

Student Stars: How the Media Covered 1960s Student Protest Leaders

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Protest movements fighting for civil rights, free speech, an end to the Vietnam War, women's rights, and a generally more democratic political system and open culture marked the 1960s. While historians largely agree that media coverage and portrayals of 1960s movements and their leaders did not match reality well, they are divided on which side is to blame, how leaders felt about media coverage, and the consequences of media treatment for the larger movements. This paper will shed light on these debates and offer a synthesized analysis of the various aspects of how the media covered the protest movements of the 1960s. The media's tendency to distort the messages and actions of movements and turn leaders into celebrities regardless of their desire for fame helped lead to the disintegration of and popular backlash against the protests and a wide range of consequences for leaders, such as Mario Savio of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM) and Mark Rudd of the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), from withdrawal to burn out.

Historians debate whether the media or activists were more responsible for the distortion in the coverage of 1960s protest movements. Edward Morgan, a professor of political science at Lehigh University who has done extensive research on the 1960s, belongs to the large group who views the media as more at fault. Morgan argues that the mass media "systematically reinforce the prevailing order" through three key ways that emerged during the 1960s.¹ First, the media determined what views were acceptable to have and delegitimize those that are radical or outside the dominant debate of elites. Thus, dissent could occur, but it was limited to within the bounds set by the media, which reflected establishment interests. Additionally, the media sought to entertain their audience by overdramatizing people and events. This led to little public discussion and exposure to real issues. The third way was the media's consumerism and thus

¹ Morgan, 88.

tendency to commercialize anything rebellious or generally outside the mainstream. This undermined non-conformity by bringing it into the very mainstream it was rejecting.² This side of the debate sees the media as having distorted protest movements by presenting them as far outside the bounds of the proper discourse, focusing on their most radical and provocative elements and actors, and undercutting their image and truth by selling them to the mainstream.

Paula Eldot, a history professor at California State University in Sacramento, exemplifies those who believe the protesters to be more at fault. Eldot argues that student protesters have tended to overstate and radicalize larger trends in American society.³ In regard to the FSM, she finds the students becoming increasingly militant and violent over time to the point that their activity becomes revolutionary. This is shown in their massive demonstrations designed to disrupt campus activity and the leaders' aversion to compromise. Furthermore, Eldot argues that the FSM leaders manipulated the largely moderate student base into following them in radicalism. Focusing on one leader, Mario Savio, she rejects his equation of the system at Berkeley to Mississippi and finds his rhetoric revolutionary and radical.⁴ For Eldot, the more radical students, especially leaders, exerted undue influence and drug their movements farther outside the mainstream creating great distortions.

The distortion debate also has a middle ground that holds both activists and the media accountable for the kind of coverage provided. Paul Weaver believes each side contributed significantly to false news. Weaver, the former Washington Bureau Chief and Assistant Managing Editor at *Fortune* and also a professor of political science at Harvard University, has done considerable work in trying to expose hidden problems in news coverage. Weaver argues

² Morgan, 88-90.

³ Eldot, 269.

⁴ Eldot, 277-8.

that the media actually helped movements and their leaders stage the news by presenting their actions as genuine, authentic protests.⁵ In trying to appear credible, the media could go too far leading to a particularly structured story lacking in substance and based on simple facts, an overly objective voice, and the exclusion of details that may undermine the narrative.⁶ Weaver also finds fault with the activists, such as those in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, who, in his mind, sought to gain exposure and sympathy by staging sit-ins and strikes. With the Sproul Hall incident, the most famous FSM demonstration in which hundreds of students took over a campus building and were later forcibly removed by police, Weaver sees the FSM trying to make political gains by capitalizing on the publicity provided by the media's coverage of it as authentic and real rather than staged and scheming.⁷ By examining the lives and leadership of Mario Savio and Mark Rudd, this paper shows that the media were mostly responsible for distortions in coverage.

Media coverage of Mario Savio, a leader of the Berkeley FSM, was characterized by over-dramatization and an undesired elevation to celebrity status. Savio's critiques of the university's treatment of students were not taken seriously by the media and were cast aside as radical. One *Washington Post* article called the activists "rebels without causes."⁸ They are compared to the student protesters of the 1930s, who were seen as legitimate and positive forces who helped bring about the New Deal in a terrible time in America's history. In contrast, the Berkeley activists are viewed as protesting various issues to fill a lack of self-worth rather than wanting to create social change out of concern for those oppressed. Savio is singled out as the embodiment of this problem with the FSM. He is presented as participating in Freedom Summer

⁵ Weaver, 28.

⁶ Weaver, 32.

⁷ Weaver, 31.

⁸ John Chamberlain, *Washington Post*, December 29, 1964.

to give his life some meaning.⁹ In actuality, Savio demonstrated a passion for civil rights before going to Mississippi. His Catholic upbringing instilled a strong moral inclination toward social justice and helping the oppressed. Savio joined civil rights group upon arriving at Berkeley. He was arrested for a protest he helped organize of discriminatory hiring at a Sheraton Hotel in 1963.¹⁰ Thus, this characterization of Savio is inaccurate and ignorant of his personal background. In other instances, the media sought to discredit Savio and the FSM by presenting them as far outside the mainstream.

Savio's image was also distorted by how the media covered FSM incidents. Following the major sit-in at Sproul Hall in December, 1964, which may be viewed as the culmination of FSM, a *Chicago Tribune* article classified the event as "organized rioting."¹¹ The students are presented as violent rebels comparable to communists leading revolutions around the world. Indeed, the article focuses considerably on the leftist involvement in the FSM and sit-in despite admitting its actual numbers being relatively small. Savio is presented as the sole leader of the event, tied in with communists, and against the administration proposed "peace plan."¹² The article is clearly attempting to delegitimize Savio and the protest by making them appear extremist. This portrayal was wildly inaccurate though. Savio despised hierarchy and was overtly non-Marxist. He was also just one leader among many in the highly democratic FSM, so the view of him as the leader of the sit-in undermines the FSM's structure and elevates Savio to a higher position than he or anyone else wanted.¹³ Additionally, looking at Savio's speeches during the sit-in shows a lack of violence and ideas that are not unreasonable. Before the event

⁹ John Chamberlain, *Washington Post*, December 29, 1964.

¹⁰ Cohen, 49-51.

¹¹ *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 1964.

¹² *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 1964.

¹³ Eynon, 51-2.

began, Savio emphasized order and peace in the protest. He urged students not to bother painters in the building and he encouraged everyone to participate in learning and discussion of freedom and to watch movies once inside.¹⁴ This seems to be a far cry from violent revolution and destruction. Savio critiqued bureaucracy and asked for greater freedom for students in speech, protest, and learning in another speech given inside Sproul Hall. He mentions that all he is advocating is adherence to freedoms and proper treatment clearly enshrined in the Constitution and founding of the nation.¹⁵ Thus, the issues he and FSM were protesting were actually not very radical and certainly not extremist as the article portrayed them. Media coverage tended to present them as revolutionary and unreasonable though as the students were viewed as privileged and unable to be truly oppressed. The media frequently made Savio the spokesperson and face of the FSM. This was a reputation that compromised both his and the movement's democratic principles and thus caused him great personal anguish.

In the first biography of Mario Savio, Robert Cohen, a history professor at New York University, chronicles Savio's life from his working class, Catholic upbringing to his rise to leadership of FSM to his departure from the public eye for much of his later life. Savio's fiery rhetoric and incredible oratorical skills launched him to the top of FSM and made him a media star. A sort of cult of personality even developed around him.¹⁶ However, Cohen argues that Savio actually disliked the media attention. Savio did not want to be placed above everyone else and felt uncomfortable at the power and influence his celebrity status might afford him. Cohen argues Savio was truly committed to the democratic ideals he and the movement espoused.¹⁷ Indeed, Savio's interactions with the media confirm his personal anguish. Frustrated with a

¹⁴ Savio, *Bodies Upon the Gears*.

¹⁵ Savio, *An End to History*.

¹⁶ Cohen, 10.

¹⁷ Cohen, 133-6.

growing cult of personality and elevated status above the rest of the movement, Savio refused to do an interview with a *New York Times* reporter unless the rest of the FSM leadership was included. He desperately tried to change the media coverage of FSM as solely his movement to more accurately represent its highly democratic spirit.¹⁸ Bret Eynon, the former Research and Education Director for the American Social History Project of the City University of New York, shares this view with Cohen. Eynon notes how Savio and the FSM were deeply inspired by the civil rights movement and thus modeled their movement on it. This meant decision-making was collective in nature and had a more bottom up approach. Savio, in particular, tried extremely hard to make the FSM inclusive and democratic and create a sort of community feel within the movement.¹⁹ Deeply committed to his ideals, Savio anguished over the unwanted fame and pressure the media pushed on him in an interview with Eynon. He felt uneasy about being viewed as the spokesperson for the entire movement and how that ignored the great contributions from everyone else and undermined the FSM's ideals. Savio experienced tremendous personal feelings of guilt and shame from his status.²⁰ These inner conflicts were significant factors in his disbanding of the FSM after it reached its goal and his withdrawal from activism altogether.²¹

Todd Gitlin, a former president of Students for a Democratic Society and now a sociologist, also notes how the media created celebrities from the protest movement. Like Cohen, Gitlin sees the media as creating many celebrities or stars from student movements. Those who were most vocal, dramatic, and radical in addition to those with great charisma got the most attention.²² This could hurt movements by creating leaders ill suited for the role.

¹⁸ Cohen, 134.

¹⁹ Eynon, 59-61.

²⁰ Eynon, 61-2.

²¹ Cohen, 245.

²² Gitlin, 146-9.

Gitlin aligns with Cohen and Eynon in telling how Savio rejected the fame granted to him by the media ultimately leading to his stepping down from leadership and activism. Gitlin also mentions how Savio struggled internally a great deal with how to balance his celebrity with his democratic ideals.²³ Some leaders followed the Savio pattern, but many did not according to Gitlin. Gitlin argues that other leaders used their media given celebrity to grow their own image, which they may then use to further their movement's agenda or simply make a career out of their celebrity.²⁴ Mark Rudd, an SDS leader, fell into this second category.

Mark Rudd gained celebrity status from the media coverage of the Columbia University student protest of 1968. Being in the media center of New York City, the protest received extensive coverage. Despite several organizations and leaders being involved in the Columbia protest, the media selected Rudd, who had recently been elected president of Columbia's SDS chapter, as the representative and spokesman of the revolt.²⁵ In his book, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen*, Rudd tells his story of his time as a radical. In his book, Rudd discusses the role of the media in his life and the protest and the advantages and disadvantages it provided. Rudd hoped to use the extensive press coverage to make people aware of the issues at stake and to spread the movement across the country and even the world.²⁶ In this respect, Rudd was similar to Savio. They both thought media attention could be useful in engaging and gaining the support of those outside the actual protests.

After their initial protests ended, however, Rudd departed greatly from Savio's behavior. Rudd continued to use his celebrity for the movement and even himself while Savio retreated from activism altogether. Rudd embraced his stardom rather than downplayed it like Savio did.

²³ Gitlin, 176-8.

²⁴ Gitlin, 166.

²⁵ Gitlin, 150.

²⁶ Rudd, 96.

A fellow movement member said celebrity status captivated Rudd. While claiming to use his fame to help the movement, many in the movement saw Rudd thoroughly enjoying it. Rather than emphasize the democratic structure and group leadership of SDS and the student movement, Rudd grew his own image and influence by embracing his media-created role as spokesman.²⁷ Rudd recognized there were some advantages to his celebrity such as his ease in attracting large audiences and an ability to make money for SDS through his public appearances. He went on a speaking tour after being expelled from Columbia to grow the protest movement. He also found he was able to advance his own more militant vision for SDS though. He used his celebrity to gain a following and make a run at the SDS national presidency in 1969 as leader of the more action based, confrontational Weathermen faction of SDS. Rudd even advocated for himself by referencing his stardom and role as a symbol of the movement as why he should be president.²⁸

Rudd was overall disappointed in the media's treatment of the Columbia protest because it concentrated on the events of the uprising rather than the motivations behind it. An article discussing the police raid that ended the nearly weeklong occupation of five buildings on the Columbia campus focused mostly on the police events. It dedicates only a few sentences to explaining why the students took such drastic action and simply notes their protest of the building of a gymnasium due to the surrounding Harlem community's opposition to it.²⁹ This barely scratched the surface of why the students rose up though. Rudd also notes how the *New York Times* and Columbia University were well intertwined with one another. Columbia connections filled the university's board of trustees as well as the editor ranks of the paper. This led to constant bias in favor of the university and its administration by the influential newspaper

²⁷ Gitlin, 153.

²⁸ Gitlin, 151.

²⁹ Peter Millones, *New York Times*, May 1, 1968.

in Rudd's opinion. However, the fact that the paper published a story on the police raid before it actually occurred gives support to Rudd's assertion.³⁰ The coverage of police behavior was also inaccurate in favor of Columbia and the police. The article on the police raid mentions next to no instances of violence. It presents a peaceful picture of the removal of students and attributes injuries to crowd dispersal of spectators to the raid.³¹ However, Rudd insists that the police attacked the students without restraint in a violent, bloody affair that left hundreds injured.³² Additionally, almost no coverage was even given to the story of police attacking a *New York Times* reporter.

Rudd also complains in his book that he and others "tried to explain why we were forced to take action, but the press could only portray us as lunatic, destructive kids."³³ The media did not seem to care about reporting the real reasons behind the protest, which were weapons development supporting the Vietnam War by Columbia research and the lack of care of a racist nature for the surrounding Harlem community from which Columbia had been acquiring property.³⁴ In fact, the students actually had real, strong feelings about these situations and acted to stop them. Mark Rudd's activism was heavily informed by his Jewish heritage and own experiences in Harlem. Growing up Jewish just after World War II, Rudd thought extensively about the Holocaust and what it meant for Jews. He imagined the horror he might have experienced had his family not come to America the generation before. This led Rudd to identify with oppressed or targeted peoples, such as the Vietnamese and African Americans.

³⁰ Rudd, 97.

³¹ Peter Millones, *New York Times*, May 1, 1968.

³² Rudd, 87-8.

³³ Rudd, 97.

³⁴ Rudd, 98.

Rudd strongly opposed the Vietnam War and saw the United States as murdering innocents.³⁵

Rudd also came to sympathize with African Americans and the Harlem community around Columbia through a tutoring program he participated in early on in college. Rudd became close with a poor, black boy he tutored and his family. He became passionate about ending poverty and racism and believed Columbia to not only be failing to help address the problems but making them worse by evicting people from their homes and encroaching on their community and through other forms of subtle discrimination.³⁶

The media focused in on Rudd rather than the racism and support for the war by the university that were the real issues behind the protests. Trying to provide entertainment, the media usually gave attention to the most active, outrageous, or flashy of protesters.³⁷ Rudd was already a leader of the “action faction” of SDS before the Columbia protest and thus a prime target for the media. Within a month of the Columbia protest, the *New York Times* had done a story on Rudd that documented his upbringing and life leading up to the uprising. The reporter even interviewed Rudd’s parents for the article. Even this story did not dive deep into Rudd’s motivations for activism though. It presented his activism as filling some personal void rather than stemming from true concerns for oppressed people.³⁸ This personal story on Rudd illustrated how the media elevated him though and made him the celebrity of the Columbia protest. The media’s desire for the provocative only led Rudd further down a radical path based on aggressive action.³⁹ Unable to gain control of SDS, the Weathermen faction broke away after the elections in 1969. It become increasingly violent and revolutionary and went underground in

³⁵ Rudd, 23-4.

³⁶ Rudd, 7-9.

³⁷ Gitlin, 153.

³⁸ Steven V. Roberts, *New York Times*, May 19, 1968.

³⁹ Gitlin, 193.

1970. The split weakened SDS and the violence associated with the Weathermen discredited its celebrities like Rudd as other activists and the public became alienated from the movement.⁴⁰

Rudd emerged in 1977 when he turned himself into authorities after being a fugitive sought by the FBI for over seven years. While Rudd still attracted a large media crowd, he seemed burnt out by his fame and the new direction of his activism and refused to speak with the press or draw extra attention to himself.⁴¹ Rudd now regrets giving into the media attention and using his celebrity the way he did. He feels that it hurt him and the movement by compromising their democratic principles, feeding into the false media narrative, and hiding the contributions of other leaders and the rank and file.⁴² Thus, over time Rudd has come close to the position Savio held when he left activism in 1964.

While there is a consensus on media coverage and movement realities not aligning, there is great disagreement over who is to blame. This paper argues that the media are largely responsible for distortions in coverage of 1960s activism. When protesters employed tactics different from their professed ideals, it was generally to gain the attention of a media that had largely ignored them. This sometimes caused more distortion as movements were forced to drift away from their original stances. Additionally, there are a wide variety of ways leaders, such as Mario Savio and Mark Rudd, gained celebrity status from the media and how they handled it, especially the tension over a need for individual leaders' abilities and a desire for collective decision-making. While some leaders used their celebrity poorly and caused distortion themselves and thus deserve some blame, the media are still ultimately for their constantly inaccurate coverage and their pushing of leaders down a fame filled but more radical path.

⁴⁰ Gitlin, 164-5.

⁴¹ Dorothy Collin, *Chicago Tribune*, September 16, 1977.

⁴² Rudd, 319.

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