

# **David Copperfield**

## **Project report**

**MACS390, “Media, war and peace”**

**Autumn session, 2010**

**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\\_10outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390_10outline.pdf)

1. An information pack for an organisation.

*David Copperfield* prepared an information pack designed for an organisation — Friends of the Earth — in the form of a slide show. The slide show is a separate file.

Note that the slide show is neither the product nor the responsibility of Friends of the Earth.

2. A fictional dialogue on doing the project.

*David Copperfield*'s dialogue starts on the next page.

This document is located at [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390\\_10tops/](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS390_10tops/).

# Dialogue

James: How's the work on civil liberties and activism coming on?

Penelope: It's not looking good... more and more laws just keep getting passed criminalising protest and dissent. It's becoming increasingly difficult to carry out meaningful, effective action in opposition to government policies...

James: No way! But we're meant to be a free country, right? Isn't it on the front page? Aren't people out in the streets in protest? Sounds like something out of a dictatorship...

Penelope: Mmmm, yes... But the issue is almost totally out of the public spotlight. The passage of a new law attacking civil liberties might generate brief interest, but this soon dies down and the matter fades away. For instance, during the 2007 APEC summit, there was widespread concern about the tactics adopted to police protests and new laws that gave police extraordinary powers to establish roadblocks, search and detain people, seize possessions and prevent certain people from entering specific areas altogether.<sup>1</sup> But with the end of the summit the laws' "sunset clauses" kicked in and attention faded away – then when almost exactly the same laws were put on the books permanently, without a sunset clause, two years later as the NSW "Major Events Act," there was almost no media coverage whatsoever.

James: Nothing?!

Penelope: A Google search for "NSW Major Events Act" reveals thousands of pages, but it turns out that they're all from the same website. There are really a mere sixteen items, only one of which is a critical article analysing its implications for the future of protest – in a small magazine called "Dissent," which most likely has only a very small circulation.<sup>2</sup>

James: So what you need to do is work out how this issue can be forced right into the centre of public and media attention, so that people are outraged by it, and see it as an injustice, as an attack on democracy?

Penelope: Exactly. That's the whole idea of this project. To help activist groups understand how the media covers these issues and how to generate enough concern to make them backfire against the governments that created them. Democracy depends upon the right to free speech and free assembly and these laws, by attacking those, are no less than an attack

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the high profile of the APEC summit, the security operation was the most expensive and large-scale exercise of its type ever mounted in Australia, with a 2.8 metre fence surrounding the CBD, 3,500 police officers and 1,500 military personnel mobilised, warships moored in the harbour and jet-fighters circling the city. As a result the extraordinary powers granted to law-enforcement agencies came up for extensive scrutiny: see, for instance Horin, A. (2007) 'No dissent in the chicken coop – and that's an order' *Sydney Morning Herald* 8/9/07; Marr, D. 'Lucky we all got out alive in Fear City' *Sydney Morning Herald* 10/9/07; Baker, J. 'Identity parade of the secret police' *Sydney Morning Herald* 10/9/07

<sup>2</sup> Creenaune, H. and Hutchinson, Z. (2010) 'Criminalising peaceful protest', *Dissent*, Autumn/Winter 2010

on fundamental democratic rights. Holly Creenaune from *Friends of the Earth Sydney* spelt out the need to create a backfire against this explicitly when she said that ‘we need to organise to resist and de-legitimise repression and increased police powers.’

James: Mmmm... but that leads to the question: won’t every new law make it more difficult to protest? Aren’t these laws going to cause activism to diminish, and increasingly discourage people from participating? How can you be certain that as conditions become less free and less conducive to protest and dissent, *more* people are going to get motivated to become involved?

Penelope: Yeah, that’s a really good point. You can easily imagine that with certain people banned from meeting together, with the use of infiltrators and *agents provocateurs*, with surveillance of people or groups through phone-tapping or bugging, many might refrain from activism or lie low. Similarly, heavy violence against protestors at G20 and the use of extremely severe punishments had a “chilling” effect for future protests and tied up many in hours of frustrating legal and fundraising work.<sup>3</sup> However, much of this above repression occurred out of the public spotlight – when, for example, infiltration of activist groups or blackmail of protestors is brought into the open as it was before APEC<sup>4</sup>, or when massive, highly visible violence is used against large numbers of clearly peaceful people, this generally tends to generate outrage that will push more supporters and activists from the sidelines into action.

James: So amongst the activist community you think it’s relatively likely that, when they’re known about, when they’re used to attack the rights of protestors, these laws will generate outrage and have the opposite effect to that intended – they’ll spur more people into action?

Penelope: Yeah, it’s a hallmark of most struggles if the repression is done in a highly public way and people are upset by it.<sup>5</sup> It may seem ironic but that’s what tends to happen – so much so that some radicals throughout the ‘sixties and ‘seventies actively hoped for police violence to help their causes! Barry York even developed an “escalation-repression-escalation cycle” theory for it.<sup>6</sup>

James: What about third parties outside this relatively small group? Their support would be critical I’d imagine. Do you think the general public are likely to react sympathetically? During APEC and G20, for instance, there was a fairly widespread campaign, particularly in the Murdoch press, to demonise protestors, comparing them to Stalinists and predicting ‘mayhem involving every major protest group in Sydney [causing] mass CBD disruption.’<sup>7</sup> Ask most people what they think of “protestors” and you’ll get mostly derogatory comments.

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<sup>3</sup> In November 2006 the G20 (“Group of Twenty,” the world’s twenty richest countries) met in Melbourne. Protestors were arrested and faced up to twenty five years’ imprisonment for such minor offences as entering office foyers and pulling down posters or dismantling police barricades. Fundraising and legal work in the aftermath of this is still ongoing

<sup>4</sup> Tadros, E. (2007) ‘Spy for us and we’ll drop charge’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16/6/07

<sup>5</sup> See Martin, B. (2007) *Justice Ignited: the Dynamics of Backfire*, Rowman and Littlefield, Plymouth

<sup>6</sup> See York, B. (1989) *Student Revolt*, Nicholas Press, Campbell

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence, K. (2007) ‘APEC protestors target Sydney’ *Daily Telegraph*, 22/8/09

It doesn't seem realistic to expect the public to care a great deal about what they probably see as a "bunch of hippies" getting beaten up...

Penelope: It's true that the word 'protestors' frequently evokes a fairly negative image in the public mind, and that there often isn't a lot of sympathy for them... However over a million people protested against the Iraq War in 2003 – that's a huge number for a country of 20 million. And when they see clearly peaceful protests getting broken up and attacked by police wielding draconian powers, it's likely that most people will think that that's the wrong thing to do to anyone regardless of what they're protesting about.

James: All this assumes that activists will remain non-violent in the face of police attacks, which is very difficult. Also, it's a different story altogether when activists take direct action disrupting coal supplies or similar activities which *Friends of the Earth* engages in. Creating a public and media backlash against police powers used to stop this "disruptive" action would be even more difficult.

Penelope: It's true, backfire theory depends in a large part on the public being outraged, and this action might very well seem reasonable. Not only are activists seen as harming power supply, but threatening jobs too. It'll take a lot of educational work to build up support. But with the failure of the Copenhagen climate negotiations and the government's domestic inaction on global warming<sup>8</sup>, we may be getting there...

James: What about winning over support from the powers that be? Both Richard Gregg and Gene Sharp, for instance, include conversion of the opponent as one of the effects of backfire, or "ju-jitsu" as they call it.<sup>9</sup> It seems even more unrealistic though to expect people like politicians and police to side with the same activists they're attacking.

Penelope: Yes, Gregg's idea that they, too, will side with targets might be a bit flawed. Seeing that their targets were unresisting, police in India laid into non-violent protestors all the more aggressively, while Mark Kurlansky similarly suspected that a perverse sort of pleasure was driving working class police to unleash violence against privileged, protesting college students in the US in the 'sixties.<sup>10</sup> However it would be wrong to assume that the authorities are all mindless automatons: during the 1998 waterfront dispute, hundreds of police turned in "sick" on the night they were to be sent in to break up pickets,<sup>11</sup> while during the Russian Revolution large parts of the army sided with demonstrators!<sup>12</sup>

James: Finally, what about the media itself? Ben Bagdikian estimates that more or less five giant corporations control almost all of the world's media outlets. Their priorities are oriented

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<sup>8</sup> The COP15 climate talks were designed to reach a global agreement on reducing carbon to combat global warming, but the negotiations ended in almost total failure. The Rudd government's attempts to pass even an inadequate Emissions Trading Scheme met with similar failure in Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Sharp, G. (1973) *The Politics of Non-violent Action: Volume Two*, Sargent Publishers, Boston, and Gregg, R. (1966) *The Power of Non-violence*, Schocken Books, New York

<sup>10</sup> Kurlansky, M. (2005) *1968: the Year that Rocked the World*, Vintage, New York

<sup>11</sup> Bramble, T. (2007) *Trade Unionism in Australia: a History from Flood to Ebb-tide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

<sup>12</sup> Sharp, G. (1972)

purely towards profit and their politics are firmly on the right.<sup>13</sup> The whole backfire model depends entirely on news of events being disseminated – it's one of the two critical ingredients of backfire.<sup>14</sup> What happens if events simply aren't covered? Is it realistic to expect of bunch of basically hostile corporations to show sympathy for demonstrators and protestors? What if they just ignore them? It seems like this is the greatest weakness of the whole model, its reliance on a condition like this that's so hard to fulfil. Jerry Mander, for instance, decided that it wasn't even worth the effort of capturing time on television, coverage was so minimal and unfavourable...<sup>15</sup>

Penelope: Mmm, you're right of course. Backfire doesn't occur for most cases of unjust repression simply because no-one ever hears about it. And reliance upon a basically hostile corporate media is a great weakness. Ideally a whole network of decentralised, grassroots, citizen-controlled alternative media could be created,<sup>16</sup> protests could get so large and dramatic they're impossible to ignore, we could witness a huge rise in popular participation of people in their own lives...

James: Wow, sounds utopian; sounds like you're talking revolutionary social changes here...

Penelope: Maybe I am! We could do with a change...

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<sup>13</sup> Bagdikian, B.G. (2003) *The New Media Monopoly*, Beacon Press, Boston

<sup>14</sup> Martin, B. (2007)

<sup>15</sup> Mander, J. (1978) *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Morrow Quill Paperbacks, New York

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Martin, B. (1998) *Information Liberation: Challenging the Corruptions of Information Power*, Freedom Press, London