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Comment

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‘September 24 protest: communication tools the key’

The weekend’s anti-war protest in the U.S. succeeded in proclaiming its message because communication tools were cleverly used, writes **Jane Smith**.

Anti-war protests have long had an impact on the historical landscape- think back to the late 1960s and the Vietnam War.¹ Years later, little has changed. Since the commencement of military activity in Iraq, many anti-war protests have been held. However, none have garnered more support than the non-violent protest held in Washington D.C. on the 24th of September. In fact, while organisers had expected 100,000 people, over 300,000 actually arrived to march from The Ellipse in Washington D.C., past the White House.² This protest against U.S. involvement in Iraq was led by the September 24 National Coalition, and aside from the march, included talks from notable campaigners such as Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a fallen soldier rallying to have the troops brought home. So what was it that made this anti-war protest, which was actually one of many held around the world on that day, the biggest protest since the war began?³ The answer centres on the methods through which the message was spread.

¹ D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999, p. 1. The authors comment that since the 1960s, protests “...have become a permanent component of Western democracies.”

² L. Lambert, ‘Thousands in US Protest Iraq War, Globalisation,’ <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/advocacy/protest/iraq/2005/0924protest.htm>, 24th September 2005; United for Peace and Justice Organisation, ‘March Route for September 24,’ <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/article.php?id-3091>.

³ Author Unknown, http://irishantiwar.org/calendar/item.tcl?scope=public&calendar_id=1477; A.N.S.W.E.R (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) Organisation, ‘We all did it! 300,000 surround White House in largest anti-war protest since war began,’ <http://www.internationalanswer.org/>, 25th September 2005; P. Dvorak, ‘Anti-war fever fills the streets: demonstration is largest in capital since U.S. military invaded Iraq,’ <http://www.internationalanswer.org>, 25th September 2005. A large peace rally was held in Ireland, as well as San Francisco, Los Angeles and London. The website of the Irish Anti-War Movement said, “We will be stretching out across the Atlantic to join our American brothers and sisters in saying: NO to WAR.”

As Brian Martin says in his work 'Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,' participation in a protest must be voluntary- people cannot be forced to join in against their will.⁴ In this case, 300,000 people came on a voluntary basis, having been invited to participate through mediums such as email. "I hope you can join the protest this Saturday, September 24th ...," one message said.⁵ Clearly, this was an invitation, not a request. As a result, the Washington demonstration was a classic example of a successfully conducted non-violent protest, given that such a large number of people came of their own accord.

Non-violent struggles require leaders, people who will take the cause to the streets.⁶ In this case, the September 24 protests had two definite leaders- the Act Now To Stop War & End Racism (A.N.S.W.E.R.) group, and the United for Peace and Justice Group. These organisations led the participants who banded together under the title 'September 24 National Coalition.' Had there been an absence of direction from these parties it is doubtful that the protest would have been so successful.

The goal of these leaders was to distribute their message to thousands across the world, and thanks to the clever use of communication tools, was certainly achieved. Why? Non-violent demonstrations work best when the idea is communicated in a manner which emphasises co-operation.⁷ The mass media was used very successfully by the organisers of this protest, because they acted as intermediaries- an example of co-operation. This could not have been more evident than when the Coalition organised a press conference to inform the media of their plans. Within one hour of an Associated Press article being published in response, a number of major newspapers across the country had picked up the story, and within twenty-four hours, it became international news.⁸ This extensive exposure certainly helped to swell the size of the crowd, with the message also being spread through coverage of the demonstration itself.

Likewise, the organisers cleverly used television as an intermediary. This visual exposure proved crucial, because the public were able to get a better feel for the enormity of

⁴ B. Martin, 'Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,' *War Resisters' International*, London, 2001.

⁵ G. Bohicik, 'March on Washington D.C. - Saturday, September 24th- No to Unjust War and Occupation in Iraq,' <http://democrat.meetup.com/365/boards/view/viewthread?thread=1513327>, posted 19th September 2005. George Bohicik, a protester from the organisation 'Not in Our Name/Columbus,' sent this email, which not only gave information about the logistics of the protest, but reasons why it was being staged. Mr. Bohicik provided a telephone number and email address through which interested parties could contact him for more information.

⁶ B. Martin, 'Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,' *War Resisters' International*, London, 2001.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ A.N.S.W.E.R Organisation, 'Sept. 24 White House protest receives widespread media coverage,' http://answer.pephost.org/site/News2?abbr=ANS_&page=NewsArticle&id=6611, 1st September 2005. A wide variety of news organisations attended the press conference, including CNN, *The New York Times* and the DC-Independent Media Centre. The article from the Associated Press was written by Elizabeth White, and was titled 'Anti-war activists plan massive D.C. Rally.'

the protest and its message, through imagery. As we know, a picture can tell a thousand words! The independent media were strongly involved, particularly through radio broadcasts,⁹ and this certainly contributed to the message being communicated, because so many people have access to this medium.¹⁰

However, the real strength of the way this non-violent struggle was conducted lies in the organisers' use of the internet. Given that the internet is a very interactive medium, the networks established through it can be very effective channels for distributing ideas.¹¹ Not only did the interactive nature of the internet allow people to find out information about the protest itself,¹² it provided a forum for a large number of participants to record their experiences.¹³ Clearly, this level of active involvement proves that communication mediums such as the internet were well used. People are more likely to become involved if they have the chance to use the technology, and do so as they wish.

While there is little doubt that contemporary technology contributed greatly to the successful communication of this protest's anti-war message, the use of traditional communication tools must not be forgotten. Posters, stickers, flyers, and badges emblazoned with memorable slogans and colourful graphics helped to convey the idea.¹⁴ Why, when many people believe these to be antiquated, was this so? The vibrant design of these items attracted attention, and created an identity for the participants, which writers Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani view as important.¹⁵ So these communication tools added another dimension to the protest, and while traditional, contributed strongly to its success.

Non-violent protests rely heavily on communication tools to broadcast their message, and in the case of the September 24 protests, their clever use ensured that it accomplished

⁹ Author Unknown, 'September 24th Anti-War Protest,' http://www.indybay.org/archives/archive_by_id.php?id=3339&category_id=18. One radio station accepted and broadcast reports on the protest which were telephoned to them.

¹⁰ B. Martin, 'Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,' *War Resisters' International*, London, 2001.

¹¹ B. Martin, 'Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,' *War Resisters' International*, London, 2001.

¹² A.N.S.W.E.R Organisation, '10 pieces of essential information about the September 24 rally and march,' http://answer.pephost.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ANS_s24index, 17th September 2005. This page was designed exceptionally well. It communicated the logistical information effectively through clear, concise wording, and appropriate visuals, such as maps, and tables with bus and train timetables.

¹³ C. Christner, 'Anti-war protest in Washington D.C.,' http://www.toptechwriter.us/anti-war_protest/page_1.htm, 24th September 2005. Chris Christner, a participant in the rally, created a photographic blog as a way of further communicating the anti-war message. These photographs depicted people marching and listening to the speakers, and also focussed on the signs that were held by demonstrators throughout the proceedings. There are various other sites of this nature, with many using words instead, to comment on the protest.

¹⁴ A.N.S.W.E.R Organisation, '10 pieces of essential information about the September 24 rally and march,' http://answer.pephost.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ANS_s24index, 17th September 2005.

¹⁵ D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999, p. 89.

much. Given the effective use of both contemporary and traditional means of communicating, as opposed to violence, it is little wonder that this demonstration was successful.

'Communication: tradition still proves important'

Jane Smith's article ('September 24 protest: communication tools the key,' September 27) emphasised what we have all long suspected- that how we communicate is just as important as whether or not we do. While it is true that the internet is undeniably a significant asset to our lives, the traditional methods of communicating, as mentioned by Jane Smith, should not be thrown by the wayside entirely, particularly in the event of a protest.¹⁶ If one positive was to arise from this demonstration, it would be that good old fashioned posters, flyers and badges have proven their worth and are still effective ways of getting a message across.

Anne Taylor, Wollongong

'Protests of the future'

We are living during a time in which all aspects of society are becoming increasingly interconnected. Like everything else, the internet has changed the nature of protests and demonstrations,¹⁷ as reflected in Saturday's anti-war protest in the U.S, and noted by Jane Smith. It is without doubt that the power of the internet, through email, can draw together large groups of people who share a common belief. Maybe in future years we will see protests conducted entirely in the domain of cyberspace.

John Jones, Parramatta

'Anti-war protest did not reach the top'

While it is true that thousands of people around the world heard the message from the latest U.S. anti-war protest, it failed to reach those who it was really aimed at. That's right, the U.S. administration and other governments worldwide who have involved their countries in military action. In order to really convey this message to those at the top, it is important to think even more carefully about the communication techniques needed to do so.

Susan Williams, Katoomba

¹⁶ Like Anne Taylor, J. Carlton feels that both traditional and contemporary methods of communication are valid, but that there should be a balance between the two. It is this author's belief that "...the most effective campaigns use the internet in conjunction with more traditional forms of interaction"- J. Carlton, 'Technology (A Special Report): the best way to organise a protest,' *Wall Street Journal*, 15th September 2003, p. 13.

¹⁷ This view is also shared by Jennifer Lee in her article, 'How protesters mobilised so many and so nimbly,' in *The New York Times*, 23rd February 2003, p. 43.

Dialogue

The Setting: *The author of the article ‘September 24 protest: communication tools the key,’ Jane Smith, is walking along the street, and meets a friend, Tom Baker. Shortly afterwards, another friend of the pair, Andrew Kennedy, arrives. After talking briefly on the street, the trio decide to go to a nearby coffee shop and discuss Jane’s article further.*

Tom Baker: Hello Jane, how are you? I saw your article in the paper the other day.

Jane Smith: Hi Tom, I’m pretty good, thank you. Yes, I did have an article in the paper.

TB: Being published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*- that’s a great achievement!

JS: Thank you. Yes, it was a lot of work, but it was really worthwhile. I certainly learned a lot.
Andrew Kennedy arrives.

Andrew Kennedy: Hi Jane! You had an article in the *SMH* the other day, didn’t you?

JS: Yes, we were just talking about it actually.

TB: Why don’t we have a cup of coffee and talk about it some more?

The trio go to the coffee shop.

AK: So why did you decide to write about the communication tools used by the organisers of the September 24 anti-war protest, Jane?

JS: Well, I had studied the communication technology used in non-violent struggles, and the topic really interested me. I had heard about the September 24 protest through a newspaper article I had read over a month earlier about Cindy Sheehan. She was the woman who camped on the side of the road near George Bush’s Texan ranch in order to protest against the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq. I had then seen an article in the newspaper on the actual protest, and thought that it might be an interesting case study in light of the topic I had studied.

TB: How did you know what to do in order to start the project?

JS: Firstly, I had to plan out very carefully what I was going to do, and work out what information I needed. I used Brian Martin’s article ‘Technology for Non-Violent Struggle,’ which featured in the *War Resisters International*, as the framework from which to build the article. That is, I used the theory explained in the article as the main basis from which to analyse the case study. After looking at this article in detail, I established the theory concerning non-violent struggles which I needed to find out more about.

I identified the information I needed to know through using a framework which journalists often use. That is, I worked out that I needed to know the ‘who, what, where, when, why and how’ aspects of the case study! This really helped me to establish where I needed to go, and what I needed to do to write the article.

AK: Yes, I'm sure that would have been very beneficial. What did the actual research involve?

JS: I decided to research the actual case study first. Because the protest only occurred recently, there was not going to be any information on the case study in books. Subsequently, I had to do an internet search, and I gained a lot of information through looking at the various media items which it called up. For example, one article written by Lisa Lambert, and published by Reuters, was titled 'Thousands in US protest Iraq war, [and] globalisation.' It was helpful because it provided a lot of background information about the case study. I also looked at the websites of the two organisations at the forefront of organising the protest, A.N.S.W.E.R and United for Peace and Justice. These were extremely helpful, and allowed me to gain an insight into the communication tools used by the organisations to get their message across.

AK: So you would say that the internet provided you with a lot of detail about the case study.

JS: That's right. However, I found that journal articles and books were a useful source of information in regards to the theory. For example, there was an article by J. Carlton, titled 'Technology (A Special Report): the best way to organise a protest,' which gave an excellent insight into the use of the internet as a communication tool. A book by Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani on social movements also provided some information on the theory relating to the topic.

TB: The research was obviously a very important part of writing the article. I imagine that you had to analyse the information and plan what you were going to write very carefully.

JS: Yes, that was an important part of the process, and necessary in order to formulate my opinion on whether or not the protest used communication technology effectively.

AK: Did you show the article to anyone before you sent it in to the paper?

JS: Yes, I did. I showed it to two relatives who have an interest in politics and associated topics, and they provided some valuable feedback. They advised me on aspects of the article which needed improvement, and this was greatly appreciated.

TB: Speaking of opinions, what did you think of the 'Letters to the Editor' in response to your article?

JS: These were very interesting. John Jones' idea about protests possibly being based entirely in cyberspace in the future was thought provoking, but I'm not sure that that will happen though, given that Carlton thinks that the most effective protests use a combination of the internet and traditional means of communication.

AK: I was thinking about the point you made in the article about how the internet was used effectively. I thought that the invitation to participate via email was interesting, but what if people thought that it was a spam email, and didn't take any notice of it? The organisers wouldn't have had as many people participate if that had happened.

JS: Yes, I can see your point. The article I read by Carlton touched on that issue and I was quite surprised to see that, because it was not something I had thought about in the context of organising a protest before. However, Mary Bull, an organiser of another campaign, said in the article that emails should state what the protest is about in the subject line, and have a positive slogan. I hadn't expected to find out anything like that during my research into communication tools for non-violent struggles.

TB: That was something different! Just as a point of interest, you said in your article that television coverage was used by the organisers to get the message across. I didn't really see too much about the protest on TV, though.

JS: Well, that is true. In fact, I found an article by the Independent World Television Association, entitled 'Disappearing anti-war protests,' which said that there really wasn't much coverage of the protest on U.S. television at all.¹⁸ It said that there was some coverage on the Sunday morning news shows, but not an extremely large amount. This was quite unexpected. However, upon further research, I found that the coverage there was, communicated information about the protest very effectively. As I said in my article, using imagery is a very valuable way of communicating with people. So even though there may not have been excessive amounts of coverage, I still felt the need to include a reference to television in the article, because the footage that was shown did get the message across well.

AK: You didn't mention anything about mobile phones. I think I heard somewhere that they are being used quite a lot during protests. Why didn't you discuss them in your article?

JS: That's true; they are being used quite heavily. For example, an article I read about a protest in the Philippines, during the course of my research, said that during the week leading up to that protest, approximately seventy million text messages were sent in an effort to spread the message.¹⁹ In regards to this case study, some protesters were going to use their mobile phones to send text messages and tell other people about the protest and its message, but I couldn't use this information in my article, because it would have caused it to be too

¹⁸ Independent World Television Association Newstaff, 'Disappearing Antiwar Protests,' http://www.iwtnews.com/disappearing_antiwar.

¹⁹ S.S. Coronel, 'New media played a role in the people's uprising,' *Nieman Reports*, Vol. 56, Iss. 2, Summer 2002, p. 61.

long. Needless to say, it was a very interesting point, but unfortunately, there just wasn't enough space to include it!

AK: Just going back to the 'Letters to the Editor' in response to your article, I can see why Susan Williams didn't think that the protest was a strong example of communication technology being used to successfully convey a message during a non-violent protest. If you had taken her side of the argument, and seen the audience as specifically the governments involved in the conflict, it would have been difficult to come to the same conclusion.

TB: I can see what you mean Andrew, but it's important to look at the protest in the context of the bigger picture. The audience not only included the political leaders, but thousands of people like us around the world. So I think Jane's conclusion that the message was successfully communicated to a wide audience can be reached, when you look at it in this way.

JS: Yes, it is a complex situation, and one which organisers of future anti-war protests will have to take into account. Well, it has been interesting discussing this with you, Tom and Andrew. We will have to talk again.

AK and TB: Thanks, Jane.

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