

# **Richard Hamlet**

## **Project report**

**MACS390, “Media, war and peace”**

**Autumn session, 2012**

**Media and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

The project report assignment had two parts. For details of the assignment see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390\\_12outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390_12outline.pdf)

*Richard Hamlet* prepared (1) an information pack in the form of slide show, available separately, and (2) a fictional dialogue on doing the project, below.

- The link to this document is from [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/mwp\\_tops.html](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/mwp_tops.html).

## MACS390 Project Report

### Nonviolent Action in the Media – The 1960 Nashville Sit-ins

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The following dialogue is a fictional conversation. It takes place between a coordinator from a non-government organisation called “Do It Safe, Do It Right” showing a pack designed to help educate students about the efficacy of nonviolent action and effective use of media in high schools, and a teacher knowledgeable on the subject running a class that just saw the presentation.

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Teacher (T): That was a very interesting presentation, George. There was certainly a lot of activism during the period of the Civil Rights Movement, with the Nashville sit-ins forming just a small part of that. So what inspired you to choose it?

George (G): It’s only the tip of the iceberg, but a very important part for both the history of the USA through racial desegregation and as an exemplary case of successful use of nonviolent action. There were many protests during that period, but the case of the Nashville sit-ins stands out as a strong example of effective preparation and execution. The statement that “Nashville's ability to resolve it within a relatively short period of time and put it behind it was worth considering”<sup>1</sup> outlines its efficacy in dealing with the issues quickly and effectively. It’s especially important for its modern day commonalities and applications; the

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<sup>1</sup> (Copeland, 2010). This can be seen as a comparison to say the Greensboro sit-ins where they began before but finished after the Nashville sit-ins. The Nashville sit-ins can be seen as both timely and decisive by sticking to the aim of sit-ins until it was achieved and maintaining their stance of nonviolent action.

body of the sit-ins consisted of students just like those who watched the presentation, and issues such as social segregation and racism still persist today.

T: As does the media, which as shown played a large role in the success of the sit-ins. But given how media is always changing, does it retain its importance?

G: I believe media as a tool of protest is more relevant today than ever. The successful use of media technologies and institutions during the Civil Rights Movement can be seen as having important implications for the future<sup>2</sup>. It is important to remember that media during that period was dominated by broadcast technologies, consisting of singular-directional flow of information and largely beyond consumer control. The usefulness of said media was limited by the respective audience and interest.

By comparison, new media capable of multi-directional information flow and user input is forever developing and growing in use in modern society. Despite the successful use of media by the Nashville protestors, research suggests that information about the protests was spread through news media rather than social networks<sup>3</sup>. Yet the prominence of social networking today alongside such technologies as the smartphone could potentially provide a foundation of effective communication and information dissemination, empowering students to emulate the successful planning and organisation of the Nashville sit-ins.

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<sup>2</sup> (Andrews & Biggs, 2006, pg. 772). The importance of this cannot be understated, as the Nashville sit-ins protestors' use of media was highly effective given their limited influence. Media technologies are forever changing and new media offers a lot of power to the individual that didn't exist at that time.

<sup>3</sup> (Andrews & Biggs, 2006, pg. 769). This again reflects the changing nature of media. The concept of social networking has changed drastically with sites like Facebook and Twitter, enabling much quicker and efficient communication than was available during the Nashville sit-ins.

T: Although, that wasn't the only reason the Nashville sit-ins were a successful use of nonviolent action. Media portrayed the issue, but the participants are what determined the success of the process.

G: Without people, there is no drive; the Nashville sit-ins show that volume of participants is crucial to nonviolent action. Take for example how hundreds of black students crowded up the jail system and refused bond for release<sup>4</sup>. The action was only as strong as the number of participants and their resolve for the cause. The heavy participation by students and their training created a persistent, devoted presence that couldn't be ignored. Having said this, participation combined with meaningful involvement from all segments of society<sup>5</sup> can be seen as adding substance to the importance of numbers through ensuring transmission and reception of the intended messages, as well as support generated through that.

T: But like you say, the sit-in only goes so far as to attract the necessary attention for change and is not the tool that achieves it.

G: Yes, researching into the theory of nonviolent action and the Nashville sit-ins showed me that demonstrations are only part of the picture and that negotiation can be a means to achieving the change that the sit-ins raise awareness of. Three suggested commonalities of nonviolent action and negotiation are a want to engage with conflict in a constructive manner, a need for consideration of leverage and power, and focus upon the preparation, process, and strategic action<sup>6</sup>. The presentation shows not only how the Nashville sit-ins adhere to these

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<sup>4</sup> (Morris, 1981, pg. 764). Even in jail the spirit of the movement continued; just like protestors sat down at lunch counters to draw attention, crowding the jails can be seen as generating the same attention to placement that cannot be ignored.

<sup>5</sup> (Cohen, 2006, pg. 26). This is something easily forgotten, but crucial to remember. The Nashville sit-ins embodied their meaning and didn't quit until their demands were met. If the meaning was lost, it could've affected how people perceived the sit-ins, and in turn could have changed how the Nashville sit-ins carried out.

<sup>6</sup> (Finnegan & Hackley, 2008, pg. 11).

ideals, but how the sit-ins ultimately led to the process of negotiation that in turn achieved the goal of removing lunch counter segregation.

T: The Nashville sit-ins are certainly ideal for demonstrating the efficacy of combining nonviolent action with negotiation. And yet Greensboro is the prominent event from the movement.

G: Given that Greensboro was the first area to employ the sit-in strategy, it makes sense that events there would be frequently mentioned. Having said this, the prominence of Greensboro did make researching the sit-ins in Nashville difficult, as there were fewer materials to find and information was often found in articles about the movement in general. There was great research found on the relationship between media and the 1960s sit-ins, including Nashville. Having said this, the statement that an aspect less recognised of important leaders in nonviolent action is their ability to negotiate and cleverly frame issues and build toward goals<sup>7</sup> reveals a gap for further research into how effective the various sit-ins were and the importance of negotiation in tandem with nonviolent action.

T: But despite the prominence of Greensboro, you stuck with the Nashville case. It was important for more than just what it achieved though, such as the leaders of nonviolent action it produced.

G: As I've mentioned, leaders who could effectively manage the movement and negotiate change was an important factor in the Nashville sit-ins. Reverend James Lawson was the figurehead of the Nashville sit-ins who trained the students emotionally, mentally, and physically to sustain their nonviolent actions<sup>8</sup>. This no doubt contributed alongside the media

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<sup>7</sup> (Finnegan & Hackley, 2008, pg. 9).

<sup>8</sup> (Cohen, 2006, pg. 26). Each of these elements can be seen as important to the overall efficiency of their nonviolent actions; to fail any one of these would have weakened the

to the depiction of the protestors as peaceful and even victimised through white people retaliation. Students such as Bernard LaFayette, John Lewis, and James Bevel of American Baptist & Diane Nash, Marion Barry, and Angela Butler of Fisk University became key leaders and mentors during the movement under Lawson, and continued to participate in following protests<sup>9</sup>. As such, the effective structuring and management of the Nashville sit-ins such as the training and effective leadership enabled the event to have a positive effect through nonviolent action not only within but also outside of the scope of its aims.

T: So researching the Nashville sit-ins led to the discovery of some interesting theoretical connections. But was there anything surprising?

G: There was one particular scenario that stood out during the research process. One article discussed how Diane Nash, one of the students under Lawson's training, recalled a waitress dropping plates by accident in a comical fashion, but that the students remained firm in their composure to maintain the importance of their cause<sup>10</sup>. It stood out not for reinforcing the notion of adhering to their training, but for its whimsical nature amidst a setting of tense socio-political relations and hostilities. Also surprising was an online news article, which detailed how during a 50-year anniversary re-enactment of the sit-ins, not a single white person there was willing to participate in the role of a heckler<sup>11</sup>.

T: And I imagine it was hard not to include every interesting detail of the sit-ins. Did you undertake a process of elimination?

G: That definitely formed a part of my work method. I had to keep in mind not only to include relevant contextual information, but also information that is applicable to the theory.

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overall movement. Consistency and a resolve to uphold it shows how the Nashville sit-ins maintained their meaning.

<sup>9</sup> (Isaac, 2008, pg. 42).

<sup>10</sup> (Ling, 2000, pg. 37).

<sup>11</sup> (Phillips, 2010).

Before bringing it to the students the presentation was also tested, with respondents suggesting that the information needed to be spread over a generous amount of slides and include more images<sup>12</sup>. This feedback was then incorporated into the final version, which I believe makes it more accessible and easier to view as a result.

T: So like the media, your presentation became largely about how the information is framed and consideration of audience.

G: Exactly! Like the Nashville protestors, I came to consider the best way of using my chosen medium of communication in order for my message to be best received.

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<sup>12</sup> The respondents referred to are my father and cousin who formed primary research for the presentation. The points mentioned are from the feedback received following their viewing of the presentation on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2012.

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