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

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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. For example, newspapers have often focused on the violent nature of student protest, which 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. 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 (France, Ireland, Spain and the UK) to argue, 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 delegitmise student protest – noting the celebratory discourses evident in both Ireland and Spain.

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Introduction

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

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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, Ingram, and Allen 2021).

The current article 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 earlier in 2024, 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. While student activism, in relation to the Israeli action, took many forms – from the 'informal' (e.g. speaking out in social or academic spaces) to the 'formal' (such as proposing motions in committee settings and/or signing petitions) (see Lin 2025 for a useful typology of repertoires of action) – it was the organised protests and encampments that generated most attention from both the media and relevant university authorities (Castro 2025; Freeman 2025). 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).

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, 170).

The article proceeds as follows: the extant literature relating to both students as political actors and media coverage of such student action is discussed below – emphasising how newspaper reports have tended to work to delegitimise student protest. The methods underpinning the study are then outlined, before the findings are discussed. Two key arguments are made: first, that there is considerable cross-national variation in constructions of protesting students (that can be explained with respect to differences in both public opinion and the position of national governments in relation to the conflict in Gaza, as well as broader political and cultural issues), raising questions about the sometimes-assumed homogenisation of European higher education (e.g. Moutsios 2013; Slaughter and Cantwell 2012); and, second, that it is erroneous to assume that the media always serves to delegitmise student protest. Indeed, celebratory discourses were evident in Ireland and Spain.

Background

Students as political actors

There is now a substantial body of work that has examined higher education students as political actors. Universities, some have contended, facilitate political participation by

bringing together a critical mass of young people with political interests and providing resources to facilitate political action (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012). In addition, university societies can play an important role in encouraging members to develop their political identity and emerge as 'student citizens' (Loader et al. 2015), while students have become increasingly involved in the governance of their institutions (Brooks, Byford, and Sela 2015; Klemenčič and Park 2018).

There is an ongoing debate, particularly in the US and UK, about whether higher education impacts students' substantive political views (e.g. Fryer 2023; Scott 2022) – often linked to concerns about more general political polarisation (Grossman and Hopkins 2024; Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Nevertheless, in many nations, there is now a widespread societal assumption that students *should* be politically active, driving social change and challenging enduring inequalities, and they are often criticised – by journalists, higher education staff and other interested parties – when they are perceived not to be acting in this way (Brooks et al. 2020). However, as Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) have asserted, this conceptualisation of students as political actors became common only in the 1960s, and is frequently based on a misreading of that particular period – a misreading that overlooked the fact that only a minority of students were involved in the US and European campus protests of the 1960s and early 1970s. Contemporary constructions of students as politically disengaged also tend to operate with a relatively narrow understanding of such engagement. While involvement in on-campus activities associated with *formal* politics tends to be limited, and students' unions in a number of countries of the world have become less 'activist' in their orientation (e.g. Nissen and Hayward 2017; Rochford 2014), students nevertheless have a relatively high level of political interest (Brooks et al. 2020) and graduates are more likely than others to be politically engaged in later life (Olcese, Saunders, and Tzavidis 2014).

Representations of students taking political action

When we turn to *representations* of students taking political action the literature is, however, notably smaller. Nevertheless, nearly all work in this area has argued that, irrespective of location, the media typically serves to delegitimise political action taken by students. Writing with respect to the student protests of the late 1960s, Bessant (2021) has argued that the media, along with politicians and other commentators, typically represented protesters as 'either impulsive, infantile and deranged or as the dupes of extremists and communists' (16). She goes on to assert that this reaction was intended to deny the distinctively political nature of student dissent. Scholarship that has focussed on more recent events has advanced a similar thesis. For example, writing with respect to student protests in the UK in 2010 (against tuition fees) and in 2016 (against policies to metricise teaching quality), Gagnon (2018) shows how the media used various strategies to infantilise and criminalise those who took part. These included giving disproportionate attention to the small minority of students who engaged in violent activity, and criticising protestors for not entering into dialogue with university authorities. Indeed, Gagnon demonstrates how the media constructed the boycotting of the National Student Survey (which is used to gauge student satisfaction with their courses) as an illegitimate method. Instead, students were called upon to 'articulate their criticism' in more conventional ways (1010). We see similar processes played out in South Africa in the media

coverage of the 2015 student protests about the state of the national higher education system. In Ebrahim's (2018) analysis, although newspapers did run some positive stories about students as agents of change, these were significantly outnumbered by those that took a more critical perspective – constructing students as 'destructive vandals' (by either featuring headlines that referred to violence, or referring to violence in the body of the article); violators of the rights of others (through disrupting the academic work of other students); and 'law breakers' (positioning the police, in contrast, as law enforcers, even though their action had at times been brutal). Ebrahim (2018) concludes that, together, these representations had the effect of delegitimising students as agents of change.

The delegitimisation of student protest is also a strong theme in Mampaey et al.'s (2021) research in Flanders. They show how the media responded to student protests in 2014 against proposed fee increases by employing a range of strategies to legitimate the reforms e.g. by indicating that they were both required because of various 'uncontrollable forces' affecting the country, and a necessary means to achieve desirable ends. The media also positioned student protesters as 'irrational human beings, not able to calculate the (long-term) costs and benefits of their private investments' (531), thus undermining any sense that they were important stakeholders in the dispute. These various 'micro-level discursive strategies' had the effect, Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker (2021) suggest, of disempowering student activists and delegitimising their demands. There are clear parallels between these arguments and those advanced by Cabalin (2015) in his analysis of how *El Mercurio*, the most influential newspaper in Chile, responded to actions taken by the Chilean student movement in 2011 in protest about the neo-liberalisation of the Chilean higher education system. He asserts that the paper presented neoliberal reforms as inevitable – because of irreversible global trends – and framed private provision as more efficient than public alternatives. Moreover, protesting students were portrayed as not representative of the wider student body; under the influence of external political forces; and engaged in criminal acts of vandalism. These narratives, Cabalin (2015) claims, effectively framed public discussion of the protests and delegitimised students as political actors: they were denied the opportunity to engage in political discussion because they were widely considered to be ineffective and irresponsible.

Finally, we turn to the US – where the 2024 anti-Israeli protests started – and see evidence of similar processes of delegitimisation being played out. Conner (2020) draws attention to the sometimes-contradictory ways in which politically active students are discussed in the US media – as, for example, 'social justice warriors, too bullheaded and concerned with activist performativity to engage in productive dialogue' (180), but also as 'snowflakes', 'too fragile to brook controversy or personal affronts' (ibid.). They can also sometimes be portrayed as violent and unruly, but equally as idealists, 'fearlessly and naively championing social justice' (ibid.). Despite these differences, however, she asserts that they are all problematic and reductionist. Writing with respect to coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests by US students in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (the main news source used by higher education researchers and practitioners), specifically, Hailu and Sarubbi (2019) highlight the often-disparaging coverage. For example, they note the fearful tone of some of the articles, the erroneous linking of Black Lives Matter to anti-semitic movements, and unwarranted concerns that the protests would curtail free speech.

In many ways, research on media coverage of politically active students has much in common with the literature on politically active young people in general (noting that not all students are, of course, young). Bessant (2021), for example, has contended that while young men and women are certainly present in the political sphere in many countries across the world, they tend to be 'constituted in representations that position them in ways that help serve the interests of those with the power to win out in struggles over recognition, over what counts as political and what "kind of person" they are' (5). Moreover, she asserts that while they often play a major role in politics, their presence as political actors is rarely acknowledged; instead, they tend to be 'ignored, rejected or recognised as something else' (13). To some extent, this is related to assumptions that young people are morally and cognitively immature – as 'incomplete adults' (ibid.). Indeed, Bessant maintains that, in contemporary society, young people (and children, as well) continue to be:

> represented as half-adults lacking the experience, cognitive skills, self-control and judgement apparently needed to take on the role of the citizen. This contrasts strikingly with how many [of them] now represent themselves as political actors and assume highly visible leadership roles in social movements. (17)

Cross-national comparisons

As the preceding discussion has illustrated, most of the extant research in this area has tended to focus on a single nation-state. Thus, while comparisons can be made by bringing individual studies into dialogue, they have not been an integral part of research design. A notable exception is Lainio's (2023) work, which examined representations of students in national newspapers in six European countries (Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain). She found that, across all six nations, it was relatively common for students to be constructed as political actors – in articles about university governance as well as student protests. However, she also notes some national variation. For example, in only England and Ireland were students constructed as 'snowflakes' (a construction that has also been common in the US, as mentioned above). Lainio (2023) explains this with reference to broader debates about identity politics and 'culture wars', which were common in England (and to a lesser extent, Ireland), but not in continental Europe, at the time of her data collection (2014–2016). She also discusses the ways in which student political action in Spain was undermined by the media's focus on the type of action taken – particularly when any violence was used – rather than the reasons for their action (see also Brooks et al. 2022). Although a focus on violence was apparent in media articles in some of the single-nation studies discussed above, it was not evident in the other five nations involved in Lainio's research over the period covered by her data collection. Like Conner (2020), however, Lainio emphasises the often-contingent and contradictory nature of media constructions across all nations – with students frequently understood as over-sensitive and immature, but also holding considerable political power and constituting a significant threat to academic institutions. The current article builds on this nascent cross-national work by considering both similarities and differences in media representations across four European countries a decade on from Lainio's sample.

Methods

The article draws upon newspaper articles from France, Ireland, Spain and the UK that were published between March 2024 and March 2025. While some consider newspapers to be outdated forms of media, the analysis was underpinned by a belief that: 'the logics of the practice of journalism, established in respect of print media, are still relevant in the digital versions of newspapers' (Baroutsis and Lingard 2023, 2), with many newspapers appearing in both print and digital formats (ibid.) The four countries were chosen to represent different higher education systems and media landscapes. With respect to both dimensions, Ireland and the UK can be considered neo-liberal in orientation (Lažetić 2019) – charging fees for higher education in a marketised system, and having witnessed the early emergence of a commercial mass-circulation press (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In contrast, France and Spain have been more successful in resisting neo-liberal marketisation of their higher education systems (Carpentier and Courtois 2025; Lažetić 2019), while their media landscape is typically categorised as 'Mediterranean pluralist' – having had, historically, relatively low levels of newspaper circulation, a tradition of advocacy reporting, and significant state intervention (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Clearly, this country selection is far from exhaustive, excluding central and Eastern Europe, as well as countries within western Europe that have different traditions of both higher education and media production (e.g. those within Scandinavia). However, it does constitute a significant advance on many previous studies in this area which, as noted above, have focused on a single country and, in some cases, a single newspaper.

The LexisNexis database was used to identify and retrieve articles as this includes a large number of newspapers in the four case study countries. A 12-month period was chosen in order to cover the main period when the protests occurred (April-June 2024) and also several months afterwards, to incorporate any articles that reflected on the protests after they had ended. The following search terms were used, in different combinations: Gaza, Israel/Israeli, Palestine/Palestinian, student, protest and university (they were translated into French and Spanish for the searches relating to France and Spain respectively). Searches were conducted for articles in the national language only, and which had originated in the country of focus.

Once the initial searches had taken place, articles were excluded from the sample if they were exclusively about student protests in other countries – as the aim of the research was to examine how *national* protests were understood by newspapers located in the same country. (A sizable proportion of the articles focussed only on the protests in the US). In addition, letters to the newspapers were excluded (these, however, constituted only a very small minority of the overall numbers). The focus was primarily on national (rather than regional) newspapers.[1] The achieved sample, comprising a

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	–

total of 90 articles, is shown in Table 1. As the table shows, there were many more articles about the student protests published in UK newspapers than in the three other countries. (The salience of this is discussed at a later point in the article.) 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.

While there are many advantages to using the LexisNexis database for the retrieval of newspaper articles, it is important also to reflect on its limitations. First, its coverage of countries across Europe is limited; several nations (e.g. Denmark and Poland – both countries discussed in Lainio's cross-national European study cited above) are not covered well by the database. Second, even within the four case study countries, not all newspapers are included in the database, and coverage is not necessarily even across nations. This is one of the likely reasons why there are more articles from the UK than the other three nations. Nevertheless, the database includes a good number of publications from each of the four nations, representing different political leanings. It also has advanced search functions, enabling relevant articles to be identified in a rigorous and systematic fashion.

Differing constructions of student action

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). Each of these is discussed in turn.

Celebrating student activism: Ireland and Spain

The newspaper articles from Ireland and Spain were striking in the almost unanimous support they gave to protesting students, and the celebratory tone in which many of the articles were written. Across all 33 articles, there were almost no words of criticism of the action students had taken, and no critique of their demands. Moreover, students were often positioned, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, as 'in the right', as the extract below illustrates:

> Hats off to the students for strategic, peaceful and effective activism. There was never any risk to the Book of Kells [a tourist attraction, housed at Trinity College, to which students blocked access], and tourist disappointment doesn't come close to comparison with the horrors happening in real time in Gaza. (*Irish Independent*, 10 May 2024)

Indeed, a strong, although mostly implicit, message in many of the Irish articles is that Trinity College was correct in agreeing to the protesting students' demand that it should divest itself of its investments in Israeli companies. In addition, some articles held the protesting students up as positive examples, claiming that the wider population could learn from them:

> I support their protest. They are right to show us adults the way, as they did in recent referenda, and as they have done at every climate march. (*Irish Examiner*, 10 May 2024)

The maturity of the students' approach was also highlighted in some of the Spanish articles:

> José Luis Ledesma, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology at the UCM [Complutense University of Madrid] … . said: 'They are showing a maturity that we did not have in 1994 and in 15-M [previous protests in Spain]. They have learned from previous experiences, replicating the successes and correcting the errors. It is exciting to listen to them in the assemblies.' (*El País*, 23 May 2024)

In addition, a common theme across both the Irish and Spanish articles is the support given to protesting students by other social actors. The extract below, from an Irish article, makes the point that the encampments at Trinity College are supported by the wider student body.

> Students … feel the union is doing a good job of reflecting the opinion of the student body which is, overwhelmingly, pro-Palestine. I've hardly met anyone who is pro-Israel, says Zoya Kherani, a second-year law and business student at Trinity. They're either neutral or pro-Palestine. There's a lot of protest, the students union is very active, they share their stance on social media. No-one I've met thinks ties with Israel are a good thing. (*The Irish Times*, 4 May 2024)

Here, there is a notable contrast with media strategies outlined in the extant literature, that delegitimised student action through suggesting that protesting students are not representative of students in general (Cabalin 2014; Ebrahim 2018).

Moreover, several Spanish articles present students and staff as in concert ('The teachers have offered to lend a hand with the tasks', *El País*, 23 May 2024), with a similar set of concerns, while also noting the positive reception by the wider local community – evidenced by the practical and moral support they have offered to those in encampments. For example:

> 'What they ask us most is what to donate', explains one of the young people from the Complutense. A smiling fifty-something woman approaches at the end of the afternoon and drops a handful of coins into a plastic cup. 'It's all I have today, tomorrow I'll rob the bank and come back', she jokes. The kids respond with a smile and return another joke. (*El País*, 9 May 2024)

> Although the campers are almost entirely students, the campuses have become the centre of these protests and attract dozens of neighbours every day who come to show their support and solidarity. 'People from Malaga come to spend some time with us or to replace us so we can rest', Juan admits, to which Toni adds that many Barcelona residents are giving them money for food. (*El Mundo*, 19 May 2024)

Perhaps most surprising was the focus, in two of the Spanish articles, on the wider benefits brought about by the student encampments, notably the reinvigoration of

university campuses following the period of quiet that had followed the COVID-19 pandemic. This extract is illustrative:

> Mata [student] is clear that 'the student movement is back to stay' and Baena [student], after realizing that 'things can change without living in a capital', agrees: 'The campuses are bursting with life again and they keep the hope that I have never lost in this generation.' (*El País*, 20 May 2024)

When we turn to an analysis of the voices that are represented in these articles, the space devoted to the perspectives of the protesting students is notable. Indeed, a large number of articles, from both countries, include quite lengthy quotations from students who are involved in the action. In contrast, voices from university leaders (or indeed other social actors who may be critical of student activity) are either entirely absent, or take up only a small proportion of articles. Moreover, when university staff are quoted, their words are typically sympathetic to the students' cause, even thanking them for their action:

> Senior Dean Eoin O'Sullivan, who led the talks for Trinity, said: 'We are glad that this agreement has been reached and are committed to further constructive engagement on the issues raised. We thank the students for their engagement.' (*Irish Independent*, 9 May 2024)

> A five-day protest at Trinity College Dublin over the war in Palestine has ended, following talks between the university's senior management and protestors. [… .] The university said: 'We fully understand the driving force behind the encampment on our campus, and we are in solidarity with the students in our horror at what is happening in Gaza … ' (*Irish Examiner*, 9 May 2024)

In common with articles from the other countries in the sample, links are made to the US, where the protests started. Here, too, students are treated sympathetically. Articles note approvingly that Irish universities did not call in the police (as had been the case on several US campuses), seeing this as an overly harsh reaction. Indeed, one journalist comments that 'I'm relieved that Ireland is responding more sensibly than America at least'. Sympathy is extended to protesting US students, as well – with an Irish student quoted as saying how inspiring they found the action on American campuses.

Taken together, then, the evidence from Ireland and Spain is starkly different from that reported in the extant literature on media coverage of student protest. Far from delegitimising student action, as previous studies in this area have shown (e.g. Cabalin 2015; Ebrahim 2018; Gagnon 2018; Hailu and Sarubbi 2019; Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker 2021), in this particular case, newspaper articles – from publications across the political spectrum – have, in contrast, *celebrated* student action in a direct and explicit fashion.

Overlooking student activism: France

In France, the media coverage of the student protests was somewhat less favourable than in Ireland and Spain. Five of the 14 articles, for example, mentioned anti-semitism in relation to the anti-Israeli protests, while one discussed specifically the isolation felt by Jewish students in the face of the protests:

> On campus, Jewish students report anti-semitic prejudices heard here and there, such as 'beware of Jews' or 'Jews control the media.' 'Jewish students are ostracized, we no longer sit next to them, in class we move away from their benches', lists one of them. 'People

> don't say hello to us. We hear digs, like so-and-so doesn't seem so Jewish after all … ' (*Le Point*, 20 March 2024)

Even though most of these articles do not directly accuse protesting students of anti-semitism (typically just reporting that they are accused of this by others), it can be interpreted as a strategy of delegitimisation. Indeed, there are similarities with Hailu and Sarubbi (2019)'s argument about accusations of anti-semitism being used in the US media to undermine students involved in Black Lives Matter action.

In addition, two articles were explicitly critical in tone, one of which was bound up with a critique of the alleged 'Americanisation' of French higher education and the associated 'woke-ness' of student culture – the heading of this article summarises its content well: 'From Wokeism to pro-Palestinian mobilizations, French universities under American influence; Spearheading ideas and concepts from across the Atlantic, Sciences Po set the tone in France for demonstrations that started in major universities in the United States' (*Le Figaro*, 3 May 2024). A further article provided significant detail about students being held in police custody. Although in this article, there is no explicit criticism of students, they are nevertheless positioned negatively by virtue of the fact that they have been detained by the police.

However, across the sample as a whole, there were many other articles that were either neutral in their reporting of student action, or sympathetic to the protesting students. (Indeed, these constituted the majority.) There is notable emphasis, for example, on the peaceful nature of the student action. Moreover, as with the Irish and Spanish sample, plenty of space within many of the articles is devoted to the voices and views of protesting students (individual students as well as those occupying representative positions), and relatively little to the universities.

Neverthelss, two key features distinguish the French coverage from that in the other three countries. First, there is much more discussion of national political figures and their engagement with student protests than in Ireland, Spain and the UK (although some UK articles do focus on the actions of the prime minister and home secretary – see below). For example, there is considerable coverage of the 'radical left' supporting pro-Palestinian activities on university campuses. Indeed, in this extract, the focus is on the disagreement between the leader of the left-wing party, La France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Mélanchon, and the then Minister of Higher Education, Patrick Hetzel, rather than the protesting students or their demands:

> For his part, Jean-Luc Mélenchon justified his call for student mobilisation by the supposed 'abuse of power' exercised by the Minister of Higher Education. After a series of pro-Palestinian demonstrations that took place last week in Paris in front of Sciences Po and the Institute of Oriental Languages, Patrick Hetzel had judged that these actions went 'against the principles of neutrality and secularism'. A finding decried by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. (*Le Figaro*, 7 October 2024)

Second, some of the articles, while referencing student occupations and other forms of protest, appear primarily concerned with the decisions of university management and the extent to which the university should be considered as a space for political action. For example:

> For a good ten years in France, the police have been regularly called to campuses without this arousing widespread indignation. These interventions are relegated to the realm of the

> ordinary. University presidents increasingly tend to cover themselves by calling the police, as at Sciences Po. These leaders represent a new generation of managers without activist experience. (*Le Telegramme*, 19 May 2024)

Taken together, these two approaches, while not 'delegitimising' protest in the ways documented in the extant literature explored above, do tend to position students as relatively minor actors in political debates conducted primarily by others (national politicians and university leaders). As such, they support Bessant's (2021) contention that young people's often-significant contributions to politics are frequently overlooked and/or misrecognised.

Problematising student activism: UK

When we turn to the UK, however, a starkly different picture emerges. Although there are several articles that are sympathetic, or at least neutral, towards the student protests, the overall stance is more negative, and thus much more in line with previous studies of how such action has been covered by the media. The negative coverage typically comes from the right-wing press – both tabloids (such as the *Daily Mail*) and broadsheets (including *The Telegraph* and *The Times*) – which published a large number of articles on this topic over a very short space of time. (As noted above, the number of articles from the UK was considerably larger than in the three other countries – a sizable proportion of which came from the right-wing press: 33 of the 42.) Within the corpus of UK articles, it is also notable that much less space is devoted to the voices of student protesters when compared to Ireland and Spain. Indeed, the voices of critical others – university authorities, the government and societies representing Jewish students – are often foregrounded.

We see in this sample of articles various 'strategies of delegitimisation' being played out, many of which have been previously documented in the extant literature. First, and in direct contrast to some of the Irish and Spanish articles discussed above, protesting students are often framed as not being representative of the wider student body. Space is given, in several of the articles, to students who were not happy about having their exams disrupted by the encampments and occupations, and appear to have little sympathy for their peers involved in the protests. Even more common, however, is recourse to quotations from Jewish students and/or representative of Jewish student societies, focussing on the intimidation felt by Jewish students on campus. Often such quotations are presented at length, and without the views of the protesting students being offered alongside. Extensive coverage is also given, again primarily by the right-wing press, to the meeting the Prime Minister at the time, Rishi Sunak, called with university leaders to press upon them the importance of ensuring the safety of Jewish students. Indeed, this was mentioned in seven of the 33 articles from right-of-centre newspapers. As with the French case, there are clear parallels here with what Hailu and Sarubbi (2019) have argued with respect to media coverage of Black Lives Matters protests on US campuses and the erroneous links that were made, in some of the articles, to anti-semitism.

Accompanying some explicit claims that the student activists were not representative of the wider student body is a more implicit framing of students as elite – thus suggesting that they may be out of touch with the views of the population at large. This is conveyed through the overwhelming focus on the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (the two

most prestigious universities in the UK). Many articles focus on *only* activity in these two institutions, even when encampments were set up at numerous universities across the country. In other cases, other universities are mentioned, usually briefly, at some point in the article, but the headline and primary focus is on Oxford and/or Cambridge. The following headlines are indicative:

> Oxford and Cambridge students set up camps as campus protests against Gaza war gather steam. (*The Independent*, 7 May 2024)

> Oxford cancels exams over pro-Gaza protest; Students forced to miss end-of-year paper after demonstrators occupy building used for tests. (*The Telegraph*, 14 June 2024)

> Pro-Palestinian students spray red paint over Cambridge University's historic Senate House in Gaza protest. (*Daily Mail*, 22 June 2024)

In addition, students are criticised in some articles for failing to engage in dialogue with university authorities and other relevant stakeholders. This is illustrated well in the *Daily Mail*'s coverage of the visit of Suella Braverman (the then home secretary) to the encampment at the University of Cambridge. Students are explicitly criticised for failing to speak to her; there is no recognition that this was clearly a symbolic means of resistance on their part. Here, we can see clear resonance with how students' boycott of the National Student Survey was not recognised as a legitimate form of action, with the media calling for students to engage in dialogue with policymakers instead, as documented in Gagnon's (2018) research discussed above. In some articles, students' actions are also portrayed as disruptive, violent and /or extreme, with little consideration of the reasons *why* students may be engaging in such action – again reflecting what other studies of earlier student protests have found (e.g. Ebrahim 2018; Gagnon 2018; Lainio 2022).

It is notable, however, that while the UK data illustrates the kind of media strategies documented in previous studies (and discussed above), there is no attempt in any of the analysed articles to support the position the students were protesting against. Thus, while Cabalin (2015) and Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker (2021) show how the press presented arguments to rationalise the respective government's position, there is no support for the actions of Israel in Gaza in any of the articles in the current sample.

Discussion and conclusion

The research undertaken for this article focuses, as noted above, on the student protests of 2024. Since then, there have been other important protests focussing on Gaza, conducted in many parts of the world, and by people of all ages and statuses, not only students (indeed, these wider protests have been the subject of others' studies e.g. Aswar et al. 2025). Nevertheless, by examining this particular form of political action, in France, Ireland, Spain and the UK, this article speaks to extant research in two key ways. First, it provides compelling evidence that newspapers do not always serve to delegitimise student action. Although previous work in this area has, almost without exception, shown that the media has – across many different countries of the world – criticised protests undertaken by students (e.g. Cabalin 2015; Ebrahim 2018; Gagnon 2018; Hailu and Sarubbi 2019; Mampaey, De Wit, and Broucker 2021), the data from Ireland and Spain

presents a contrasting picture. It has shown that, in some contexts at least, the media can operate in a significantly different manner, and *celebrate* student activism rather than denigrate it. Moreover, the Irish and Spanish articles did not seek to portray the student activists as idealists – naïve and out of touch with political realities (Conner 2020) – but rather as genuine and effective political actors, sometimes successful in their campaigns, from whom adults could learn. Even in France, where there were more criticisms of student protesters, there were also many articles that presented the students in positive, or at least neutral, terms. This offers a very different perspective from previous research on media representations of student protest. It also contrasts markedly with the broader body of work on the political activities of young people, which has also argued that they are commonly delegitimised by the media and other social actors (Bessant 2021). The likely reasons for this difference are explored in the discussion that follows.

Second, the analysis underlines the continuing importance, in some contexts at least, of the nation-state. As noted above, previous studies of media coverage of student protest (with the notable exception of Lainio's (2023) research) have tended to focus on single nations. Nevertheless, as they have all made very similar arguments (that the media tends to delegitmise student activism), we may assume, on the basis of this work, that the media operates in a similar way across national borders – for example, bolstering neo-liberal principles and defending established state interests. The comparative study outlined in this article, in contrast, provides evidence of considerable variation across national contexts – with newspapers in Ireland and Spain celebrating student activism; their counterparts in France often subsuming student protests into wider national politics; and the print media in the UK tending to problematise students in similar ways to those documented in previous research. While there was some variation in each of these nations (e.g. linked to the political persuasion of particular newspapers), the broad national trends outlined above were striking.

How might we explain these national differences? Newspapers clearly do not always reflect public opinion in a straightforward manner, often serving to promote particular interests of their own. Nevertheless, in relation to coverage of these student protests, to some extent, they reflect differences in both public opinion and the position of the relevant national government with respect to the conflict in Gaza. Around the time of the student protests (on 28 May 2024), Ireland and Spain, along with Norway, took the step of recognising Palestine as a state, in an attempt to help resolve the conflict by reinforcing support for the Palestinian people. In contrast, neither France nor the UK took similar action at this point in time. (While they both did, ultimately, recognise Palestine as a state, this took place over a year later – in September 2025.) Public opinion in Ireland and Spain was highly supportive of this action with, for example, 78 per cent of the Spanish population believing that 'European countries should recognise the state of Palestine now' (with 18 per cent disagreeing and 4 per cent not sure) (Enriques and Martinez 2024). Moreover, cross-European polling in three of the four countries considered in this article has revealed significant differences: 59 per cent of Spaniards considered Israel's attack on Gaza in October/November 2023 unjustified, compared with 44 per cent of Britons and 37 per cent of the French (Smith 2023). Both Ireland and Spain have, historically, been seen to be sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians – because of a shared history of British colonialism in the case of the Irish (Browne 2024),

and a longstanding affinity with Arab nations on the part of Spain (Buheji and Hasan 2024).

Other political factors may also be at play. The prominence of national political figures in articles about the student protests in France is likely to have been related to the fact that campaigning for elections to the French National Assembly was happening at the same time as the most significant protests (elections were held on 30 June and 7 July 2024). Moreover, the election campaign was marred by many accusations of anti-semitism (as well as racism) (Cassini 2024), which may have influenced the framing of the coverage of the student action. Anti-semitism had also played out in UK politics in the years leading up to the protests. The Conservative government (in power at the time most of the UK encampments were taking place) had long criticised the Labour Party for tolerating anti-semitic views amongst its MPs and the Labour Party had itself recognised the problem, taking steps to try to root out such opinions (Shaw 2021). This may well help to explain the heightened emphasis that the right-wing press put on this issue in their coverage of the student protests.

National differences relate also to wider cultural factors. The problematisation of student protests in the UK – but not in Ireland and Spain, and to a much lesser extent in France – is likely partially explained by the 'culture wars' stoked by many right-wing newspapers. Over recent years, such UK papers have developed a significant critique of students – as 'snowflakes' in need of 'trigger warnings' to protect them from challenging content (Finn, Ingram, and Allen 2021). This critique has also, in some cases, been extended to the universities in which they study – for allegedly curtailing free speech as part of a 'woke' agenda (Jones 2022). Although some strains of this debate have been observed in Ireland (Lainio 2023), it has been much more pronounced in the UK. It is thus perhaps not surprising that students are criticised in the UK media for not engaging in dialogue with politicians (discussed above), as this is in line with the papers' views that students prefer to avoid difficult issues.

These possible explanations for the observed national differences are, to some extent, historically contingent – seemingly related to particular political moments in all four of the countries. It is thus possible that at other times, in relation to other types of student protest, media perspectives may be significantly different, with fewer cross-national differences, and perhaps less sympathetic coverage in Ireland and Spain. Moreover, despite the national differences discussed above, similar and significant *international* connections were also evident. These were played out in the framing of the student protests as part of a global movement, originating in the US, which was discussed in many of the articles and also articulated by several of the students quoted in the articles. (This global framing was also evident in the sheer number of articles about protests in other countries which, as explained above, were excluded from the current analysis because of the focus on constructions of *national* students).

Despite these contingencies, the evidence presented in this article adds to the body of work that has documented the enduring salience of the nation-state with respect to European higher education in general (e.g. Brooks et al. 2022). While some scholars have argued that European higher education systems, and the experiences of students within them, have become increasingly similar – largely because of long-standing pressures wrought by marketisation and globalisation (Slaughter and Cantwell 2012), as well as specific supranational policy measures (Moutsios 2013) – the analysis in this article

suggests that there remain some substantial differences in how higher education students are understood, by their national media, at least. The article is also significant in showing how, in some situations at least, the media can serve to provide more celebratory accounts of student activism. This should be welcomed.

Note

1. In France, Ireland and Spain, regional papers were not excluded from the sample (as they were in England) because of the relatively low number of articles overall.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Rachel Brooks:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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