

MEDIA REPORTING OF PROTEST
ACTIVITY: MAPS AND STRATEGIES

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Media reporting of protest activity ; maps and strategies

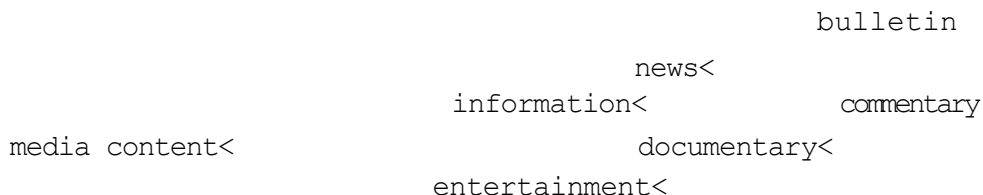
In this paper I won't be defending the right of peaceful protest so much as examining some preconditions for this right to be effective in a mass communication society. I will be drawing on current theories about the mass media to provide maps or guides to strategy which I hope will seem useful to many people with many issues to protest. These maps are meant to be simple and useful. They will show dead-end streets and no-through roads and the Positions of especially fierce dogs. They will also be optimistic : "Treasure-dig here!" They are designed for hopeful diggers, not for passive pessimists. They shouldn't contain anything that is really new Maps don't aim at novelty. A map that showed the pentagon in a nuclear test area would be new and fun, perhaps, but don't hold your breath till Reagan nukes the pentagon.

The justification for these maps is that I believe that many protest groups operate with damagingly inadequate concepts of mass society, mass media and the demands and strategies of macro-communication (ie communication involving large groups of people). As a result, they too often send the wrong messages by the wrong means to the wrong people. They fail to understand the intrinsic limitations of the kinds of message they send, and how these messages will be effective further down the communication chain. They face real enough difficulties and enemies without fighting half blind, as well. The areas of weakness I am talking about are central to the success or failure of a protest activity, not an optional extra. Peaceful protest is essentially a communication strategy, aiming to achieve social change by getting a message across. With most issues, the message has to reach many people or it cannot mobilize enough support. Protest is not an activity which sometimes connects with systems of mass communication : it is itself a form of mass communication. Some activists believe that the media in capitalist society are so biased, so enslaved to the interests of capitalism, that any attempt to use them is

doomed. Such a pessimistic view, I will suggest, doesn't square with the facts. Protest activities are regularly covered in the media, often favourably. Protest groups handicap themselves greatly if they don't use the media as well as they can. This paper aims to assist them towards that goal.

(0 Types of media content

For any protest group the first problem with the media is, how and where to enter it. The first map we will draw covers media content. This divides into a number of basic categories of content : informational and entertainment. Information divides into news and commentary, and documentary. I won't further categorize entertainment, because it is less relevant to our purposes. This gives the first simple map:



These labels do not actually specify the nature of media content. In practice (as Keith Windschuttle points out in The Media), news stories have much in common with forms of entertainment, and conversely the category of entertainment includes 'important kinds of information. What this Map does instead is to label kinds of message and assign them a place in scheduling. The message of a protest group is likely to be considered under only one heading, that of news bulletins. In fact, there is a pre-existing slot waiting for it here, for yet another protest about yet another issue. This is a positive fact, for protest groups. As they know well, this is a way in to the mass media for them, a well beaten path.", BUT there are some catches. One is, this path leads to a single enclave within the Media, not the whole territory. A full communication strategy for any protest group should aim initially at both the commentary and documentary categories as well as the news bulletin category. The success of films like The Day After and

The China Syndrome shows that the entertainment category shouldn't be neglected either. This scope is essential because for reasons we will see, the news bulletin category has many built-in limitations. It provides ready (though not inevitable) access for protest stories, but on very specific terms which cumulatively can neutralize the essence of the protest message.

(ii) What makes the news

News deals with two different categories of event : speech- events, and physical events (see Hodge 1979). To the naive - observer it might seem that the second should be the more important. In terms of media coverage, however, the balance goes very much the other way. Most news stories have at their core what someone says, not simply what has happened. What has happened only acquires significance because someone says it has happened. Not everyone's saying, however, is equally significant : or to put it another way, not all members of society are equally likely to make the news in this way. A small subset of people make the news. These are predominantly acknowledged leaders and official spokespersons. Typically they are establishment figures, middle class, middle aged, white and male. (For Australian media see Connell 1977.) Their dominance serves to express the dominance of the power structure of society. It communicates the comforting meaning that society is in good hands and mouths, even when these are prophesying or reporting doom. Keith Windschuttle (1984) has pointed out that not all newsworthy figures come from the establishment. Popular heroes, standing for lower class groups and values, can also make the news. This is true, but even so, their meanings are strongly controlled and mediated. These heroes are normally kept confined to discrete sections of the news, labelled as sport and entertainment. Crossovers into the mainstream news category occur - as with Sir Bob Geldof - but these normally require something special, and they remain a minority element in the overall category of news.

Outside the small charmed circle of names, the majority of the populace can only enter the media through figuring in a physical. event as agents or objects of an action. In this role they function as bodies not minds. Their views on what they are doing or what is done to them are not usually reported in their own words or at length. So we have a broad dichotomy. The officially important and powerful make the news because of what they think and say : the unimportant because of what they do and suffer. It is like a split between minds (and mouths and body). The ruling elite have mind and speech, while the rest exist in mindless bodies, acting and acted on but not in control of their own meanings.

This has consequences for the reporting of protest issues, and hence for the typical strategies of protest groups. Since protest activity operates on the margins of the establishment, opposing both establishment decisions and the structures through which they are made, it will normally be classified as non-ruling class. This - and this is one of the greatest obstacles for a protest group in getting across a message of any complexity - it will make news primarily as action not meaning. The two major forms of protest activity that make the -news, then, are the stunt and the rally. These two genres have different strengths and weaknesses, especially in the roles they play in provoking media events and media coverage.

(iii) Three phases of media coverage

Media coverage of tallies has three phases : preview, report, and commentary (see Hodge 1985). The preview rides on the news value of the report. The texts that make it up, however, represent an opportunity for the protest group or its spokespersons to appear as mouths rather than bodies, as one lot of authorities on the event that is to occur. The elitist criteria for speaking in the media are not abandoned, they are only modified. Distinguished public figures will have priority. Authorized spokespersons will get some space, as heads of the

protest body. One or the other may make it into the category of commentary, where they can put something of the case which is the basis of the protest. This opportunity is very important, because unless the protest group can get its argument across it cannot convince anyone. As I will show, this cannot be done through the rally itself. The commentary phase is also more or less closed to interventions by the protest group. It is controlled by media-nominated commentators, mainly chosen for their "objectivity" or at least their independence of the protest group. In many ways, the rally exists for the sake of the preview not vice versa.

A crucial difference between the rally and the stunt is that the stunt is more likely to lack a preview phase, or if it has one, it is not likely to gain protestors entry into news comment category. The rally can be represented as a construction of minds and bodies. The stunt is primarily physical. Its meaning is largely assigned through the commentary phase, where external, usually hostile interpretations have free play. For this reason, the stunt, particularly popular amongst small or frustrated protest groups, is a double edged weapon. It can get media coverage alright, but usually of a negative and counterproductive kind.

(iv) Disasters and deviants

To understand why, we will use another simplistic pair of categories. Newsworthy events can be classified as dealing with triumphs or disasters. Of these two categories, the more common is disaster. No news is good news, because most news is bad news. Within the category of disaster, the most important standard is a concern, even an obsession with deviancy of various kinds: criminals especially causes of sex and violence, drug pushers, the unemployed, those involved in scandal (See- eg Cohen and Young, 1973). The purpose of these stories (which are echoed and elaborated in the entertainment media) is clearly not to provoke deviancy. On the contrary they exist as moral lessons

reverse. The deviant, in art, literature, popular culture, and the news, especially in the popular media, is needed by the dominant ideology to complete its meaning. Society needs its deviants so that it can point out to the law-abiding what not to do. But precisely because this is so pervasive a strategy of socialization, well socialized readers and viewers do not mistake the intention of stories of deviancy. They have been carefully trained for many years to react in the right (le negative) way to them.

The category of deviant is very relevant to the construction of protest activities, because it controls how their message may be interpreted. If a group is classified as deviant, its message comes over as its opposite. The logic is as follows : what the deviant thinks, believes and wants is definitionally dangerous and wrong. So the label 'deviant' (or a form of it) is the kiss of death for any protest group. Yet the protest group has been pushed to the margins by their sense that they cannot rely on the normal channels of communication and power. They are therefore vulnerable to the label of deviance. Enemies will try to push them in this direction, describing them as unrepresentative, extremists, weirdos. This, then, is a label that must above all be resisted by protest groups. This is where the stunt is so often vulnerable as a tactic and so often counter productive. As a signal of deviance it attracts media attention, seducing the protestors into extravagant displays of difference which then cancel out their message.

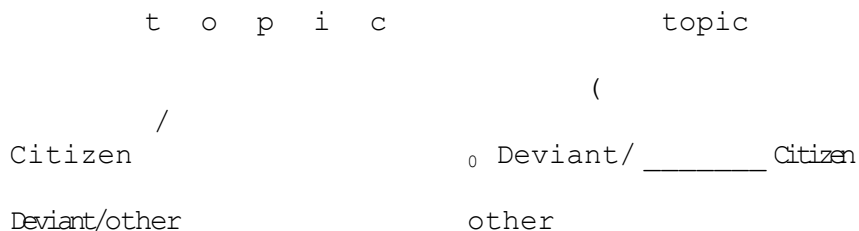
The rally itself is also liable to be constructed by the media in these terms, with the camera or journalist's eye seeking out signs. or moments Of oddness and difference,. emphasizing these out of all proportion.

Deviance is a very general social message, not a specific argument. It serves to orientate receivers of the message to its content, rather than convey that content. However, this function and kind of meaning should not be ignored or under-

estimated in an analysis of protest activities as represented by the media. On the contrary, this is the kind of meaning the mass media communicate best. It's a meaning-effect that protestors are most often blind to. They pin everything to the rightness of their cause, and the facts that support it. But in media coverage of a rally or stunt those facts only appear ipso truncated a form that they couldn't convince, on their own. Social meanings, however, are transmitted with amazing facility and richness. It is the social meanings of a protest event, that matter, not its informational content.

(v) Structure balance theory and tactics of persuasion

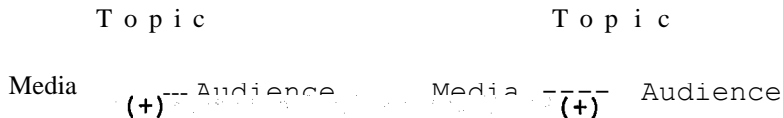
One way of seeing the dynamics of the social process at issue is to use what has been called structural balance theory (see Newcomb 197). This theory looks at communication as a triangle linking communicators and topics, with plus signs indicating a positive orientation, and minus signs the opposite. It postulates that in a triangle of this form, these signs will tend to be balanced, ie, they will add up to a positive. If they do not, then participants will try to adjust accordingly. To illustrate with the example of a deviant view of a topic, this theory would predict the following:



ie, the negative social relationship between citizen and . deviant/other pressures the citizen to disapprove of what.the other approved and vice versa. That is, the social relationship determines or influences the citizen's attitude to the topic, whatever that might be. That is why a construction of the social relationship is so important in the struggle for social meanings. This is why it is so important that a protest group present itself as knowable, likeable and trustworthy; and why hostile media coverage can do so much damage, by presenting them

as unknowable, unlikeable and untrustworthy. To give just one instance : a common shot in TV coverage shows feet marching past the camera. Only foot fetishists will find it easy to relate 'Ipositively to this image. For others, it serves to dehumanize the marchers, turning them into hundreds of legs supporting banners, not human beings like us.

But precisely because the social relationships are so important in media meanings, the topic content is often sacrificed to it. The media give their readers/viewers "what they want" because it is the readers/viewers that they, the media, want. The same triangle explains the process, but this time it is the topic which constructs the relationship, not the other way around.



That is, the media bonds its audience to it by liking what its audience likes and disliking what they dislike. The two types of triangle sound contradictory, but in practice they are complementary. Some topics serve a social function; constructing a positive relationship; others are what that positive relationship is being used for. The lesson from this for organizers of protest tallies and stunts is clear. You can't convince anyone of the rightness of your cause by information and facts, especially as filtered through media coverage. The best you can-do isConstruct a positive relationship, with the majority of messages (slogans etc) designed to-create solidarity rather than to educate - though doing both at once is even better if you can.

(vi) The ideological meanings of protest activity

One of the most important meanings conveyed by a protest activity is its general ideological message, ie, the version of social relationships it implies. Every protest activity assumes, and therefore projects, a conception of general social relationships, over the above the specific issue. Peaceful protest assumes a social order in which the governors can be influenced by public opinion and/or by reason, that the bonds between governors and governed are strong even if the governors are getting it slightly wrong, on this issue. It affirms the basic values of participants' democracy. Violent protest assumes a great gulf, unbridgeable by reason. Its message is frustration, anger and revolution. All members of society can be assumed to know about these different ideologies, and they are alert in scanning texts - an actual rally or stunt; or media coverage of one - for signs of these different ideological meanings.

Stunts are normally carried out by small groups of committed people. The smallness of the group is itself an ideological message - this is not a mass statement, but a minority statement. Because it usually must be a cohesive group in itself, it will project signifiers of internal unity, excluding other people, renouncing individuality within and co-operation without. The label of 'deviancy' hovers in the wings ready to be attached to the producers of stunts, reinforcing the negative ideological meaning of their protest. None of these meanings is inevitable, of course. What I am describing is a kind of ideological inertia which will be magnified by media coverage, and will determine the main Meaning the public will derive from a protest activity unless the organizers are skilful and effective in deflecting it

A rally or march is a well-established protest genre with, by now, a solid track record for achieving real change. Part of their effectiveness (when they are effective) comes from the ideological meanings that they can project. Crucial here is their size.

Whatever else will be reported about a rally or march the next day, estimates about numbers will be included : police estimates and/or those of the organizers. There is no objective figure which signifies 'success'. What matters is a quantity of marchers that signifies mass support. Diversity is also important. Better a mix of different age, class, occupation, race and gender than a monolithic group, even with the same overall numbers. Most organizers of rallies are very aware of the need for numbers, and even of the value of diversity. These are parts, of the message they know they have to construct. What is less well-recognized is that the rally is a text with a number of co-authors. Here we need to consider the role of the police. Rally organizers often see the police as at best a necessary evil, always likely to distort the message of the rally. In fact, however, the police are an intrinsic part of the message of the rally, as this is perceived by onlookers and transmitted by the media. Relationships between marchers and the police signify the ideological orientation of that group to the state, and of the state to that group. Given the media orientation to disaster, there will be a strong tendency to focus on incidents of violence. Even minor scuffles can be foregrounded in media coverage, to an extent that is often felt to be unfair by rally organizers. (See eg Hall et al 1978.)

Undoubtedly there has been media distortion, and police provocation in rallies which have produced media coverage which rally organizers have resented and felt was unfair.. However, part of the Aim of a rally is to demonstrate how many friends you have. If organizers construct a text which presupposes police and media hostility, they will probably get it. That set of hostilities may then be part of the overall message of the rally, with important effects. There is an alternative to a situation of competing texts a rally text and a police text carrying a meaning of opposition. police and organizers can together create a unitary text which expresses a fundamental harmony between the right of protest and the powers of the state.

Of course, this may not be possible with every rally, with every police force. It is usually less possible with stunts than rallies - another disadvantage of stunts. This seminar will be dealing later with the topic policing protest. One dimension of that topic is the police need for ideology which incorporates them in the social order. One way, in terms of social balance theory, would be for them to oppose deviants, and thus as enemies of the enemies of the social order they become allies of that order. In conflicts with criminals, this is an effective strategy. However, it is a risky strategy to do this with a protest that successfully avoids the label of deviant/other.

In this situation, the police have much to gain by co-operating in producing a text that shows positive relations *between* protestors and police. Nor is it the case that the media are uninterested in police-protestor harmony. Examples of this are still newsworthy, even if there is a preference for violence stories.

(vii) Media diversity in a stratified society.

Thus far we have talked of the media as though they made up a unity. In some respects this is right. Both ownership patterns and journalistic practices link the different media in a variety of important ways. However, for strategic purposes, the differences are equally necessary to stress and to map. Every media organization is hierarchically structured, with some at the Tops; some at the bottom and many in between. These strata are both linked and opposed. The conspiracy theory of the media is popular among many left-wing groups, including some protest organizations. (See eg McQueen 1977.) This sees the capitalist-owned commercial medias as a megaphone for capitalist interests, profoundly biased against any oppositional interests, which would include almost all protest movements. If this were true, most of my paper would be irrelevant, since whatever a protest group did, its best efforts would be suppressed or distorted. However, a careful study of the reporting of protest

activities in the Australian media shows that this does not always happen. Protests are often reported as fully as media conventions allow, and sometimes favourably. The media dice may be loaded against protest, but not irretrievably so.

To see why, we can consider the abstract interests of a hypothetical media baron (in Australia there are no baronesses).: As a capitalist he can be assumed to support capitalism and a status quo which suits him nicely. He won't want, his boat rocked too strenuously. But as a capitalist, selling commodities in the market place against other capitalists, he is also concerned with profits, and saleable commodities. If radicalism and dissent are popular causes, he may be tempted to risk pushing that line, or at least allow his journalists to take that risk on his behalf. There are recorded interventions by media barons, usually conservative in tendency, and often unprofitable, (See eg McQueen 1977.) However, non-interventions by these barons are the normal rule, and these tacitly allow a diversity of practice, where journalistic input can be decisive. Journalists as an occupational group are predominantly middle class but they are by no means mega capitalists, unlike their bosses. There are enough of them to cover a wide range of positions, and it is likely that for any protest activity, there is at least one journalist who is sympathetic towards that cause - not enough to lose their job, perhaps, but quite enough to spike a simple conspiracy-theory of the media. (See for instance articles in K & E Windschuttle 1981.)

The media can also be classified in terms of the medium they use : print, radio and television. These three media can do different kinds of job, with different kinds of message. Television is recognized as the most influential of the three. Some critics regret or deplore this, but I believe its pre-eminence is justified, and of significance to protest organizations. Television not only has greater market penetration (more People have TV sets) but also greater credibility (People trust it more). This trust of course can be

misplaced, of all the media TV is thought to trivialize issues. This is true to some extent of the news bulletin format, where each story is given so little time that complex verbal content is ruled out. However, as I have said earlier, protest activity should not attempt to communicate complex verbal messages full of information and argument. Televisual messages have their own kind of efficiency and complexity, which is appropriate for the social dimension of the protest message. Television coverage of a rally can compress hours to minutes and still give a more comprehensive and adequate impression of its meanings than print news can. Television selects and edits down massively, but still transmits actual footage. Print journalism has to translate (from visual to verbal) as well as select and edit.

Studies of print versus television as a source of understanding of complex issues underlying the news tend to find that those who rely on print (especially 'quality' newspapers) have a better grasp of underlying issues than those who rely on television. However, this gives a misleading impression of the potential of the two media. For a variety of reasons, the TV news bulletin in Australia has a half-hour format (with ads, on commercial stations) which restricts the number of news items and their duration. Newspapers can carry many more items and devote more space to them.

However, in the commentary category (eg Four Corners, 7.30 Report, etc.), issues can be presented in greater depth. Viewers can have images that show them something of the reality behind an issue (eg the beautiful countryside that is threatened, or consequences of development) plus the actual words, complete with non-verbal cues, of those who have strong views and claims to expertise about an issue, instead of the massively edited language that is the staple of the print medium. Words, are essential to convey abstract ideas; pictures, to convey concrete realities. TV can do better justice to words as well as picture's, compared to the print media, so long as time and programming constraints allow. To confirm this

judgment, in a study of one issue dealing in Western Australia, I found that in general those whose primary source for the issue was a newspaper did have a better grasp of the underlying issues than those who relied on TV. But the only group who had a complete grasp of the issues were those who had watched a TV commentary account. The lesson for protest groups is clear : TV is the high ground of media coverage, and news coverage of protest activities (rally or stunt) is not enough.

A final map to consider is a map of the target society itself, in this case Australia. Australia is a complexly stratified society, and this fact affects both its media forms and how they are interpreted. Mass media forms in spite of this name are only relatively massy. They copy with the diversity of their audience in one of two broad ways - by targeting an audience, who comes to know roughly what to expect, or by blurring differences to aggregate an audience, who will be attracted by different things in the medium and even respond to them and interpret them differently in the light of their different values and assumptions. The mass media aim is to seem all things to all persons. But a specific orientation to protest activities is a recognizable dimension of some media. Some newspapers have a 'liberal' readership, and are likely to be more positive about a specific protest issue. This can mobilize support for it in a wider potentially sympathetic community which may still, overall be in a minority in Australia at large. Other newspapers aim at a 'conservative' readership. These papers will most likely give a negative, even biased image of a protest activity. **But** the readers of those papers mostly have an inbuilt bias that would in any case have turned a neutral report into a negative one

Only when an ostensibly broad scope medium (eg The Australian, as Australia's only national paper, or a major TV channel) carries a negative image, should a protest group really worry, and cry _____ A major media organization's aim to aggregate an audience in the name of profit is not a cast iron guarantee

of objectivity and full coverage, but it is better than nothing. It is also, incidentally, better than anything that could be achieved by any conceivable legislation.

(viii) Conclusion

This overview has been rapid and superficial, but I hope it provides a fair indication of how the media land lies. I argue that the mass media are essential in completing the communication functions of peaceful protest activity. Since this link is so vital, and since legitimate protest activity is so important in a democracy like ours, the stronger it is the better. I have tried to emphasize what protest groups could do to strengthen this link, not because I think the media are perfect or beyond criticism but because I think that protest groups have the stronger vested interest. Perhaps out of a seminar such as this protest groups could not only achieve their specific aims better, they could create a general pressure for a more responsible and responding media in Australia.

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