

Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

Buses from nowhere: television and anti-busing activism in 1970s urban America

MATT DELMONT

Professor of History, Arizona State University

matthew.delmont@asu.edu

ABSTRACT: 'Busing', in which students were transported by school buses to achieve court-ordered or voluntary school desegregation, became one of the nation's most controversial civil rights issues in the decades after *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954). Focusing on Florida Governor Claude Kirk and Pontiac housewife activist Irene McCabe, this essay examines how busing opponents turned the conventions of television news – its emphasis on newsworthy events and crisis; its selective use of historical context; and its nominal political neutrality – to their advantage, staging television friendly protests that positioned mothers and children as victims of activist judges and federal bureaucrats, and framed their support for segregated neighbourhoods and schools in the colour-blind rhetoric of homeowners' rights. For politicians who aspired to the national stage, like Florida Governor Claude Kirk, busing offered a recognizable issue on which to take a stand. When Kirk protested court-ordered busing by suspending a local school board in Manatee County (Bradenton, Florida) and appointing himself school superintendent, he was not only appealing to Florida voters but also to television viewers in cities like Nashville, St Louis and Seattle, many of whom wrote to convey their support. When Vice-President Spiro Agnew complained that television network news 'can elevate men from obscurity to national prominence within a week', he was referring to Black Power author and activist Stokely Carmichael, but television news also propelled grassroots anti-busing activists like Irene McCabe to national prominence. McCabe, who staged a widely covered six-week march from Pontiac to Washington DC to protest busing, made frequent television appearances because networks deemed her newsworthy, not necessarily because newscasters agreed with her politics. Repeated television coverage turned relatively minor busing battles in Bradenton and Pontiac into national news and established Kirk and McCabe as icons of busing opposition in the early 1970s.

This Scalar site can be viewed at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/index>