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Hierarchies of Incredibility: The impact of different repertoires of protest on message propagation and press coverage

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Jonathan Cable works at Cardiff University where he completed his PhD in Journalism Studies in July 2012. His research examined the impact of the media and protest tactics of three different protest groups, and the affect these tactics had on their ability to publicise their messages and succeed and fail in their stated objectives. He's since worked on several different projects such the *BBC Trust* funded project investigating impartiality across news outlets.

Abstract

This paper examines the tactical repertoires of three particular protest groups and how their internal objectives and decision making processes impacted upon their protest tactics and press coverage. The three groups cover a range of topics and used very different protest tactics, from a non-confrontational community campaign to a series of symbolic direct actions, and a mass demonstration. The concept of political opportunities is adapted for a more mediated politics to assess the success and failure of protest groups to propagate their messages, and the affect different media strategies and protest tactics has on this endeavour. The messages of each group are examined for their collective action frames and traced through protest group communications, protest actions, and into their framing in press coverage. The main argument put forward is that the success and failure of a protest group should be judged on what they do, their aims and goals, and not just the results of protest, such as press coverage. This gives a more complete picture to give a more complete of a protest group than just looking at the results of protest.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with protest group messages, the representation of protesters, their aims and goals, and how the decision making process influence their media and protest tactics. Before continuing it is worth giving a brief background to the three groups under investigation in this paper how they were structured, and their aims and goals. The groups were active at various stages between the years 2008 and 2010 in the UK. The first group was a Cardiff, UK based community campaign with a central committee of 5 people whose aim was to save a Victorian era pub from demolition, called Save the Vulcan. They had a very local focus, used non-confrontational protest tactics, and created close relationships with the regional press to create a high local media profile (Save the Vulcan 2010a). The second group protested against the expansion of Britain's airports, and was spread nationally across the UK, and operated under the name Plane Stupid (Plane Stupid 2014). They were expressly non-hierarchical and used more confrontational protest tactics, namely symbolic direct action to get their messages across. This tactic was used to attract press coverage through a use of spectacular stunts, and as will be shown, this generated a lot of press coverage. This occurred against the backdrop of political division over the future of Britain's airports. The final group G20Meltdown were an umbrella organisation who represented approximately 65 different groups, operating non-hierarchically and were mainly based in London (G20Meltdown 2009b)¹. They conducted a mass demonstration with a direct action element it targeted at the Group of 20 (G20) summit which was held in London in April 2009. The group attempted to capitalise on public and press attention on the MP expenses scandal and the financial crisis. Their actions fit into the sequence of international summit protests that have occurred around the world over the last 25 years following the Global Justice Movement's rise to prominence at the World Trade Organisation meeting at Seattle, Washington in December 1999 (DeLuca and Peeples 2002).

¹ Please note: the G20Meltdown website no longer exists. A cached version can be found on the Internet Archive WaybackMachine (G20Meltdown 2009a).

Methods and Data Sources Used

To fully investigate the collective action frames, protest tactics, and reactions of the press to the three groups several different empirical methods and data sources were used. In order to 'follow the message' the official websites and social media presences of the groups was analysed. This was done to uncover what the collective action frames at the centre of each campaign were, and the activists' framing of their protest opportunities. In other words the reasons why a specific protest action was carried out, including references to the protest target and the timing of the action. The tracing of the messages through the protest actions and into the mainstream press required a targeted content analysis of press coverage for each group. For Plane Stupid and G20Meltdown these articles were taken from UK national newspapers, and for the Save the Vulcan campaign the press coverage was gathered from the two main South Wales regional newspapers the *Western Mail* and *South Wales Echo*. The debates around the protest issues present in newspaper articles is said to reveal the 'strategies of power or strategies for defining the rational and the commonsensical' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2003, 133-134).

The sample articles were gathered in two ways, the first was from the online newspaper database Nexis but searching for the names of the groups, key figures, and variations of name/issue/protest. The reason for targeting each group was to allow for the inclusion of a wide range of publications, and to uncover their particular influence on the coverage, and how their messages were reported in the press, rather than the issue as a whole. This method yielded 126 articles for the Save the Vulcan campaign (between September 2008 and May 2010), 207 articles for Plane Stupid (between February 2008 and June 2009), and finally 97 articles for G20Meltdown (between January 2009 and June 2009). To compliment these methods an ethnography was carried out with the Save the Vulcan group, along with interviews with several participants involved in each of the campaigns. The following sections are based on insights from the interviews and data from the other methods. This paper will now detail the theoretical framework, the results of the empirical research and discuss the implications of the findings for protest groups and for future academic research.

Political and Media Opportunities

The interaction between protest groups, the media, and their political targets is where the conceptual framework of political opportunities comes into the argument. Political opportunities concerns the external influences upon collective action, and by extension, the relative success and failure of protest groups. The very definition of political opportunities refers to the shaping of collective action by environmental, institutional, and political variables (Eisinger 1973; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Sireau 2009). However, the construction of this theory is far too structural to be applicable to all groups, and this allows room for refinement. This is central to the two arguments which will be put forward in this paper. The first is concerned with the level of prominence granted to the media, because media opportunities are often the first place to go for any protest group attempting to highlight an issues and/or pressurise a protest target. This increased prominence plays a key role in the success and failure of groups to publicise their

messages (McCurdy 2013). It is the normative role of the media to act as a space for political debate, its potential public reach, and its ability to increase the salience of an issue. Second, political opportunities does not take into account the aims and goals of protest groups in its assessment of success and failure. The assumption is that activists are striving for political acceptance when this is clearly not the case for all groups. In order to ascertain the level of success and failure this research focused in on the messaging of each group and how they communicated their aims and goals to the wider public. This is in keeping with Diani's message focused approach to political opportunities, where this messaging is influenced by different political and media contexts (1996:1067).

The Press in Relation to Collective Action

The decision to act, and the protest tactics used is based upon the choices of a protest group, their aims, and the opportunity to protest. These decisions have a massive impact on the tone and quantity of press coverage. The reaction of the media to different types of protest has been examined extensively by numerous academics, and the general consensus tends to be the more spectacular tactics used the greater the likelihood that reasons behind a collective action will become lost (Rosie and Gorringer 2009a; Wykes 2000; Gitlin 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen 2003). Furthermore, this goes beyond the reporting of just the collective action to include depictions of the protesters themselves (Gitlin, 1980; Wahl-Jorgensen 2003). This relationship between protest and press coverage takes its cues from the general media coverage of social conflict where much of the reporting surrounds the three themes of deviance, crime and violence. All three of which are potentially apparent in more confrontational forms of protest. As Cohen pointed out in his classic study on moral panics the media role is to set the agenda, transmit images, and break the silence by making claims (Cohen: xxviii-xxix). In practice this is the selecting and highlighting of events which have an element of deviance attached to them.

It also relates to the prominence of certain news sources which aid in diminishing or heightening a moral panic, or it is these very claims makers who are able to provoke a panic by themselves (ibid: xxviii-xxix). The second point about news sources is particularly relevant for protest groups, because if a group is able to have its voice heard it will be more capable of defining an issue in its terms. However, this power to define runs very much in line with Becker's idea of a 'hierarchy of credibility' which is based upon 'who represents the forces of approved and official morality' (Becker 1967: 240). This so called 'morality' fits in with crime narratives in the news as Hall et al's research showed that the news reports crime so it 'evokes threats to, but also reaffirms the consensual morality of the society' (1977: 64). This brings about the idea of a societal consensus where actions are deemed as legitimate and illegitimate, and this is particularly evident in the coverage of protest. A point which is reflected in the perception of protest groups when their actions and politics are seen as 'illegitimate and 'deviant'', and challenges to political consensus are portrayed as being "potentially violent" (Murdock 1973: 156-157).

Gaining credibility in the eyes of the press is incredibly difficult for a protest group to achieve, which is why activists may resort to more 'hit and run' style tactics that play

with the event based nature of news. In many respects, apart from technological advances, little has changed since Murdock's research into militant mass protest where he laid out the four ways in which collective action is covered:

- 1) Crossing the newsworthy threshold – as in the general characteristics a protest needs to meet before it is covered e.g. number of people, how spectacular, potential/actual violence.
- 2) The attention of the news tends to focus upon the construction of a protest rather than the issues. In other words the type of protest, timeline of events, who was there, and what happened.
- 3) Media attention tends to be temporary, and once a protest event is over media attention dissipates quickly.
- 4) Finally, a full explanation of the issues occurs only when the message coincides with political consensus (Murdock 1973: 163-164)

It would be unfair and disempowering to protest groups to not state that they are conscious of these media conventions, because activists are 'reflexively aware' of how and why the media functions as it does for two reasons; 1) activists are often sources for news organizations, and 2) activists are also consumers of news media and know about how the media have covered protest in the past (McCurdy 2013: 61). Therefore, it is the use of spectacular tactics which recognises and exploits news values. For Gamson and Meyer it is this spectacular aspect of protest which is the key to its newsworthiness:

Spectacle means drama and confrontation, emotional events with people who have fire in the belly, who are extravagant and unpredictable. This puts a high premium on novelty, on costume, and on confrontation. Violent action in particular has the most of these media valued elements. Fire in the belly is fine, but fire on the ground photographs is better. (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 288)

The spectacle in this instance is the visual attraction that prompts the press to cover a protest, and in doing so blurs the line between staged media spectacle and the expression of political beliefs. A more recent interpretation of the news values of spectacular protest comes from Rucht, and are as follows:

- 1) Size of protest, i.e., the number of people participating
- 2) Degree of disruptiveness or radicalness
- 3) Creativity or newness of the form of action and its accompanying symbolic elements
- 4) The political weight or public prominence of individuals or groups supporting or actually participating in the protest (Rucht 2013: 257)

What should be interpreted from this is that for protest to be featured in the press it needs have an aspect of theatre. In-turn this means that activists have become actors on the media stage, as opposed to politically aware individuals. This interpretation is what led Wall to compare protest to a 'performance' where 'activism [...] is a method of performance that must be developed and improvised' (1999: 96). The danger that this presents for protest groups is that by stepping out of character could potentially lose media interest, and increases the probability of exploitation and celebritisation of protesters which inevitably comes from having a high media profile.

How this relates to media framing of protest is the 'selection and salience' of particular issues within a news story given higher prominence over another (Entman 1993: 52). Or to use Gamson's analogy this selection process is a 'thought organiser' where different perspectives about an event or issue are narrowed down to a small number or one overriding frame:

Like a picture frame, it puts a border around something, distinguishing it from what is around it. A frame spotlights certain events and their underlying causes and consequences, and directs our attention away from others. (Gamson 2003: para 21)

The neutrality of this picture frame 'however' is questionable, as Entman states a frame creates an 'imprint of power' (1993: 55). Although, it is unfair to state that there is one monolithic narrative which originates from all media because frames come from the ideological viewpoint of the media outlet. These will be inconsistent, but this is not to say that one dominant master frame does not exist. Moreover, think of these master frames as representing a status quo, but equally contain discrepancies, disagreements and differences over issues and their solutions, and this is where protest groups have a media opportunity to open these cleavages and present their messages.

Press Representation of Each Group

The press remains the place where the majority of political debate is prompted and takes place, and in this respect the press acts as a 'validator' for protester concerns (Gamson and Meyer 1996:290). Equally, the press acted as a platform for the messages and issues under protest by each of the group's investigated, and this is regardless of whether or not the concerns of the groups were 'validated'. It is the press representation which really separates the three groups. In this analysis a newspaper article is treated as the unit of analysis and potentially featured many thematic elements, and for this reason more than one top level category could be recorded, but sub-categories were recorded only once. The Save the Vulcan as a local community campaign with their non-confrontational tactics and received extremely favourable press coverage. This point is evidenced by the key category which appeared most often in news articles. This was the recognition of protest which appeared 60 times or 37%. This top level category consisted of a number of sub-categories around explicit support for the campaign in articles and a focus on the issues. What is often extremely important for protest groups is that there is a focus on the issues, and in the case of Save the Vulcan this occurred 36 times or 22%. This variable was recorded when an issue was explained at length. What followed from on from a focus on the issues was expressed support for the campaign in a total of 24 articles out of 126 or 15% of total. Subsequently, this demonstrates that when the press places a substantial focus on the issues there will be a more supportive tone to the coverage.

The coverage of the Save the Vulcan campaign is in stark contrast to Plane Stupid and G20Meltdown. Taking Plane Stupid first and the major focus in the press were around aspects of law and order and the spectacle of protest. Within the content analysis law and order occurred 188 times (or 43% of articles). This was recorded when the press

mentioned topics such as arrests, disruption to the public, court proceedings, and police or security concerns. These reactions of the press are perhaps understandable when direct action is used because of its potential illegality, but that said, a major focus on law and order serves to move a protest from the frame of an act of democratic expression to one of criminality. This, when taken together with the press' fascination with the spectacle of protest which occurred 172 times (or in 38% of articles) meant that there was plenty of content within the reports which diverted attention from the coverage of the issues and reasons why people were protesting. The spectacle of protest included the structure of protest which is when the press details the demographics of a protest or some other logistical detail, reference to historical protest, and personal information about the activists.

Similarly, G20Meltdown's actions were framed by a focus on law and order and the spectacle of protest. There was however a different element which precluded the protest that helped the press to create an atmosphere of an anticipation of violence. This brings to the fore the relationship between the press and the police, because in the February of 2009 following a Metropolitan Police briefing the *Guardian* produced an article that set forth two scenarios of what was going to happen at the G20 summit demonstration:

1. Violence would occur, and it would be on a par with the 1990 Poll Tax riots in London
2. Activists from these riots, as well as other historic actions would be coming out of retirement with the sole intention of causing disruption (Lewis 2009: 1)

This press briefing, as will be shown, created a master frame from which the press could use as an interpretive anchor to judge not only the mass demonstration but the demonstrators who took part as well. Again, as with Plane Stupid, law and order and the spectacle of protest were the most common themes found in press coverage. When taken together these two categories constituted 81% (250 out of 309 occurrences) of all themes found in the reporting. If these two categories are then broken down into their sub-themes it is clear what impact the police briefing, the protest tactics, and the historical coverage of mass demonstrations had on the reporting. The most frequent sub-category was the anticipation of violence that includes the fear that violence will happen on a protest, or if violence has already occurred that more will follow (17% of all themes, but apparent in 53 of the 97 articles). As with Plane Stupid the structure of protest was reported on frequently and constituted 12% of themes or in 37 reports, and this is closely followed by the coverage of the police operation (11%, or 35 articles). This included the number of police present, the equipment they had, the policing tactics used and so on. The next most common, and this bears remembering when considering the police briefing reported on in the *Guardian*, was the evocation of historical protest. This occurred in 22 articles or 7% of all themes, and in some ways can be seen as the press' attempt to contextualise the protests by discussing historical examples. However, what was evident from the coverage was the historical protests mentioned had ended in violence and disruption. As with Plane Stupid the talk and predictions of violence merely served to distract from the issues under protest, and to create an interpretation of how the demonstration should be perceived.

Before moving on it is important to mention the relationship between protester and press, and how attitudes towards the media impact on a group's tactical repertoire. Press coverage happens because of a media outlets decision to deem a protest newsworthy enough to be covered, and most importantly protest groups can only influence not control how they are reported. This leaves activists open to being potentially exploited by the press, or they feel the pressure to stay in character by acting and conforming to what the press expects. The attitude of activists towards the press ranges wildly from cooperative and open to ambivalent or averse. For Rucht there are four specific reactions to a lack of media coverage available to protest groups:

- 1) Abstention – Following a number of negative experiences at attempting to influence the press a group withdraws entirely from attempting to gain press coverage.
- 2) Attack – Explicitly critiquing acting against the mainstream media.
- 3) Adaptation – Accepting or exploiting the press and its unwritten rules to increase the probability of positive coverage.
- 4) Alternatives – In order to compensate for a lack of press attention or to correct the misconceptions of the press activists can create their own media, from leaflets and zines, to websites and online forums. (2004: 36-37)

The most important 'A' on this list in relation to media strategies is 'adaptation', because it differentiates between the protest action or 'front stage', and the organisation of collective action or the 'backstage', and the impact this has on protester's attitudes towards the press (Feigenbaum et al. 2013: 74). What is also important to note is that protest groups are not necessarily striving for political acceptance/change or press popularity. For instance, the Save the Vulcan campaign wanted political change and positive press coverage to achieve their aims. Plane Stupid wanted to prompt debates around airport expansion through the use of direct action, and this was not dependent on press support or an acceptance of their protest tactics. Finally, G20Meltdown's mass demonstration was to highlight a range of different issues, not necessarily to put pressure on parliament, because the group were more likely to advocate political revolution. However, in terms of the issues each of the groups were campaigning on it is correct to say that 'radical ideas require more space than events' (Doherty et al. 2003: 675), and this so called space can be created by using stunts and spectacular tactics.

Protester Framing of Messages

Exploring a protest groups messages requires an examination of the collective actions frames contained in the various protest communications methods. This type of framing demonstrates a group's interpretation of an issue, and functions on three different levels; 1) as a diagnostic tool, as in defining an issues; 2) highlighting an issue as a problem; 3) and the suggestion of possible solutions to a grievance (Gamson 2003; Sireau 2009; Smith et al. 2001; Snow and Benford 1992; Entman 1993). Furthermore, the protest messages themselves work on the following different levels:

- 1) Broad outline or mention of the overarching issue

- 2) Description of the causalities relating to an issue
- 3) Any attempts to attribute blame for an issue
- 4) A detailed chain of causality point to who should be blamed for an issue (Sireau 2009: 137)

The success of the message in some ways is determined by what level of interpretation the press grants it, and to what extent the issue is explained. However, the concept of collective action frames has been criticised by Gamson and Meyer in particular who claim that protest groups are denied the agency to challenge the status quo, or master frame, through their protest activities (1996: 283). Instead they say that protest groups are 'agents of their own history' (ibid: 285), and this is particularly important when research such as this moves away from looking at how protest groups carry out particular actions to why. This brings the internal decision making process of protest groups into more focus, and increases the prominence of how groups interpret their own messages, and grants collective action frames more prominence in the choice of media and protest tactics (Lipsky 1968; Eisinger 1973).

Attempting to Control the Message

The decisions behind how and when to carry out a protest action is not as spontaneous as it might appear on the surface. There are many variables which need to be measured in order for an action to be considered successful. This includes dangers to the public and activists, potential media coverage, political impact and so on. Part of this process is to attempt to control the messages and the representation of the group in the press. This will often be dependent on the type of protest tactics used, the media strategies, and the relationship of the group to the press. This is where the groups differed most. For instance, the Save the Vulcan campaign practiced the most non-confrontation protest tactics but shared the same attitudes towards the press as the more confrontational symbolic direct action group Plane Stupid. Both of these groups believed in a simple, straight forward, but consistent message was key to getting their message across and achieving their objectives. Even the name 'Save the Vulcan' was created to carry a very simple message. This clarity of message was seen as one of the key elements in informing the public about the issues and by extension influencing political decision makers. To achieve consistency both groups attempted to control their messages by factoring this into the actions they carried out. For example, only allowing certain members of a group talk to the press, in other words members with experience of talking to the press, or with some media training about interview techniques and what to expect from press interviews.

In comparison, Plane Stupid used their direct actions as a message carrier for their campaign. Essentially using the spectacle of their tactics to attract the press, and once they had gained media attention the activists from within the group would give interviews and push the campaign's messages. Another way to think about this type of issue highlighting is that the protest tactics are acting as a 'Trojan horse' for the messages. When G20Meltdown's press tactics are considered there is a definite contrast in approaches. First, rather than have specific spokespeople, and in an arguably more democratic approach, everyone was allowed to speak to the press. They did not have a defined media strategy and maintained no intention to create one, to quote one activist

they 'did not take an attitude of we must sit down and sort out our media strategy' (Pepper 2009).

The basis of this type of media strategy is that the activists trusted each other to make non-damaging statements if and when they were approached by journalists. However, this left the group's messaging lacking in a cohesive narrative, and with so many groups present at the G20 demonstration there was a lot of 'noise' and competition for attention. This gave a fragmented appearance to the protest, and this splintering of attention left the press focusing on the most outspoken and charismatic members of the group. Furthermore, the structure of each group impacted upon how well they were able to control their messages, because the amount of people responsible differed in each case. Plane Stupid and Save the Vulcan only needed to rely on a relatively small number of activists, but G20Metldown needed to consider all of the different groups operating under this banner. This control issue is not only relevant for the messaging of each group, it also applies to the direction that collective action goes in. The sheer amount of people involved in a mass demonstration makes it far more difficult to guide and control what attendees might do, whereas smaller actions are dependent only on those activists involved.

Cost Benefit Analysis of Protest Action

Moving on from the messaging strategies of each group and onto the protest tactics that they used to promote and highlight the issues under protest. This is where the internal negotiation mechanisms within each group comes into place, and is related to a consideration of the potential negative and positive outcomes of different types of protest action – or as titled here a cost benefit analysis of protest action. This assessment of protest tactics is derived from the aims and goals of a group, and from here has an influence on whether or not a protest can be considered a success or failure.

As already explained the Save the Vulcan campaign were the least confrontational of the three groups and at no point resorted to direct action. The one demonstration they did hold was designed more as a photo opportunity attended by supporters and politicians to deliver a petition to the Welsh Government rather than an oppositional protest (O'Connor 2009: 7). This less confrontational approach was due in part to the structure of the group and the demographics of the supporters. Being a campaign trying to save a pub the campaign's core support came from within this constituency and included older community members and students. These stakeholders in the campaign would not have necessarily have been so supportive if the tactics had been more confrontational, but this is not to say that the group was not able to get more aggressive. For instance, there were two protests planned against the brewery attached to the pub, S.A. Brains whose brewery is situated in Cardiff. However, both of the planned protests were cancelled because the very threat of a mass march, and negative publicity for the brewery was enough to prompt Brains into helping protect the pub's future. There was talk within the groups that if the pub had come under a more imminent threat of demolition then the protest tactics would have become much more aggressive, as the high profile support and then AM Jenny Randerson (now Baroness Randerson) was quoted as saying 'we'll chain ourselves to the pumps if we have to' (Quoted in McCarthy 2009: 2). Perhaps this was something said as a throw away comment the fact remained that if the

group wanted to be more confrontational it could have been. When these types of tactics are compared to the other two groups there is a definitive difference in the tone and confrontational nature of the protest employed.

If we take Plane Stupid first and their campaign against the expansion of British airports, the most high profile of which was against the expansion of Heathrow Airport. The group were not the only set of activists campaigning on this issue, but they were the most direct action orientated. In emphasising this idea of a cost benefit analysis of protest one of the Plane Stupid activists described their internal decision making structure, and what considerations were taken before carrying out an action:

... first thing that we do is someone would suggest an idea and then we would bash it around. We did loads of R and D where we would come up with ideas for things and then discuss their viability and efficacy. (Activist 1 2010)

The variables involved in such 'R and D' include the demographics of the protests involved in an actions, the potential press coverage that will occur, and safety considerations for public and protesters. These should not be underestimated when investigating protest. It is because these decisions are part of a greater whole which is directly linked to the messaging of a group, as one activist put it 'all of these things are taken into consideration when you are trying to convey a narrative' (Activist 2 2010). This narrative is subsequently transmitted to the wider public via the press, and the importance of the press in this endeavour is emphasised by Plane Stupid activist Dan Glass who said 'Before we do an action we try to visualise what the front page of the newspaper will be' (2011). In order to fully exploit this media centric view Plane Stupid would time their actions to correspond with other events, and these occasions were usually associated with the issue or the environment generally. For example, in February 2008 Plane Stupid occupied the roof of the House of Commons and this protest action was timed in correlation with the end of the government's consultation on the expansion of Heathrow Airport, and at the same time as Prime Minister's Questions in the Commons' Chamber itself (Plane Stupid 2008). You could call this planned opportunism by using the event based nature of news, external events, and spectacular tactics to exploit media attention and maximise the impact of the protest. Furthermore, Plane Stupid's collective actions were never a one off, they were included as part of a series of ongoing direct actions to keep media attention high, and to attempt at creating a coherent narrative that would tie all of these events together through the use of tightly controlled messaging.

Similarly G20Meltdown represented themselves as the radical point to the G20 protests with lots of groups at the demonstration all vying for, or even competing for attention. The largest of which was the coalition of charities and trade unions called Put People First whose demonstration occurred in the week before G20Meltdown's collective action on 28th March and 1st April respectively (Put People First 2009). Equally, on the day of G20Meltdown's demonstration the environmental direct action group Climate Camp were also protesting. These two protest entities had been in contact and communicating with each other over what shape the various actions that day would take, but Climate Camp decided not to protest under the banner name G20Meltdown. This had the knock on effect of dividing press attention and fragmenting the activist groups rather than the protest appearing as a single, unified entity with a set of clear

messages. This is not a criticism of the group as such, because when speaking to the activists involved in G20Meltdown the considered themselves 'the only thing in town', and their aims and goals were not necessarily interested in a cost benefit analysis of their actions (Activist 3 2010).

Their aim was to differentiate G20Meltdown's protest with previous summit demonstrations by using slightly different tactics, or as Pepper puts it be 'more than just a march'. She goes further to state that this approach is more about filling the gap between 'boring A-B marching on the one hand, and Molotov lobbing on the other' (Pepper 2009). Their different approach to mass protest is reflected in G20Meltdown's aforementioned media strategy, which was not as high a priority when compared to Plane Stupid or Save the Vulcan. That is not to say that they were actively negative towards the press, on the contrary their belief was that the demonstration would be an event of such size that the press would come to the group, and not the other way around. One activist framed this as 'the media riding our coattails' (Activist 3 2010). The attempted exploitation and creation of political and media opportunities as shown is all about the choice of what repertoire of protest to employ, but what is worth bearing in mind is that protest tactics are part of an ongoing evolutionary process of activism (Wall 1999: 42). This means that protest groups learn from past activists, and apply these lessons to their own campaigns and adapt for the political and media context from which they are working within. This point is highlighted by the already mentioned quadruple As, where adaptation is one of these 'As' and Rucht believes that this is required to make issues more prominent (2004: 36-37). This section has highlighted is that media and protest tactics are based on a cost benefit analysis of protest and what can be achieved by using one type of action over another.

Seizing the Opportunity

What the above section has shown is that deciding to act is much more than a simple calculation of what actions will or will not generate press coverage. It is clear that other considerations are taken into account, such as protest opportunities, which are the decisions to act against a particular protest target, or to time an action to correspond with other events. The key argument to be made here is that protest groups do not carry out collective action without an awareness of the potential positive and negative outcomes. This is what Gamson and Meyer referred to as '*relative opportunities*' which permits groups increased awareness around their role in their own representations (1996: 283, emphasis in original). The variation in tactical approaches and choice of protest actions was very much driven by the aims of each group.

However, to be successful when creating protest actions with the goal of press attention requires a certain 'intensity' and the ability to create 'news hooks' (Smith et al. 2001: 1402), because the 'media and attention cycle is notoriously short' (Rosie and Gorringer 2009b: 5.7). The choice of protest tactics in relation to press coverage on the whole follows the equation that the more non-confrontational protest tactics are the greater the likelihood of thematic coverage. However, by not being confrontational it is more difficult to attract press coverage in the first place. On the other hand symbolic direct action and disruptive protest, as already mentioned, has been historically decontextualised, depoliticised, and episodic (Iyengar 1991: 14; Smith et al. 2001:

1404). This view requires more nuance, especially for groups like Plane Stupid, whose tactical choice was not a matter of choosing spectacle over debate it was more about using spectacle to prompt debate. The other big factor of press coverage following a protest action is all about timing, and this is particularly evident when Plane Stupid's direct action is compared to G20Meltdown's mass demonstration.

Timing is increasingly relevant when considering media and political opportunities because these refer to a particular moment in time and reflect a specific political and media context. It is these two major variables which shape the openness of media and political opportunities at any one time, and for protest groups effective timing of their actions aids in fully exploiting these opportunities. However, the key difference between Plane Stupid and G20Meltdown's actions is a matter of press prior knowledge. Direct action, by its very nature often has a substantial surprise element attached, but a mass demonstration is often known about well in advance. This has a subsequent impact on press coverage, because by using the element of surprise this catches the press off-guard and allows less time for negative stereotyping or an atmosphere of an anticipation of violence. On the other hand with a pre-determined date for a mass demonstration the press has the opportunity to frame the interpretation of a protest event will unfold. In the case of G20Meltdown the case was similar to previous summit protests where an atmosphere of fear and expected violence was generated, and the activist's messages become lost in the hype. This correlates well, for instance, with the Rosie and Gorrings's work that focused upon the G8 in Scotland in 2005, and the G20 summit in London in 2009 where the coverage of both of these events was beset by an anticipation of violence frame created by the press (2009a, 2009b).

The ability of the press to generate this type of frame is aided by the historical treatment of protests. This includes the use of historical references to contextualise and anchor the press' interpretation of the protesters actions. The time before a mass demonstration takes place blank pages need to be filled, and the 'news hole' created is filled by sensationalising protester intentions and what happened at similar events in the past. The historicising of protest by the press goes beyond merely talking about previous events, it is something which extends to references to historical high-profile protesters, such as the environmental direct action campaigner Swampy (Wykes 2000), or more generally, as Gitlin put it 'celebrated radicals become radical celebrities; four-star attractions in the carnival of distracting and entertaining international symbols' (1980: 162). Although, there is a choice to be made by the press as to their preferred framing and what type of historical anchors they are going to use when reporting on a protest, peaceful or disruptive.

Conclusion

The comparison of groups as found in this paper allows for a greater assessment of the political and media contexts that each group was working with, and how this impacted on each group. It is the media context which is 'essential to a full understanding of any given protest' (Rosie and Gorrings 2009b: 2.9), but it is a groups awareness and knowledge of the media context which impacts on a group's actions. What needs to be highlighted is that gaining media coverage and achieving some kind of political legitimacy is not the goal of every group. When analysing protest groups with this in

mind moves research beyond judging a group's success and failure based on only the nature of media coverage. This is in addition to following the messages through their inception and into press coverage increases the scope of the interpretation of collective action. One of the aims of this research is to raise the importance of the media in the development of political opportunities. Previously defined as the structural and general openings in the political system (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Sireau 2009; Meyer 2004), by adding media opportunities to this definition gives some communicative power back to protest groups. This increases the theory's applicability for radical groups who do not seek political acceptance or positive media coverage. This helps to raise the agency of a protest group to guide their own destiny, and do not undertake protest without considering the potential impacts. This extra variable gives a significant boost to interpreting the success and failure of protest groups.

This paper has taken the approach to what is success and failure by linking it to the propagation of a group's message. What Gamson argues about success is that it is an 'elusive idea' which is based on the outcomes of protest (1990: 28). But the examination of success should be judged on the aims and goals of a protest group, and therefore taken on a group by group basis. This helps to break the more institutional approach of political opportunities in particular the views of Meyer and Amenta et al (2004: 126; 1992: 323). The goals of a group are granted increased prominence (Gamson 1990: 36), and this is why the salience of the message was a major aspect to this research. How prominent these messages are in the press, whether or not they are fully contextualised are influenced by media and political opportunities. What this all means is that the media and political opportunities available to, or created by a protest group have a major impact on the success and failure of activists to transmit their messages. But it is the protest group's awareness of media and political opportunities and their ability to exploit these opportunities using certain protest tactics and media strategies which are needed to place a group into a position to succeed or fail. Otherwise their messages and the issues under protest will remain hidden and unreported.

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