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Lights, Camera, Direct Action: The protest spectacle as media opportunity and message carrier

In February 2008 five activists from the environmental direct action group Plane Stupid occupied the roof of the House of Commons in London. They unfurled a banner reading 'BAA HQ' calling into question the Labour government's policy on airport expansion. This happened at the same time as Prime Minister's Questions and on the final day of the government's consultation into airport expansion¹. The timing of this action was to maximise press and political impact of the protest. The aim of this chapter is to examine the protest tactics and media strategy of environmental direct action group Plane Stupid. It demonstrates how they adapted their tactics to gain press attention and promote their messages. In doing so this chapter utilises data from in-depth interviews with activists from Plane Stupid to uncover how and why they used a professionalised media strategy with controlled messages, and media trained spokespeople. The argument put forth is that Plane Stupid's symbolic direct action acted as a message carrier by attracting press attention and allowing activists a platform to unveil their messages. A content analysis of UK national press coverage examines how these messages penetrated the reporting of their protest actions, and the ways in which Plane Stupid tried to adapt and exploit the event based nature of the press. This raises two important questions, 1) why does a group, like Plane Stupid, use symbolic direct action and professionalised media strategies? And 2) what difference does this make to the press coverage that they receive? Before the chapter addresses these particular questions a brief theoretical background to the research is presented in order to situate it within the broader context of the academic debates.

Background Theory and Methods

What groups like Plane Stupid are involved in is championing causes and highlighting politically contentious issues. These politically contentious issues cover many different topics ranging from complex identity politics, to single issue protest. The issues, it is argued, take their origin from the "structural conflict of interests" which exist in society². The point where 'structural conflict' exists is at the point where protests groups, the press, and protest targets meet to contest and put forth their definition of issues. However, and importantly for this chapter, a protest group's visibility and impact on the public consciousness often follows protest activity. Protest action in this sense is able to attract publicity and as a consequence

highlight an issue. Lipsky provides a helpful definition of protest activity which encapsulates these dynamics:

...protest activity is defined as a mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterized by showmanship or display of an unconventional nature³

Building on Lipsky's definition, Eisinger talks about protest as "collective manifestations", which attempt to provide "relatively powerless people with bargaining leverage in the political process"⁴. However, in the case of contentious politics it is protest activity that causes conflict between those protesting and those being protested against, and the relative power of each group to define an issue. It follows that protest activity occurs in one of three ways; it is either "demonstrative, confrontative or violent"⁵. Furthermore, Kriesi et al. go on to describe five broad forms of protest action within these three types of protest activity:

- 1) Direct democratic events (such as a vote)
- 2) Demonstrative events (such as petitions and demonstrations)
- 3) Confrontational events (such as blockades and occupations)
- 4) Events of light violence (such as violent demonstrations and limited damage to objects)
- 5) Heavy violence (bombings, arson and violence against persons).⁶

Where protest activity lies in relation to these different types of protest action has consistently impacted upon the nature and tone of mainstream media. The nature of the coverage received, and the relative success and failure of protest action is predicated upon the prevailing political and media opportunities available to a protest group. This chapter will now explain what this means in theory, and underline the reality of the political and media opportunities which were available to Plane Stupid.

Political and Media Opportunities

The term 'political opportunities' is used here to mean "the institutional and political factors that shape social movement options"⁷. The 'options' referred to in the quote corresponds to the media strategies, protest tactics, and the relationship between a protest groups and their protest target. However, the idea of political opportunities underplays the influence of quite possibly the most important variable of all, the media. Behr and Iyengar go

as far to argue that changes in the media agenda have a substantial influence over the public agenda⁸. A protest group's decision of how and when to act upon media and political opportunities further aids in defining the outcomes of protest action and the nature of media coverage. For instance, timing a protest activity to coincide with another high profile event, or drawing upon a pre-existing public attitude results in protest groups generating their own political opportunities. This is where an effective use of communications strategies and protest tactics by protest groups enters more prominently into the argument. Those groups who are able to get their message highlighted by the media can help prompt debate and provoke a reaction from dominant institutions; thereby creating further gaps in institution arguments and debates which produce further space for protest groups to promote their view of the world. For Plane Stupid their actions against the expansion of Heathrow Airport in particular happened against a backdrop of political opposition at both a local level with the council disagreeing with airport expansion⁹, and at the national level with the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties opinion conflicted with the ruling Labour government's proposals for Heathrow¹⁰. How these debates are depicted, shaped, and issues are defined is to talk more specifically about media and protest framing.

Media and Protester Framing

The importance of framing in the context of protest actions is due to the impact of protest and media tactics on the representation of a protest groups messages. The concept itself looks at how the media may select an issue to cover, thereby elevating its salience over a myriad of other issues. Subsequently, media framing provides one perspective, or narrow view, on an issue and acts as a 'thought organiser'¹. To quote Gamson, the media in this sense is performing 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.¹¹

This picture frame however, is not entirely neutral. This is because of the preferential attention is paid to one issue to the detriment of other issues. This is what Entman calls an "imprint of power"¹². More accurately the framing of issues has three important elements,

¹ This connects to Goffman's original concept of framing as the process by which a society produces meaning. See Fisher (1997) for a useful exploration of how the concept of framing has been adapted and applied.

frames: 1) diagnose causes; 2) make moral judgements; and 3) suggest solutions to issues¹³. Media frames in particular originate from the ideological viewpoint of a media outlet. This is not to say that a dominant perspective or master frame does not exist. It is just that frames are neither monolithic nor impenetrable, and there are discrepancies in how issues are defined, and as already mentioned it is within these gaps in definition which is where protest groups operate.

The media are not the only ones to utilise frames. Referred to as ‘collective action frames’ by Snow and Benford, this type of frame has, as the name suggests a more collective element to it. These frames are the shared coming together of a protest group’s viewpoints and collective experiences in a “relatively unified and meaningful fashion”¹⁴. These frames however are independent of political opportunities and exist within the groups themselves. But to become public and transition beyond the confines of a protest group favourable media and political opportunities are required. What these types of frames are attempting to do is to define an issue and the arguments from the viewpoints of the protest group, but these frames will be in competition with other social actors who are trying to have their own frames publicised, be it dominant institutions or the media. This is how the perspectives contained within frames are trying to point towards how issues should be thought about, and what the preferred solution should be. Before entering into the discussion about Plane Stupid’s media and protest tactics the methods used and the materials gathered and analysed which provide the empirical backing to this chapter will be detailed.

Methods and Materials Used

In order to fully investigate Plane Stupid’s collective action frames, tactics and reactions of the UK national press to their protest actions a number of different empirical methods were deployed. Firstly, Plane Stupid’s official website and social media presence was examined. This was carried out in order to uncover the key issues at the heart of their campaign, who they blamed for the issues arising, suggested solutions, why they chose those particular times to act or to put it another way their framing of the protest opportunities. These elements are seen to be at the centre of what constitutes collective action framing¹⁵. To follow the messages and reactions to the group in the press a content analysis of UK national newspapers was carried out to build as detailed picture as possible. The debates around issues

which protest provokes has been said to reveal the “strategies of power or strategies for defining the rational and the commonsensical”¹⁶.

The newspaper sample was taken from February 2008 until May 2009 and covered the full range of newspapers from tabloids to broadsheets and left and right wing ideologies. The online newspaper database Nexis was utilised to collect the reports, and the searches were focused upon the name of the group, Plane Stupid, and the names of the seven most high profile named activists taking part in the campaign. The rationale for this approach helped to broaden the range of publications which could be included, and meant that Plane Stupid’s methods and messages could be focused upon. Sampling in this way was able to yield 207 articles within the timeframe. To explore the press coverage fully physical copies of the newspapers were obtained with the goal of analysing the imagery used to accompany each article, and see how this complimented or contrasted the contents of the articles. This inter-relationship between image and text allowed for the broadest view of the dominant framing of protest events. This chapter will now detail the results of these empirical methods, and the implications of the findings for protest groups.

Symbolic Direct Action and the Spectacle of Protest

The specific type of protest action used by Plane Stupid was symbolic non-violent direct action. This includes tactics such as occupying or blockading a space, for example an airport runway. In addition to direct action Plane Stupid used a tactic which they referred to as ‘direct intervention’. The difference between intervention and action is that direct intervention has the benefit of having a measurable impact. By shutting down an airport runway planes will not be able to take off and land and this will result in a reduction in the amount of carbon dioxide and other pollutants released into the atmosphere. The key indicator here being “you can materially measure the success, or the impacts of your action”¹⁷. Their rationale behind the use of these particular tactics is similar to a cost-benefit analysis. Plane Stupid were aware of the effect that their protest actions might have on the press and the coverage, and this was an active consideration of what their protest targets were and what particular style of action would be used. The way this worked in practice can be found in a quote by one Plane Stupid activist:

We don't break the law lightly [...] We are aware that our disturbances cause people distress and we don't like doing that but we do need to get our message across. We have genuine concerns.¹⁸

What this quote shows is that the activist has acknowledged the extent to which direct action causes disruption whilst maintaining that it is these types of tactics that are required to highlight the issues. Taken further the quote recognises that protest groups do not carry out actions without reason. It is this awareness which meant that Plane Stupid were able to identify and exploit the underlying news values of the press by playing to what Gamson and Mayer argued as the primary news value of protest:

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.¹⁹

These visual requirements which are fore filled by the presence of protest spectacle, and are enhanced through the use of “showmanship or display of an unconventional nature”²⁰. The lines between political expression and media spectacle in this context are therefore blurred, but the main goal of Plane Stupid’s direct action was to “critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle”²¹.

To think of the group another way is to consider them as protest opportunists; looking for and planning their actions to correspond with other events, and further exploiting press attention. Each action will be slightly different but the key messages will remain the same, namely airport expansion and climate change. This helps in creating a continuing political narrative through a direct action campaign, and aids in avoiding being delegitimised as ‘mindless’. This is what one activist referred to as planning actions “according to key dates”, tailoring the messages to the protest action, and linking explicitly to these external events²². The argument at the heart of Plane Stupid’s protest tactics was to generate news coverage of the issues, and it did not matter to the activists what tone the reporting took because the “more media attention the better, even bad press generates dialogue”²³. The most important point to Plane Stupid was that the issues were being discussion and debated, as one activist put it, their role was to “force the issue into the open”²⁴. Direct action in this case is being used to carry a message, and the use of spectacular events driven by direct action is to capture the press’ attention, and once activists enter the press as sources they highlight the issues²⁵.

The political opportunity presented to Plane Stupid by the expansion of Heathrow Airport was fully recognised by the activists as having a “strong policy rationale”, and that

direct action was the strategy best suited to changing government policy²⁶. One activist went so far as to say that direct action was one of the reasons for the increased debate about the issue, and that Plane Stupid acted as a catalyst for political change²⁷. Plane Stupid were fully aware of the media and political context within which they were campaigning, using it as a platform upon which to build their campaign. Furthermore, with that campaign taking place a year to two years before a General Election, Plane Stupid recognised that the issues around Heathrow's expansion would become an electoral issue, and that politicians could be pressurised through the threat of losing votes.

What this section has done is detail the type of protest tactics that Plane Stupid utilised and the rationale behind the choice of said tactics, what will now be discussed is how the press in Britain reacted to Plane Stupid's protest events.

Press Coverage of Plane Stupid

The importance of the press to Plane Stupid, in publicising their message, cannot be underestimated and can be summed up by the following activist quote; "before we do an action we try to visualise what the front page of the newspaper will be"²⁸. This led to Plane Stupid attempting to manage the media as part of their planning and preparation for their protests. The rationale for this is cited as the importance of the press' reach compared to that of a protest group, and this led to one activist presenting the following stark choice:

We cannot put out hundreds of thousands of newspapers; we cannot make a broadcast and get millions of people to see it. It is the media that does that. We have to work with them or are forced to.²⁹

In doing so Plane Stupid were very successful in gaining press coverage. Their actions generated 207 articles over a 15 month period. What is interesting however is the thematic break down of the coverage and where press attention was most regularly concentrated. The reporting of Plane Stupid's actions was predominantly about aspects of law and order and the spectacle of protest. Across the sample the content analysis found there were 188 references (present in 43% of articles) relating to law and order. This included the talk of arrests and subsequent trials of activists, any disruption caused to the public, and police and security concerns over the ramifications stemming from, for example, the occupation of an airport runway. The impact of the press' fixation on law and order shifts the status of a protest from one of democratic expression and transforms it into an act of criminality. The spectacle of

protest on the other hand occurred 172 times (present in 38% of articles) and included the structure of the protest action i.e. the people taking part and other logistical details, references to similar historical protests, and highlighting the personal information and background of activists. Taken together, the prevalence of law and order and the spectacle of protest serve to distract from the issues under protest and remove the context as to why activists are carrying out their actions.

To give an example of how law and order and the spectacle of protest manifest themselves the coverage of the first major protest action from the newspaper sample to see how these story elements interact. The occupation of the roof of the House of Commons was covered by 42 of the 207 articles (or 20% of the total). The protest action prompted a lot of newspaper talk around security issues relating to parliament with police and security concerns being voiced in 11 of the 42 articles (or 26%). Direct action by its very nature is disruptive to targets, and this often leads to discussion about the security of sensitive locations and the legality of protest. These then become the focus of the coverage and not the issues. The following comment was found in relation to the House of Commons action which the *Daily Mirror* reported as; "...shout it from the rooftops our security is a shambles"³⁰. However, as mentioned previously, these kinds of press angles are fully recognised by members of Plane Stupid. In a quote by one of the activists, given from the roof of the House of Commons, they acknowledge the security implications of their actions by saying they had "exposed a huge security flaw"³¹.

Another story angle which would appear prominently throughout the coverage of Plane Stupid, from the House of Commons action onwards, was an evocation of historical protests and the protesters who carried them out; a much more personalised and individually focused kind of reporting. The protester who was mentioned most often was the 1990 anti-roads protester 'Swampy' who gained prominence and even a level of celebrity after he, and a number of other activists were involved in tunnelling and living beneath the roads around Manchester Airport in April 1997. These actions, and the press reporting they provoked has meant that Swampy became a by-word for environmental direct action³². The presence of past protests was evident in 24 of the newspaper articles (12%), in which Plane Stupid were talked about as being the heirs to Swampy. In one particular example, found in the *Daily Mail* on March 1st 2008, the headline simply read "MOVE OVER SWAMPY"³³. Although, the article does make a distinction between Plane Stupid and Swampy, which includes some ingrained stereotypes and the personal history and background of the activists. Plane Stupid are said to be beyond the old stereotypes of so called 'crusty' activists, and the focus is on the

novelty of the tactics and personalities involved. The following passage is taken from the already mentioned *Daily Mail* article in which often repeated stereotypes are used to argue that Plane Stupid are a 'new breed' of protester:

... this new breed of protester is a world away from the likes of the infamous Swampy, and the usual raggle-taggle of jobless drop-outs that are so often associated with the eco-warrior cause.³⁴

The *Guardian* declared that Plane Stupid had learnt "lessons from Swampy" and they were hailed as a "New wave protesters target airport expansion"³⁵. This narrative of celebrity protests is no more evident than in the following quote "A decade after Swampy defied Britain's road building programme and invented the eco-protester as national celebrity"³⁶. This kind of personalisation and elevation of the individuals involved was a regularly occurring theme in the press coverage, where activists' backgrounds appeared in 32 articles (15% of total) across the sample. This is no more evident than in the following strapline about the House of Commons protest "A Baronet's granddaughter, a philosophy graduate, and an MP's grandson. The oh-so smart backgrounds of this week's Commons invaders"³⁷. This information was used to deflect attention away from the issues. With some members of Plane Stupid having a perceived privileged background prompting the tabloids to refer to them as 'upper crusties'³⁸. This is a consequence of being open with the press which leaves activists open to having their personal and private lives exposed. The information is then used to deflect attention away from the issues. When activists become bigger than the group they represent they also take all of the attention. Subsequently side-lining the issues.

In this respect the group did more than just highlight the issues, they were also challenging the ingrained perceptions of direct action activists. They were effectively attempting to 'reframe' the press coverage in the direction of their narrative and definition of the issues. The process by which this happened was through their meticulously planned protest actions and finely tuned messaging. This is the very basis of what they were doing; by using a protest event as a spectacle to draw the press' attention and then unveil the messages, or as one activist referred to it, as a 'Trojan Horse':

If you are clever and you understand how the [media] game works then you can actually use spectacular actions as a kind of Trojan Horse which you leave outside the gates of the big media corporations, and they are like ooh we like the look of that then they bring the horse in, then you jump out with your radical message³⁹

In doing so the connection between Plane Stupid's actions, messages and protest targets was made explicit and fully exploited the protest and media opportunities the actions created. This helped in achieving their aims of having airport expansion debated in public. This has shown how Plane Stupid was generally covered what the next section will demonstrate is how different protest targets and tactics generates a different tone of reporting.

Different Protest Targets, Different Coverage

The two examples below will demonstrate the influence the choice of protest tactics has on media opportunities and press coverage. The first of the two examples took place in March 6th 2009 when a Plane Stupid activist Leila Deen threw a canister of green custard over the government's Business Secretary, Lord Mandelson. This action was timed to coincide with a government launch of a summit concerning the low carbon economy⁴⁰. Personality certainly plays its part in the resultant coverage of the action, but this time the focus is more on how the newspapers felt about Mandelson, as the following selection of headlines shows:

- 1) *Daily Mail* – Lord Mandy Gets His Just Desserts!⁴¹
- 2) *The Express* – The Slime Minister⁴²
- 3) *Daily Star* – I'm discustard with you Mandy⁴³
- 4) *Daily Mirror* – Lord C'stard⁴⁴

To illustrate this further the presence of Mandelson is reflected in the political ideologies of the newspapers who reported the action. There were 18 articles (9% of total) which covered the protest, but there is a clear right wing bias in the coverage. The left-wing newspapers only produced 4 articles while the right wing press printed 14 reports relating to the action. This perhaps is more representative of the press' personal opinion of Peter Mandelson than the protest itself.

This coverage is somewhat different to that of Plane Stupid's occupation of the runway at Stansted Airport which took place on December 9th 2008. The main difference being that it was the public who were disrupted by the protest and not a single individual. This difference produced much more negative reporting and is heavily reflected in the headlines the following day:

- 1) *Daily Star* – Plane Mean!⁴⁵
- 2) *The Independent* – Stansted brought to standstill by ‘Plane Stupid’ protesters⁴⁶
- 3) *Daily Mail* – Three days of chaos after airport invasion⁴⁷
- 4) *Daily Mirror* – Could they stop air terrorists?⁴⁸

The focus this time is very much on the actions of the protesters and debates about their choice of target and tactics. The first article in the list describes the protests as selfish, because the protest took place in the run-up to Christmas⁴⁹. This aspect of the action became the focal point for the *Daily Star* who led with the headline “Protesters play Scrooge”, and framed the disruption as “HUNDREDS of kids on their way to see Father Christmas had their flights cancelled yesterday as protesters stormed Stansted Airport”⁵⁰. The second report brings the activists’ background into the story mentioning that the action was carried out by “middle class militants”⁵¹. This is a form of exclusion by inclusion where protesters are included in press coverage only to be discredited and delegitimized, because they are posing a challenge to the political consensus. Whereas the final two examples focus much more on the security implications of the shutting down of an airport and the disruption caused to the public⁵². All of these themes are reflected in the coverage, but in terms of press coverage this was Plane Stupid’s most covered protest. The occupation of Stansted Airport generated 48 articles in total (18% of total articles) across the UK’s national newspapers. This is not like the coverage of the Mandelson action as demonstrated by the appearance of an equal amount of articles (24 in each) in both left and right wing newspapers respectively.

The targeting of an airport, and the disruption to the public it caused, was by far the most focused aspect of the action occurring in 24 of the 48 articles (50% of Stansted related articles). This demonstrates that the action of the protesters was at the forefront of press coverage. But it is important to note that the gaining of press coverage is not solely dependent upon spectacular events, as the next section will demonstrate having a prominent profile and a positive relationship with journalists leads to alternative routes of press attention.

Activist / Press Relations

The maintaining of press attention is one of the biggest challenges for a protest group. The sample of newspaper articles contained 39 articles (19% of total) which were not directly related to a specific protest action by Plane Stupid. The subject matter of these articles was highly varied ranging from Plane Stupid’s inclusion in a profile about environmental activist John Stewart⁵³, and offering comments in an article about the introduction of showers onto

planes⁵⁴. This demonstrates the level of credibility and perceived authority Plane Stupid developed during their campaign to comment on such issues in the press. As well as this the group used their relationships with select journalists to aid in generating newspaper stories. Those additional stories, beyond the protest action, are all part of maintaining publicity for the group and ensuring that the narrative around airport expansion is as prominent as possible. Essentially, this should be viewed as the use of media opportunities to make sure that political opportunities remain open. The higher the profile of an issue being debated in the press the greater the likelihood that the government, or other protest targets, will not be able to ignore it.

The use of this relationship is evident in the coverage of the events surrounding the unveiling of a corporate spy within the group and attempts by Strathclyde Police to turn one activist into an informant. The incidents were framed by the group in two different ways but the goal of going public with these stories was to protect activists from future infiltration. Taking the corporate spy story first, one activist discussed how they worked closely with a journalist at *The Times*, and that the relationship was used to cultivate the story and have it told from Plane Stupid's point of view. In the activist's words "we felt that we were working with journalists in order to tell a story in the way that we wanted to"⁵⁵. The spy, as it turned out, was fairly incompetent and for this reason the choice of framing for the story was one of humour, and the group chose to portray him as "a bit Austin Powers"⁵⁶. This humorous angle was then reflected in the press coverage.

The act of self-preservation was a more prominent part of the framing around Strathclyde Police attempts to turn one of the Plane Stupid activists into an informant. The very serious nature of this incident was not viewed lightly by the group and was dealt with in a much more sombre tone. The activist's believed that the whole episode would be a massive news story and pitched the idea for an article to a journalist at the *Guardian*⁵⁷. The other activists agreed with this assessment with one referring to the use of the event to create press coverage as "a real propaganda coup"⁵⁸, and another stated it was "pretty much all a media stunt"⁵⁹. The press reacted to Plane Stupid's framing of the story and reported it as a very serious matter, with substantial civil liberties implications.

The intended goal of that particular media strategy was to protect activists and to highlight issues around public order policing. This demonstrates the ways in which Plane Stupid exploited the media opportunities presented to them, and shows how successful they were at doing so. Their attempts at press coverage played into a constant and consistent endeavour of keeping the messages as high profile as possible. This was independent of what

was being discussed and it always all came back to the underlying narratives around the issues. The group's aptitude in generating press stories and ability to frame them from their perspective demonstrates the size of the media opportunity they create for themselves. In cultivating relationships with the press and offering compelling news stories meant that the probability of their action being covered would increase.

Conclusion

In closing, it is worth reflecting on the overall impact of Plane Stupid's media and protest strategies. If the group had not have existed it is less likely that the issue of airport expansion would have been covered so heavily. It is the spectacle of direct action which feeds the media's need for entertainment, it provides dramatic images that can be reported on in a relatively simplified manner. Spectacle, such as shutting down an airport, creates an event which can cross a press threshold between gaining attention and remaining unreported. In addition, their professional and press focused approach meant that the group was able to advance their viewpoints and exploit press attention. The more incredible and spectacular the protest was the greater amount of press coverage received. Despite the breadth of the different tactics used the group maintained a consistent message across their actions which connected each protest together to create a coherent narrative. This use of direct action is as a platform for the messages to be transmitted. The power of this message was only disrupted by a fixation on the backgrounds of the activists, and this focal point provided a distraction to the issues. The intrinsic use of theatre turns protesters into actors on the media stage, and leads to an increasing need for activists to 'stay in character' or risk losing media interest. However, for Plane Stupid it was not a consideration of spectacle over debate it was an approach centred on using the spectacle to prompt debate. Accepting the rules of the press game also meant that they had accepted the associated risks.

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