

TELEVISION REPORTING OF PROTEST ACTIVITY

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By way of beginning, I refer to the page of publicity material circulated by the Human Rights Commission to announce this seminar. It says, in its first paragraph, that "peaceful protest is a major mechanism for the attainment and maintenance of peace. It enables ordinary men and women to speak out on issues they believe important, thereby helping to bring about social and political change by peaceful means."

As my particular subject here is "Media Reporting of Protest Activity", I would like to take up two points that preamble suggests, and to develop them from the standpoint of someone who, over the course of some 28 years in the media, in this country and elsewhere, has inevitably found himself confronted from time to time by the many - and often complicated - issues that the conjunction of protest activity and the media bring about.

The first point is to do with the implications for the media in the sentence about enabling ordinary men and women to speak out ...thereby helping to bring about social and political change. I would guess that protest has always depended for its success, to a considerable degree, on who hears it. Roman citizens, making for the forum to protest to the noble senators about this or that tax increase, presumably intended their anger to reach wider audience than the Senators alone. They must have hoped for a mention in the contemporary Roman version of Hansard at least, and probably in the reports - whether word-of-mouth or written - that kept the empire in touch with itself. Not much point, they would probably argue, in putting your case unless your constituents - and as many other people as you can reach - hearing about it as well as the people you're putting the case

to. After all, sheer Merit or force of logic in your argument may not be enough to carry the day. If nobody knows you're protesting, except the protestors and the protestees - if I can call them that - then your chances of success are probably pretty slight, and few will know you've even tried.

If that was true in Roman times, it's surely all the more true now. In these days of P.R. people, lobbyists, pressure groups, and the Pervasive nature of newspapers, magazines, radio and television, the message is - more and more - "get it in the media". And, increasingly, the electronic media. It would be extremely foolish - apart from just plain wrong - to argue that the so-called print media are in terminal decline, or destined for the same fate as the dinosaur and the dodo, but there's equally no doubt that - so far as this country at least is concerned - we're in the age of talkback radio and the T.V. "news grab". So every programme editor in television current affairs and every newsroom chief of staff finds his mailbag or his telephone message pad pretty full each day with information about protests. Ordinary men and women, wanting to speak out on issues they believe important, are organising to do so. In numbers and with 'great frequency.'

Faced with all this advice about protests here and there about this and that, the editor or his chief-of-staff then faces the classic editorial questions: who, what, when, where and why, as well as some others that are of a more specific kind; and particularly important to television: Is the protest intended to be a peaceful one (I'll come back to the question of violence a little later)?; is it likely to be?; is it about an issue that's already in the public domain?; if so, is it significant in any serious national, state or community sense?; if not, is it an issue that is likely to become significant?; does the issue involved have any general application, or does it affect only the people protesting?; if the latter, is there still something significant involved, like a miscarriage of justice or an example of administrative unfairness?; is it an isolated case,

or - potentially - the tip of the iceberg?; if not of great significance, is there still something interest-catching about the issue? - a protest by children for instance about the loss of a local playground. What chances of success does the protest have? Is it a lost cause, or something which might stand a chance of success? At a more superficial level, what tactics are the protestors going to employ? Are they marching, sitting-in, handing out leaflets, or employing some "gimmick" which is likely to catch media attention and single that protest out from any others? In many cases, these questions can be answered before the event, by checking the files on what' already happened or contacting the protesting organisation directly. But many others - like the size of the protest in - terms of numbers, and the effect it has - can only be answered on the day itself. By that time, a key decision may .already have been made: whether the media organisation will "cover" the protest or not. The answers to those questions may have produced the decision by themselves, but other factors will have weighed in it too. What else is happening? What resources in terms of camera crews and reporters do you have at your disposal? What are the priorities?

There are no formula answers to any of these questions: they'll vary according to circumstances and news judgements, and notevery decision about whether to cover or what to cover will be the right oneOrganisers of protests will be unhappy if the media, or significant parts of it, doesn't turn up when invited and probably still more unhappy if the coverage is done but subsequently not shown. What's going on? Is it censorship? Pro-establishment bias? Or media disappointment that the protest didn't turn violent, and thus produce what is commonly supposed to be "good" television. Almost invariably, in my experience, it will be none of those things. It's more likely to be simply the pressure of events, and choices having to be made between competing candidates for limited television air time The answer may lie within the protest itself: if organisers have forecast a turnout of, say, 15,000 for their

gathering and only 2,000 turn up editors may legitimately conclude that the protest hasn't got the strength of feeling behind it that was claimed for it.

Then there's the nature of the coverage. Should it include "rank and file" protestors being seen and heard as well as the organisers, who may have their arguments better marshalled and be more articulate, more concise? Should it include sight and sound of those being protested against? Ideally, in my view, yes. , But circumstances on the spot will not always permit, and neither will the constraints of time within a television news bulletin. If a protest is not immediately successful - and few are - how often should the media return to it? Is a regular weekly protest, by roughly the same numbers of people doing roughly the same things, worthy of regular inclusion in news bulletins? It may represent admirable persistence and determination, but is it news? The dilemma for the protestors then is what to do to regain media attention, assuming - as I have done - that they believe it to be necessary as a means of propagating their cause. Do they simply persist, hoping to wear away the stones of media indifference and establishment inaction? Or do they "up the ante"? Find some new tactic to advance their cause and get back in the public eye? One answer, whether out of calculation or sheer frustration, is to turn to violence. After all, it's widely assumed that the media, and especially television, feeds on violence and will choose to cover the protest that's likely to be violent rather than the one that isn't.

Which brings me to the second point about that preamble which sets the atmosphere in which we're discussing protest today. It's in that other sentence I referred to "peaceful protest is major mechanism for the attainment and maintenance of peace". That's an extremely worthy sentiment and there are positive examples I am sure we could all quote to bear out the statement. But I hope it will not be taken as the cynicism of someone who has perhaps been around journalism too long if I ask whether it

is, really, generally true. I don't believe it is, at least - where major issues affecting either individual nations or groups of nations are concerned. And those issues, after all, are the ones most likely to affect, for good or ill, "the attainment and maintenance of peace".

In saying that, I don't disparage the success of peaceful protest in attaining what could be called "small-scale" objectives, at a community or local level: the provision of a new pedestrian crossing, saving that playground I mentioned earlier, or causing a rethink on some unsuitable piece of re-development. There must be plenty of examples of success of that sort (although probably there's plenty of failures too).

But, on the really big and important issues, how often can peaceful protest be claimed to have made much headway. Not often, I would submit and - these days - with decreasing frequency. Why? Because, these days, most protests on major issues very quickly become violent protests. The examples spring readily to mind from one's own experience: the anti-Vietnam demonstrations of the mid sixties; Paris in 1968; anti-nuclear demonstrations of various kinds in the U.K. and Europe through the 70's and 80's; anti-apartheid demonstrations in South Africa and elsewhere; demonstrations against the - right-wing juntas of South America; for and against the Sikh community in India. Closer to home, the demonstrations against anti-demonstration legislation in Queensland; against the visits of American warships; against woodchipper and roadbuilders in the forests of Queensland and Tasmania; against Uranium miners or for Aboriginal land rights.

In all those cases, there's been extensive media coverage; by no means least on television. As I said earlier, television is often blamed for the violence. If the cameras weren't there, it's argued, the violence wouldn't happen. Maybe even the protest itself wouldn't happen. Television will show the violence because "it makes good pictures". Therefore, if you

want maximum publicity for your protest, attack the police or whichever symbol of authority is handy. You can be sure you'll be on the evening news. If you're peaceful, you may not even have your protest covered, if it is covered, it probably won't be shown.

The difficulty for the media in all this is that there's an element of truth in it, as well as all the elements of what's called these days a no-win situation. Violent protests often will be shown, and occasionally - I regret to say - it's because an individual editor has decided that they are simply "good pictures". That's regrettable because it runs contrary to one of the precepts of good television journalism: that the pictures are important, as a means of illustrating a news story, but not all-important. There must, or should, be an issue or an event which is worth reporting for its own significance, not simply an excuse to show bleeding heads and clouds of tear-gas.

But why show the violence at all? Why not simply switch off the camera and walk away when it starts? Or edit it out and leave the violent bits on the cutting room floor? Because that's as misleading as to show only the violence, and not to report why the protest was happening in the first place, and what form the protest had originally taken. The violence, when it happens, need not be instigated by the protesters or, at least, not by their organisers. It may be hangers-on, looking for any excuse for a punch-up. It may be agents provocateurs. It may be the police, or the military, or whichever arm of authority. And they may be acting out of anger and frustration, or dislike of long-haired lefties, or because they have their orders to defend lives or property or just "keep the peace". It doesn't really matter so far as the editor's decision about coverage is concerned. If the violence forms a substantial part of the events surrounding the protest, it should be shown: coolly, and responsibly, and in context, but shown. How, else are those citizens who are viewers ^{of} television news, and that's most of them in most societies, to get an idea of how their fellow

citizens and the authorities which govern them behave in times of conflict. Surely one measure of a mature society is how well it can get along with itself. And one sign of dangerous tensions, which ought to be examined and dealt with, is how quickly disaffected citizens resort to throwing stones and how easily edgy authorities reach for the baton and the gas canister. By the time it gets to the petrol bomb on the one hand and the machine pistol on the other, it may be too late to start asking what's going wrong.

As I wrote this, a few weekends ago, I was watching the evening television news bulletins in Sydney. They all included, among a range of other items, coverage of two protest demonstrations, both to do - in their different ways - with the subject of peace. One concerned the visit to Melbourne of American warships which may or may not have been carrying nuclear weapons. The ships had been opened to the public in the usual goodwill gesture. Some protestors had got on board to hang out banners and paint slogans on the ships' sides. They had tangled with the crew and then - in a fairly violent confrontation - with the police on the dockside. Who had instigated the violence? The Americans and the police would say it was the protestors, who had disrupted an otherwise peaceful occasion and resisted attempts to expel them from the scene. The protestors would - and did - say it was government policy in the first place which caused the trouble (the very presence of such ships was an act of violence), and the Americans and the police in the second place, for resisting an otherwise peaceful protest. The television coverages reflected all those things, albeit briefly. I believe they were right to cover the story, and right to show it in the way they did.

The second protest was outside the Sydney Film Festival, where the French film Hail Mary was being shown for the first time. A story about the Prince of Peace, but you'd never have guessed it. From a peaceful beginning, it turned within minutes into an ugly clash between people who believed - apparently with a great

depth of feeling and emotion - that such a film had no place being screened at all. It should be banned. And others who believed that they had a right to see the film first and make up their minds about it afterwards. They also felt that their fellow-citizens didn't have the right to prevent them from so doing. In the middle, some obviously unhappy policemen who didn't seem to know whether to allow the protesters to protest or the film-goers to filmgo. Or quite where to draw the line between the two. Whose civil rights were being threatened? Whose views of peace should prevail? How far should either side go? Again, the television news bulletins reported, and generally reported well, on the issues as well as the violence.

But for the media, the problems associated with the reporting of protest, whether peaceful or violent, are not likely to go away. We'll be accused of doing too much or too little. Of encouraging violence by our mere presence, or of supporting the role of the authorities against protesting citizens. Complaints like that can arise from on-the-spot decisions as apparently simple as behind which line to stand - the police line or the demonstrators. Obviously, to be in both places at once would be an aid to comprehensive coverage and thus to fairness, which should be our over-riding consideration. But it isn't always possible. Where a camera crew and reporter stands - in the physical sense - might also be conditioned by the relative hostility to them of both sides. Put bluntly, are you going to be knocked about and have your camera smashed by the police or protestors? Those decisions all have to be thought through, and acted on carefully. Not made simply out of habit or convenience. It's an easy temptation for us in the media to say that if we're being criticised by both sides in a dispute then we're probably getting it right. Not necessarily. As the director-general of the BBC Alasdair Milne put it recently, it's a temptation we must resist: "to be shot at from every side does not necessarily prove that you are standing in the right place".

So we have to continue to examine every issue as it comes along, and to re-examine our own attitudes to some of those old editorial questions I mentioned at the beginning: the how, when, where, what and why. Where protest is concerned, it's the how, what and why that are the most important. What's the protest about? Why are we covering it? How are we covering it, and how will that coverage be edited so as to present a fair picture to the viewers, and one which provides them with food for thought - however disturbing that may be. We're not there as advocates of a cause, or as defenders of an established position, but as , witnesses - eyes and ears for the wider community who won't be present themselves. It behoves us to take that responsibility seriously, to use both eyes and both ears, and our experience and intelligence, to do the best job we can. We can't, and shouldn't make society's decisions for it; we can, and should, provide society with some of the wherewithal on which it can base its decisions. That applies to our reporting of protest activity at least as much as it applies to anything