Project report, STS390, "Media, war and peace"
Spring session, 2004
Science, Technology & Society, University of Wollongong

ANTI-WAR REACTIONS TO THE INVASION OF IRAQ: APPLYING A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE TO NON-VIOLENT ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 saw an unprecedented anti-war response from across the world. Despite little support from mainstream media sources, a culturally and geographically diverse contingent of individuals and groups were able to unite in actions of solidarity and protest. This study will focus on some of the methods employed in this mass mobilisation, including rallies and protests, cultural production in urban space such as anti-war writings and song, the use of human shields in the country itself and, throughout this all, the use of the Internet as a forum for discussion and as tool for the dissemination of information alternate to the dominant media discourses of the time. The use of both traditional and modern methods of non-violent will be examined in order to determine their roles and effectiveness in conveying a message. This analysis will be considered in terms of the communication framework laid out by Martin and Varney in the article 'Nonviolence and communication' [1]. Listing five dimensions of non-violence as communication, this article provides an in-depth analysis of non-violent action in the 1991 Soviet Coup. The same five dimensions, listed below, can also be applied to the invasion of Iraq. These are as follows [2]:

- Conversion, persuasion, symbolic action: dialogue with opponents
- Power equalization via noncooperation and intervention: preparation for dialogue with opponents

- Mobilisation of third parties: the chain of non violence

- Collective empowerment: dialogue within activist groups

- Individual empowerment: inner dialogue

In applying these dimensions of non-violence to the invasion of Iraq, a better understanding of the way non-violent actions operate in wider society can be achieved. The integration of academic comment on aspects of protest and communication provides a wider framework in which to comparatively view non-violent action.

BACKLASH AGAINST THE INVASION OF IRAQ: A NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS

1. Conversion, persuasion, symbolic action: dialogue with opponents

Protest rallies were characteristic of the lead up to the invasion of Iraq. As the declaration of war by U.S. President George Bush became an imminent reality, anti-war groups declared an Emergency Day of Action to take place the day war was declared, with other rallies and vigils held in public spaces across the world. As a participant in some of these activities, taking place in Wollongong, it became apparent to me that despite the large numbers attending these events – some of the largest rallies that the city has ever seen – media attention devoted to them was minimal. In many instances, events received no coverage whatsoever on local television, radio and print media sources. The role of these actions as persuasive and symbolic protests taking place in the public domain became even more important when facing this lack of coverage in the mainstream media. By taking the anti-war message to the streets in a non-violent manner, a direct forum to engage in dialogue with opponents was also created. Perhaps more influential than any verbal dialogue was the symbolic communication of support for the anti-war movement, with sheer numbers indicating that resistance to the war was not simply coming from a vocal minority.

The use of the Internet to disseminate information also worked as a tool to disseminate information, create a dialogue with opponents and potentially persuade them to the cause. Alternative media sites such as Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) and its network of autonomous affiliate sites across the globe allow regular citizens to contribute their own articles on issues of importance to their communities. As Kidd indicates in her discussion of alternative media coverage of the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Centre, "Within the first few days following September 11, the [Indymedia.org] site featured street-level descriptions of peace vigils and demonstrations in the United States and internationally" [3]. It is the wide-ranging accessibility of the Internet as a medium for publication and international communication that has allowed for power equalisation, as well as collective empowerment amongst activist groups, which will be discussed further on in this study.

2. Power equalisations via non-cooperation and intervention: preparation for dialogue with opponents

Opportunities for power equalisation via non-cooperation and, in particular, intervention, were few for opponents to the war. With the invasion propelled by a coalition of international military forces, supported by governments from across the world and led by the United States, it was simply impossible for actions of non-cooperation to target all these powers at one time.

One action that had some success in the equalisation of power though was the intervention of human shields in Iraq. Consisting of people from many nations, these shields volunteered to go into Iraq in the hope that their presence would prevent the bombing of crucial infrastructure such as food storages, and water and power plants. Despite the major hurdles facing these volunteers, many managed to conduct interviews with international media via satellite phone, or file reports which were distributed on the Internet. In a country where reporting was otherwise determined by who the occupying forces would let in – especially so after the first turbulent months of the war – this was a refreshing and positive opportunity for opinions that

were not influenced by the military to be heard. Moreover, they established a pool of eyewitness accounts which defused some of the power of the military and of media corporations to express the situation in Iraq to the Western world in a manner which suited them.

One of the human shields with a local connection to the region was Rosemarie Gillespie, better known as Waratah. The Port Kembla grandmother, who had previously taken part in other non-violent actions in Bougainville, communicated many messages to friends via telephone while in Iraq. These were rapidly posted and distributed on the Internet, and also published in a number of newspapers including the Sydney Morning Herald [4]. One message, posted on March 22, 2003, indicates the potential effect of a bombing, both on the human shields and the Iraqi people:

> The missile had landed little more than a kilometer away from where we were standing. Just a small difference in the trajectory would have had the missile heading straight for us. There are thirteen Human Shields living at the site, three Australians, one American, two from Britain, three from Japan, one Norwegian, one Belgian, one Italian, and one Dane. If the US tries again, misses again and hits us instead, we will be just become an unrecognizable mass of bits of concrete, human flesh and broken furniture. Not only would the missile kill all of us, it would also destroy the water treatment plant, which processes water for three million people. To hit the site would also destroy the special unit run by the International Committee of the Red Cross which processes water for use in the hospitals of Baghdad. [5]

From a communication perspective, this piece indicates the powerful role that emotive and evocative descriptions have as persuasive methods of non-violent communication. The prioritisation of the human shields, described at the outset and in detail by Waratah, is indicative of the way the media conventionally values members of its own group – whether perceived or actual – as opposed to the opposition. The employment indicates the true value of the human shields and their presence in Iraq. As Barker states, "Ethnicity is a *relational* concept concerned with categories of self-identification and social ascription. What we think of as our identity is dependent on what we think we are *not*" [6]. Despite their contradiction to the official line of their governments, the nationality of shields such as Waratah gave them a preconceived sense of commonality amongst their audiences, rather than having to create a similar empathy towards the Iraqi people, which would no doubt take an extended period of time and require more difficult means.

Nonetheless, the sheer volume of Iraqis potentially affected by the activities of invading forces carries its own weight. For this reason, Waratah's description of what the human shields would appear as if bombed – "an unrecognizable mass of bits of concrete, human flesh and broken furniture" – is compounded when the numbers of people that could suffer the same fate are raised. This non-cooperation refutes the dehumanisation of the Iraqi people by official sources, and is where the equalising power of such communication lies.

3. Mobilisation of third parties: the chain of non-violence

Following on from the work of individuals such as Waratah as both activists and alternative media sources is the mobilisation of third parties in the chain of non-violence. This relied heavily on the dissemination of information away from mainstream media sources. Alternative media, such as the websites previously mentioned, pamphlets and newspapers, are just some of the resources used. Another lesser-recognised but vitally important field is that of cultural expression. Social commentary through the arts is a recognisable facet of non-violent action. In Indonesia, for instance, workers are empowered through the use of theatre as an educational tool [7]. As an action that takes place in public space, performances staged for other workers enable the mobilisation of third parties, as well as communicating a clear message of knowledge to factory bosses.

A popular means of communication in response to the invasion of Iraq was music, used to communicate a non-violent message and encourage the mobilisation of third parties. Popular artists such as Zack de la Rocha, formerly of Rage Against The Machine, the Beastie Boys and DJ Shadow all released anti-war songs available around the commencement of the war. Containing passionate and opinionated lyrics, fans of the artists simply could not ignore the messages contained within. The distribution of these songs via websites such as www.marchofdeath.com allowed the artists to explicitly encourage listeners to pursue the messages contained within further, leading to both collective and individual empowerment, both of which will be discussed later in this study.

As a creative writer active in the Illawarra's arts scene and through my work as a journalist on local cultural magazine *Sparx*, I have observed the expression of anti-war sentiments in many art forms. As works of art though, these elements can be appreciated by audiences from across the spectrum of ideological positions on the war. Due to this nature, art potentially can engage even oppositional audiences for a period of time and generate a response to the ideas contained within.

Conducting a "scrutiny of various [communication] perspectives in an attempt to draw out insights that can provide guidance for nonviolent activists" [8], Martin and Varney's analysis of main models of communication theory indicates varying levels of impact that the medium has in conveying a message to an audience. The transmission model, indicating that transmission of a message between sender and receiver is a predominantly one-sided affair, with any variation on reception attributed to the influence of a "noise source" [9], has been heavily discounted by the development of reception studies that recognise the active audience [10].

The role of the active audience was highlighted by the reception of a particular issue of *Sparx* by the community. The April-May 2003 issue [11], labelled the peace edition, featured articles on non-violent anti-war statements made in the local community, including those made in art exhibitions and festivals, personal opinions of local artists and politicians, and commentaries on peace rallies held in the region. The cover image itself featured the work of local photographer Howard Jones, who captured an image at one of the peace rallies held in Sydney. This image featured a
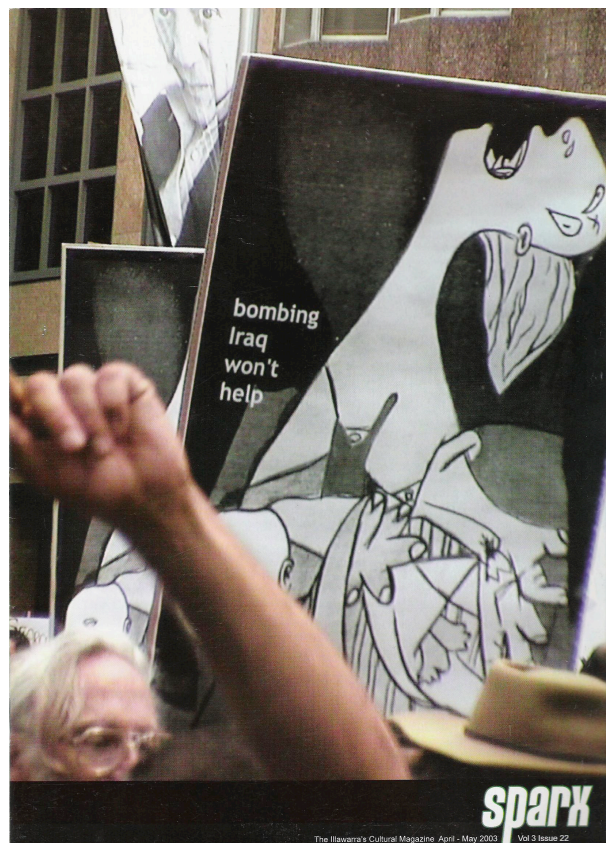

Fig. 1: Sparx, April-May 2003, cover image

protestor's placard, bearing an image taken from Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and the words "bombing Iraq won't help" [see fig. 1]. Public response to the issue was surprising, with impassioned opinions expressed by many community members, both in support of the war and against it. Nowhere was this more evident than in the chambers of Kiama Municipal Council – a primary source of funding for the magazine, as well as publisher and employer of the magazine's staff. Heated argument ensued at the Council meeting following the release of the peace edition, with some councillors vehemently opposed to the content of the issue and questioning that validity of funding such an issue. This reaction, although seemingly contradictory to the message conveyed by this non-violent means, actually worked for the cause by mobilising third parties to support the peace movement, standing up in support for the issue and the views it expressed. This was just one instance of collective empowerment.

4. Collective empowerment: dialogue within activist groups

The predominant means of collective empowerment however, was by no means as in the situation described above. Dialogue as non-violent anti-war action, at least in the public sphere, largely took place amongst organisations and activist groups formed for that specific purpose. The Internet was a significant forum for much of this discussion, not only linking people from across the world, but also used by localised groups and a cheap and efficient form of communication in order to coordinate direct – and real life – action. One example of this collective empowerment is the group of Active websites (www.active.org.au) that operate in Australia. Powered by open-source programming made available by Community Activist Technology, otherwise known as CAT or Cat@lyst, the websites aim to bring like-minded social activists together in a number of ways:

> While it originally focused on events, Active is attempting to be more than a subversive newspaper or a community bulletin board. It aims to be a meeting place, an online autonomous zone, a hub of active information where a whole variety of social change movements connect. What we hope is that participants can connect their talk to action… [12]

The Active website [see Fig. 2] differs from email list groups and other similar online resources in the level of interactivity it offers audiences. While certainly not alone in

its style, this is just one site indicative of the challenges facing communications theorists when conducting text-based studies of online material. In terms of literary theory, its closest parallel is that of hypertext – another relatively new form. With few studies conducted on this subject, the innovative nature of non-violent action can be witnessed, in this case, extending
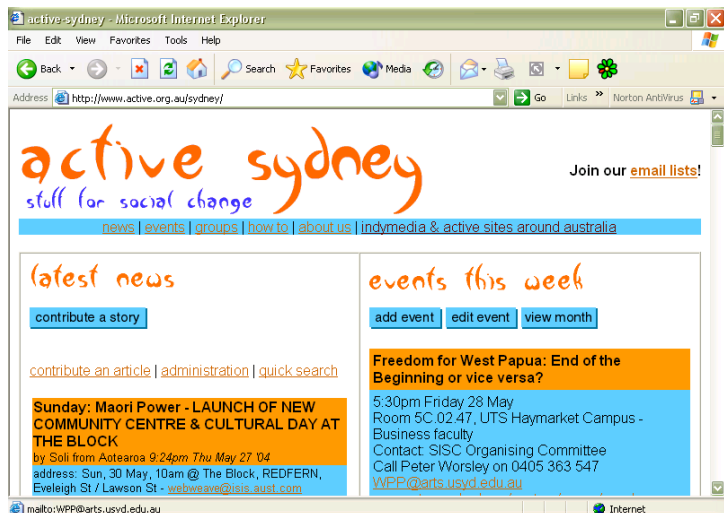

Fig. 2: Active Sydney website
(http://www.active.org.au/sydney/)

beyond the scope of this facet of communication theory through size alone. But forms of communication such as that described on the Active websites not only offer a form of empowerment through the collective consciousness, but also offer an opportunity for personal reflection. In contributing to these websites, individuals themselves are provided with an opportunity for empowerment.

5. Individual empowerment: inner dialogue

Lastly, this study moves to the notion of individual empowerment through non-violent action. The most obvious connection present to communication theory here is in understanding the undertaking of non-violent action as a self-reflexive process, in order to further one's own belief and understanding. With discussion of the Internet as a tool for communication well-documented in previous sections, this study will instead move on to consider the protest action of street art as an action that also promotes individual empowerment.

Writing on street art and political protest in Hispanic countries, Chaffee indicates that street art in general "has an implied collective, grass-roots appeal" [13] and that groups "employ this communication channel to identify problems, question values, make claims and suggest alternatives" [14]. In the case of large scale group-derived actions, such as the alteration of billboards and other advertising – also known as

culture jamming or anti-advertising – this is undeniably the case. But small-scale individual actions – such as stencils, stickers and graffiti slogans and images placed in public spaces are arguably motivated by different means. For the most part, those that undertake these actions receive no response from the public, and thus, must be propelled by an internal motivation. The desire to express an opinion – regardless of how it is received – appears as the basis of this textual creation.

CONCLUSIONS:

The non-violent actions undertaken in response to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, as understood from a communication perspective, indicate that the persuasion of opponents is one facet propelling such actions. In light of massive negative responses from around the world, United States and coalition forces continue to occupy Iraq and impose violent methods of force and coercion on the country and its people. But rather than questioning the validity of non-violent action, this fact points out the need for such actions to be demonstrated. Non-violent actions not only demonstrate an alternative to the use of physical force, but also enable the individual and collective empowerment of people across boundaries of ethnicity, religion and locale, amongst others, and mobilise others to the cause. In light of the recent violent actions of both terrorists and world superpowers, the ability of individual people to unite and communicate above these potential dividers sees some hope for peace to prevail.

ENDNOTES

1 - Martin, B. and Varney, W. (2003) 'Nonviolence and Communication', *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 40, No. 2, March 2003, pp. 213-232. Accessed online: http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/03jpr.html, May 6, 2004.

2 - *ibid.*

3 - Kidd, D. (2003) 'Indymedia.org: A new communications commons', *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, McCaughey, M. and Ayers, M. (eds.), Routledge, New York, p. 49.

4 - Gillespie, R. (2003) 'Children suffer most', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 26, 2003. Accessed online: http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/03/26/1048653739616.html. May 9, 2004.

5 - Gillespie, R. (2003) 'Calling on all world citizens', *Truth Justice Peace*, March 22, 2003. Accessed online: http://www.humanshields.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=30&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0. May 9, 2004.

6 - Barker, C. (2003) *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Sage, London, p. 195, his emphasis.

7 - For example, 'Beyond the Factory Wall', a joint project of Actively Radical TV and Teater Buruh Indonesia. http://btfw.web-instan.com/.

8 - Martin, B. and Varney, W. (2003) *Nonviolence Speaks: Communicating against repression*, Hampton Press, USA, p. 148.

9 - *ibid.*

10 - Barker, C. (2003), *op cit.*

11 - *Sparx*, Vol. 3, Iss. 22, April-May 2003.

12 - Kuiper, G. quoted in Meikle, G. (2002) *Future Active: Media activism and the Internet*, Routledge, New York, p. 92-3.

13 - Chaffee, L. (1993) *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular tools for democratization in Hispanic countries*, Greenwood Press, USA, p. 15.

14 - *ibid*, p. 9.