Disability protests: contentious politics, 1970-1999

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In the 1970s, deaf people protested outside of telephone companies around the country because they were angry at having to pay for special equipment and spend three times more than hearing people to make long-distance telephone calls containing the same information. To me, these protests seemed to be a demonstration of the shattered hope that the years of massive volunteer effort to achieve telecommunications access would be successful. Emotion can perhaps be a useful form of information to awaken minds and start the gears of litigation and legislation rolling.

In 1988, I was living in northern England for six months when the Deaf President Now protest occurred. I followed it as well as I could from that distance, wishing I could have been there at that historic event. Unknown to many people, stacks of the "Blue Book" telephone directories, which lists TTY numbers around the country, were provided to the protestors by Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. (TDI) to facilitate rapid communication about the unfolding "Week the World Heard Gallaudet." In effect, one political movement seemed to build upon the results of another. Deaf people learned to see farther with demands for social change because we stood on the shoulders of former protesters.

I have also often wondered what our world would be like today in terms of both education and employment had the Deaf community a century ago protested the lack of access to the telephone. Visual forms of telephone technologies, including the Telautograph, were known by the Deaf communities in England and the United States in the late-nineteenth century. Indeed, initial excitement about them was evident in these countries' respective Deaf periodicals. Later, deaf people missed a golden opportunity to bring the Electrowriter out of train stations and hotels into their homes and offices until something better came along—the TTY modem. Instead, we waited about ninety years for basic access to long-distance communication, something taken for granted by the hearing society. How our world has changed—or not changed—because of protests in their many forms is a question worthy of research.

With these general thoughts in mind, I looked to Disability Protests: Contentious Politics, 1970–1999 by Sharon Barnartt and Richard Scotch as a resource for my home library. The writers used "event history analysis" to focus on "contentious political actions" that occurred within the Deaf and disabled communities between 1970 and 1999. The expression "contentious protest" implies a collective behavior that has been organized in an attempt to change society. Disability Protests provides a good historical introduction. The terminology and concepts associated with disability are well defined, and the authors briefly examine the span from the Colonial period through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving the reader a context for the emergence of contentious action among people with disabilities.

One chapter describes a collective consciousness that drives contentious political action. Another summarizes the social basis for the formation and mobilization of the disability movement in the modern era. In this sense, the authors have fulfilled their
goal of writing a book that will "fill the gap in the literature about social movements." This is further enriched by the many analyses found in subsequent chapters, the bulk of the book. The authors provide enlightening discussions of the characteristics of protest, including locations, demands, duration, size, tactics, and targets. They describe organizational support, participants, and the results of the protests. One chapter focuses on cross-disability and impairment- specific protests and, as in the other chapters, tables that help us to discern patterns. I was also happy to see chapters devoted to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Deaf President Now protest.

The book's one major weakness is the fact that the extensive event-history analysis is based on "745 events" that are never clearly identified. Thus, without the supporting data, the reader is unable to evaluate the analysis. I never did figure out whether the authors included those telephone-company protests in Denver, Pittsburgh, and many other cities in the 1970s. And what about deaf people's dissatisfaction with the lack of television captions? I had to reread a great deal to try to understand the criteria for the selection of protests for the mysterious "database" not included in the book. The appendix lists "rules" for the selection of protests. In reading the numerous sections on what was not included and why, I tried to determine whether the telecommunications protests were contentious enough or whether there was another reason they might not be included. In short, I gave up trying. A table showing the specific events would have more or less satisfied me in this regard.

Of the many interesting facts I learned in this book, I was particularly struck by the low success rate of the protests: never higher than 25 percent for any decade. This made me wonder whether a massive email campaign, as the authors suggest as a potential technological approach, would be any more effective in protesting, for example, the recent reduction of captioned television shows by the U.S. Department of Education.

Disability Protests provides a good summary of the role of collective consciousness in the social movement over the past few decades. It could serve as a guide that provides critical factors to consider in planning some social change the next time you feel restless.