flagship news bulletins of both BBC and ITV were chosen, because these bulletins are the most consumed sources of legacy news in the UK (Newman et al., 2023). Regional newscasts were not considered, in order to focus only on stories broadcast nationally. This coverage was contrasted with self-mediation practices by the official accounts of XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil on Instagram, a visually based platform that has become popular among environmental movements[2] (Fagerholm et al., 2023). Research assistants mapped television reports and Instagram posts produced between January 2019 (a few months after Extinction Rebellion was formed) and June 2023, when the study was conducted.

Data was coded using frames defined after several rounds of inductive analysis, which expanded on those suggested by the protest paradigm (McLeod and Hertog, 1999). They were: (1) *Disruption/Disobedience*, that is, portrayals emphasising deviant, destructive or disobedient behaviour by activists; (2) *Confrontation*, which are clashes between protesters with the police or counterprotesters; (3) *Police Abuse / Arrests*, which is coverage of police brutality, abuses or arrests; (4) *Grievances*, that is mentions of the grievances and goals of these movements; (5) *Calls for Action*, namely attempts to mobilise people to act on the climate crisis; and (6) *Trials/Court Cases*, that is, descriptions of court hearings and trials involving activists. In addition to these frames, research assistants coded who was blamed for disruption or damage, the different types of sources appearing on television and Instagram, and whether stories were 'episodic', that is, focussed on a singular event, or 'thematic', namely depicting grievances and context.

Findings: Disruption and disobedience on legacy and social media

Environmental protests on BBC and ITV

The first relevant observation emerged when mapping the data. During the examined timespan, BBC and ITV broadcast only $N = 74$ (BBC $n = 27$, ITV

$n = 47$) reports in their flagship bulletins. This result was surprising, despite the expectation of finding a smaller number of items in television in comparison to Instagram (see next section). Some disruptive actions, such as when members of XR poured fake blood outside of Downing Street on 9 March 2019 (Mohdin and Carrell, 2019), were not screened on national television, but only in regional bulletins such as BBC London or ITV News London. Hence, British television considered environmental protests only occasionally as newsworthy for the whole country.

Another important finding referred to dominant frames. Echoing the protest paradigm literature (McLeod and Hertog, 1999), broadcasters made dissent visible predominantly through a delegitimising lens, with more than half of all stories framed as *Disruption/Disobedience* (56.8%, $n = 42$). Journalists therefore stressed behaviours considered by the media and/or authorities as disruptive, deviant or criminal. Notwithstanding the emphasis on noise and spectacle, an important number of reports were about *Grievances* (36.5%, $n = 27$). There were also a limited number of stories about *Police Abuse/Arrest* (5.4%, $n = 4$), which focussed on the arrests of demonstrators. Unsurprisingly, neither BBC nor ITV had features calling for people to join protests. It was also noted that there was no news about the court cases that followed the arrests of some activists (Table 4.1).

In line with the above findings, most reports (85.1%, $n = 63$) depicted activists as the main source of actions qualified as disruptive, damaging or criminal. Although demonstrators were sometimes blamed *alongside* the police (5.5%, $n = 4$), the latter were never portrayed as responsible for disruption on their own. A small number of reports did not discuss this topic at all (8.1%, $n = 6$) and on one occasion (1.3%, $n = 1$) other citizens were blamed for disorder or

Table 4.1. Dominant Frames on Television

Dominant frame	Total percentage (%)	Number	BBC (n)	ITV (n)
Disruption/Disobedience	56.8	42	16	26
Grievances	36.5	27	8	19
Police Abuse/Arrest	5.4	4	2	2
Confrontation	1.3	1	1	0
Trials/Court Cases	0.0	0	0	0
Calls for Action	0.0	0	0	0
Total	100.00	74	27	47

damage. The emphasis on the most dramatic facets of dissent was also evident when noting that news items were predominantly episodic (68.9%, n = 51) rather than thematic (31.1%, n = 23). Hence, the coverage on BBC and ITV stressed specific events instead of context, causes and solutions. This is an important observation. In other European countries, public television broadcasters frequently report demonstrations through a thematic lens, which provides visibility to broader issues rather than the spectacle of a single disruptive incident (Wouters, 2015).

The focus on the drama of protests may contradict that, as seen above, more than a third of reports corresponded to the frame *Grievances*. However, news items were generally short, lasting on average around 90 seconds, that is, 1.59 minutes (1.44 minutes on BBC, 1.74 minutes on ITV). It is therefore likely that journalists may have effectively mentioned the reasons driving the actions by XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, but only discussed them in a cursory way. Significantly, although the protest paradigm literature holds that legacy media emphasise official viewpoints to the detriment of demonstrators (McLeod and Hertog, 1999), activists were effectively granted voice and visibility. When looking at source type, protesters were the most prevalent (41.9% of total reports, n = 31), followed by celebrities supporting environmental activists (22.9%, n = 17). Only then politicians and state representatives were quoted (18.9%, n = 14). Yet this attention should not necessarily be equated with securing legitimacy. Legacy news media may provide limited degrees of visibility to expressions of dissent, in order to emphasise their supposedly deviant or 'radical' features (Cammaerts, 2015).

Self-mediation practices on Instagram

In contrast to television, the three environmental movements produced a greater amount of content on Instagram, with a total of N=1,112 posts associated with demonstrations (Insulate Britain n = 158, XR n = 224, Just Stop Oil n = 730). Despite this increased number, frame variations were not that significant. Although the proportion of posts about *Disruption/Disobedience* was lower than television (42.2%, n = 469), these constituted the largest frame chosen by environmental movements. This focus on disruption confirms that activists effectively drew on a 'logic of damage' (Della Porta and Diani, 2006) to direct attention to the climate crisis. Echoing legacy media, the second most used frame was *Grievances* (37.1%, n = 413). Differences were found only in other, less frequent frames. While the proportion of stories about *Police Abuse/*

Arrest (9.4%, *n* = 105) and *Confrontation* (2.0%, *n* = 22) was small, it was still higher than television. In addition, there were posts calling audiences to mobilise (3.4%, *n* = 38), as well as entries focussed on the trials faced by members of the examined movements (5.9%, *n* = 65) (Table 4.2).

Most sources in these posts were protesters themselves (45.9% of all Instagram posts, *n* = 510). They were followed by citizens (4.4%, *n* = 49), experts (2.9%, *n* = 33), police (2.9%, *n* = 32), politicians (1.8%, *n* = 20) and celebrities (1.7%, *n* = 19). This should not come as a surprise. Social movements approach digital media as part of their toolbox to increase the visibility of their causes and goals (Cammaerts, 2024). Hence, rather than pretending to be impartial, balanced and detached in the vein of mainstream journalism, Instagram posts seek to make visible the official viewpoints of XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, only occasionally requiring other voices to support their arguments.

Significantly, the narratives produced by environmental activists were far from sanitised. Most Instagram posts featured demonstrators as the main source of disruption (70.1%, *n* = 779), followed by the police (0.7%, *n* = 8) and other citizens (0.5%, *n* = 6). Although another small, relevant number of stories did not discuss responsibility for disorder at all (25.8%, *n* = 286), the findings suggest that environmental activists portrayed themselves as accountable for their disruptive actions, confirming the importance they give to potentially law-breaking tactics. The focus on disruption can however be a risky strategy. Like legacy media, most Instagram posts were episodic (70.2%, *n* = 781) rather than thematic (29.8%, *n* = 331), and therefore stressed specific events instead of context and grievances. It is nonetheless relevant that only a small number

Table 4.2. Dominant Frames on Social Media

Dominant frame	Total percentage (%)	Number	Extinction rebellion UK (n)	Insulate Britain (n)	Just stop oil (n)
Disruption/ Disobedience	42.2	469	76	63	274
Grievances	37.1	413	116	75	278
Police Abuse/Arrest	9.4	105	16	8	81
Trials/Court Cases	5.9	65	4	7	54
Calls for Action	3.4	38	12	5	21
Confrontation	2.0	22	0	0	22
Total	100.0	1,112	224	158	730

of posts depicted protesters *alongside* the police as the cause of disorders (2.9%, *n* = 33). Hence, although environmental movements directed attention to disruptive tactics, they avoided framing their actions as a violent battle between themselves and security forces (see also Scheuerman, 2022).

Concluding observations: Mirages of democratic participation

A first look at the legacy news media representation of protests by XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, suggests that television newscasts emphasised the most disruptive characteristics of collective action, repeatedly framing protests as deviant and criminal acts. Stories centred predominantly on specific events rather than broader issues, and environmental activists were depicted as the main source of disruption and/or damage. In line with the 'protest paradigm' (McLeod and Hertog, 1999), the emphasis on drama and spectacle confirms that dissent tactics drawing on disobedience and potentially law-breaking actions may secure mediated visibility, but at the cost of concealing the reasons driving people on to the streets. Although legacy media may provide some visibility to the causes and context of collective action – as seen by the relative salience of the *Grievances* frame – their role aligns more closely with the policing of protests than with a liberal-democratic forum where public deliberations on the climate crisis are staged. This is a relevant observation, when taking into account that journalistic frames focussed on disruption and alleged deviant behaviours may add to the justifications facilitating the criminalisation of collective action (see Cristiano et al., 2023).

It is significant that the visibility of climate and ecological protests in legacy media was limited, notwithstanding the focus on the spectacle and drama of disruption. The number of television reports about XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil in the examined timespan was relatively low, and the length of each story was on average less than 2 minutes. BBC and ITV therefore portrayed these groups in a flickering, intermittent manner rather than as manifestations of an urgent planetary problem or, conversely, expressions of impending social chaos. Following Di Cicco, they were shown as 'irritating and worthless, and something most would prefer to ignore – a nuisance' (2010, p. 137). This observation corroborates how, despite the efforts of many journalists specialising in environmental topics, news media tend to focus on discreet, isolated 'newsworthy' events, rather than on complex, long-term and holistic

debates on the climate and ecological crisis (Cottle, 2023; Russell, 2023). In addition, it suggests a dissonance between the limited interest of television and the reaction of authorities. Unlike British right-wing newspapers, television did not seem to hypervisibilise environmental movements as a significant threat, which was one of the tenets of the culture wars fostered by UK conservative governments in recent years (Moss, 2022; Cristiano et al., 2023).

Relatedly, the examination of self-mediation tactics by XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil on Instagram provided some unexpected insights. The three groups produced a greater amount of content in comparison with national television. However, their posts largely echoed legacy media and did not make visible a substantially different narrative. Although there were some variations with broadcasters, including the attention that court case stories received, activists generally stressed the most disruptive features of collective action, underlining actions that embraced disorder and a 'logic of damage' (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Berglund, 2023).

Although a focus on episodic and spectacular occurrences may reward these groups with (some of) the mediated visibility promised by digital platforms in the forms of likes and shares, their most dramatic Instagram posts risk becoming only fleeting glimpses that obscure the reasons driving activists to the streets (see Poell, 2014). Furthermore, the transitory nature of social media content may prompt environmental movements to direct their efforts to being noticed only, instead of being noticed to advance the slower and less notorious structural changes required to mitigate the climate crisis. Hence, they may end up approaching mediated visibility as an 'end it itself, rather than a route to politics' (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 55; see also Jiménez-Martínez and Edwards, 2023). Finally, an emphasis on social media notoriety risks feeding the narrative – often pushed by information technology companies – that, in a context of increasing legal risks for collective action, digital platforms are 'the' space where people gather to channel their demands, instead of being acknowledged as pro-market sites that often privilege noise and drama instead of deliberation and social justice (Lester and Cottle, 2022; Cristiano et al., 2023; Russell, 2023).

The above findings suggest that both television broadcasters and environmental movements paid more attention to the *form* rather than the *content* of protests. When this happens, and debates centre on whether collective action is 'peaceful' or 'disruptive', and whether protesters or authorities are to blame for 'violence', 'the state will have succeeded in turning participants' attention completely away from politics . . . and away from other conversations, such as those about the current distribution and functioning of economic and political

power' (LeNabat, 2012, p. 468). There are nonetheless hopeful signs. In early 2023, XR announced that it would retreat from disruptive actions and would instead seek to build wider relationships in civil society (Booth, 2023), thus revealing a clear awareness of some of the hazards of their communication strategy to date. At the same time, XR, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil have tried to avoid some of the pitfalls that an exclusive focus on the 'violent' or 'peaceful' character of protests presents. It is significant that the three groups eschewed discussions on culpability by avoiding direct confrontations with the police as well as stories that could fall into a 'reversed protest paradigm', which emphasise abuses by security forces to the detriment of grievances (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021).

Crucially, environmental activists did not shy away of assuming responsibility for disruptive and even law-breaking actions, openly embracing the mediated visibility of disruption and disobedience, and therefore questioning the official boundaries of what comprises acceptable forms of defiance. This is significant, because legacy media have traditionally perpetuated the authorities' viewpoints and definitions of what constitutes 'violent' or 'peaceful' protest (McLeod and Hertog, 1999). Yet these definitions are rarely neutral (Butler, 2020). In the case of the UK, despite nominally respecting the right to protest, recent governments have increasingly sought to neutralise it, favouring 'peaceful' but ultimately bland expressions of collective action (Moss, 2022; Cristiano et al., 2023). In consequence, groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil are shedding light on a worrying trend, namely of states increasingly manufacturing mirages of democratic participation. These mirages encourage innocuous *performances* of collective action that pose little challenge to dominant social, political, and economic arrangements. Yet by questioning these illusions, activists interrogate ever-expanding definitions of 'violence' that criminalise opposition to the status quo, and underscore the fuzzy and contested margins of what exactly constitutes legitimate expressions of dissent in a liberal democracy.

Notes

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2 Although these movements have YouTube channels, Instagram was chosen because at the time of the data collection, two of them had a slightly larger number of followers on this

platform (Extinction Rebellion UK had 102K followers on Instagram vs 77.8K on YouTube; Insulate Britain, 4.1K on Instagram vs 1.61K on YouTube; Just Stop Oil, 70.1K on Instagram vs 84.9K on YouTube).

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