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Bodies on the line: Physical protest

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Bodies on the line: Physical protest

Abstract

The usefulness of organised protest is often called into question in this electronic media-dominated age, when to bring bodies together around a demand or set of demands can seem somewhat archaic. So many of the occasions where we previously had to turn up personally have been superseded as we connect frequently but briefly, spontaneously but not necessarily simultaneously. Slogans have become eclipsed by SMS texts. So many of our messages are in cyberspace rather than on calico banners. Is there the need for physical protest? I will argue that there is, but that we need to understand how our protests relate to time and space.

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Bodies on the Line: Physical Protest

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By Wendy Varney

The usefulness of organised protest is often called into question in this electronic media-dominated age, when to bring bodies together around a demand or set of demands can seem somewhat archaic. So many of the occasions where we previously had to turn up personally have been superseded as we connect frequently but briefly, spontaneously but not necessarily simultaneously. Slogans have become eclipsed by SMS texts. So many of our messages are in cyberspace rather than on calico banners.

Is there the need for physical protest? I will argue that there is, but that we need to understand how our protests relate to time and space.

Modern campaigns for social justice have increasingly, and often successfully, incorporated the Net and e-mail into their co-ordination and lobbying efforts. The Internet plays a number of important roles, from allowing activists to get vital information onto the Web to facilitating discussion an initiation of alternatives. It is useful in countering secrecy and it is compatible with consultation and high levels of democratic decision-making within groups.

This has meant that some campaigns have been won, which may have previously had difficulty even getting off the ground. The campaign against the clandestinely proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment was one such example.

Nevertheless, no new electronic media, nor any other technology, can be expected to bring about social justice. Social activism is needed for that and here physical demonstrations, where real people turn up at real places in real time and with real banners, still have an important role to play. Like every other strategy, protests should perhaps be used judiciously and with a well-thought through view to the overall objectives, the audience, and how demonstrations stack up against alternative uses of energy and resources.

Other forms of protest may sometimes win the day, but there are certainly times when physical protests play cementing, supportive, and educative roles that cannot be dismissed. Interestingly, much of their benefits come from time and place. Just as the Net is useful for campaigners because it overcomes problems of time and space (people do not have to co-ordinate their activism by lobbying at the same time at the same place when they use the Net), it is that activists have to get the place and time right when protesting that gives their demonstrations much of their pungency.

Take the interjecting protest of Senators Bob Brown and Kerry Nettle last year when George W. Bush spoke in the Australian Parliament. The effectiveness of their protest, and subsequently its global media coverage, hinged on it being at that place and at that time. By virtue of this, the action itself was the protest; their actual words were much less important.

Similarly, in the protests against the proposed damming of the Franklin

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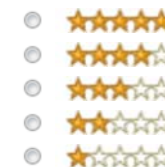
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SYNDICATION



River, the location of the blockade, though obviously chosen for practical purposes of stopping the destruction from proceeding, was crucial. Coverage of the blockade gave evidence of the grandeur of the river and its surroundings. The location was the message: This wilderness must be saved.

Due to the sorts of interaction that can only take place in real space and real time, physical protests offer opportunities that alternative communications cannot. The physical confrontation can demand more discipline not only in scheduling but also in terms of ensuring non-violent responses in sometimes explosive situations. On the other hand, the physical presence, the commitment that goes with it, and the disciplined responses all arguably have scope for challenging mainstream attitudes and creating chances for dialogue.

This will vary hugely, of course, depending on place, issue, audience, and dominant ideologies surrounding the issues. The opportunities need to be weighed into decisions about whether a demonstration is worthwhile, what sort of demonstration it needs to be, its timing and location.

A demonstration may be in a setting, which is emotionally charged and potentially hostile, such as when troops are departing for an overseas war. The setting may be symbolic or it may go to the very core of the problem and, in doing so, create an obstruction as well as an opportunity for education. The 1971 demonstrations against the South African Rugby team, an all-white team which was seen by the Apartheid regime to be something of an ambassador for the South African government, were simultaneously symbolic, obstructionist and educative.

Prior to the team's arrival, Australians generally knew very little about atrocities and the extent of the racist laws in South Africa but the rolling demonstrations which followed the team all around the country highlighted some of the worst aspects of apartheid. Initial hostility to the protests eventually gave way to a widespread feeling that it was not appropriate to host South African sporting teams.

At another level, the demonstrators were giving the team a message that was meant for the government and its opponents back in South Africa. Black South Africans followed news of the protests assiduously and were greatly heartened at the level of the dissent against the team. There was also a clear message for the Australian government, that it should cut its cosy ties with the regime. And lastly the obstructionist tactics of the demonstrators, blowing whistles that sounded like the referee had pulled up play, throwing smoke bombs onto the field to diminish visibility and running onto the field to create havoc, were intended to undermine the game and to send a clear signal to organisers of the forthcoming cricket tour that it should not go ahead. Indeed, it did not.

It is clear that both physical demonstrations and the new opportunities created by new media should be utilised wherever social injustice prevails. It goes without saying that there should be careful thinking about which strategy is more appropriate to individual cases.

We will know that physical demonstrations are useless when they are no longer banned or stymied. If George Bush comes again and Howard, instead of enforcing an expansive no-protest zone, invites protesters to sit in the public gallery, we will know they have reached their use-by date.

Dr Wendy Varney lectures in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Wollongong. She has many research interests but is presently most interested in researching the social history of women's gymnastics in Russia, a project that keeps faltering for numerous reasons. She has recently co-authored a book "Nonviolence Speaks: Communicating Against Repression" with Brian Martin, published by Hampton Press.

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