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ORGANISING FOR EFFECTIVE NONVIOLENT ACTIONS

Sending the Protest Message – Making an Action Effective

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What makes a protest action effective? Organisers have lots of potential choices: what, when, where, how, and who. Looking at how audiences are likely to respond to messages can give you guidance.

Heads of government are coming to town. Let's organise a protest! We'll have a massive rally and march. Those who want can blockade the venue. We'll make our concerns about inequality, exploitation, and aggression known far and wide.

But wait a second. Will this sort of protest be effective? Is it going to change people's viewpoints, mobilise support, and help bring about a better society? Or, instead, will it enforce prejudices, alienate potential supporters, and suck energy away from more effective initiatives? And anyway what does it mean to 'be effective'?

These questions have no simple answers. Actions have many different impacts. Many are hard to measure and some are entirely overlooked. Weighing the pros and cons is difficult: it's an emotional as well as a rational matter.

Context

Actions need to be designed with the context in mind. What is appropriate in one situation could be completely counterproductive in another. Laws, media, police, culture, religion, civil society, and many other factors are very different in Burkina Faso, Germany, Nepal, Indonesia, and China.

In India in 1930, Gandhi chose to build a campaign around salt, a potent symbol for Indians because of the British salt laws. What could protesters use as a



DEMONSTRATION IN QUITO, ECUADOR.

PHOTO: ACCIÓN ECOLÓGICA ECUADOR

potent symbol in Swaziland or Sweden today? Actions must be designed with a deep knowledge of the local conditions. As a general rule, success stories should never be copied, but they can function as inspirations and as useful cases from which to learn.

Open-ended hunger strikes are regarded very differently in a Christian culture than in a Hindu society. For atheists and Christians sacrificing your life means a lot, whereas a Hindi anticipates thousands more lives to come – an important difference! In a country where an activist risks torture, lengthy imprisonment, or the death penalty, civil disobedience is a different matter than where the likely outcome is a fine or a few weeks in a decent prison. It is wise for activists to act differently in countries with strict censorship and state-run media than where free and oppositional media regularly cover demonstrations.

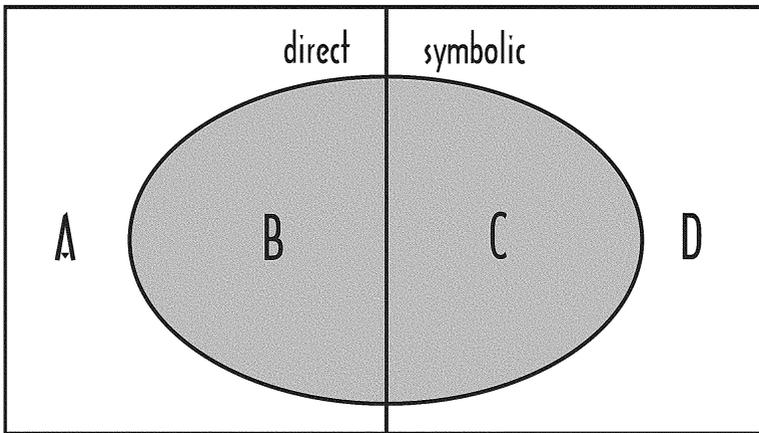
Choices

There are two main types of actions: (1) oppose and (2) promote. The first focuses on what organisers disagree with and the second on the alternative organisers are offering. Within each of these are many options. In most cases, it's much easier to create a positive image when an alternative can be constructed. To say 'no!' is common and easy but will often be regarded as unhelpful or as blocking progress. To present alternatives is more demanding but often rewarded by being seen as constructive.

Within each of these main categories there is again a choice: direct action or indirect action. Direct action means activists themselves doing something about the problem/conflict. It could be to close a city street to change it into a space for pedestrians. Or it could be to squat in a house and turn it into a cultural centre. When activists in Genetix Snowball destroy genetically modified plants from fields in Britain, they are not only demanding that these fields should be made illegal but are removing the plants themselves. These types of actions are often illegal and risky. The point is that the activists themselves are making the change directly: they are taking direct action. Indirect actions involve asking someone else, such as politicians or business executives, to respond to a demand or deal with an unjust situation. Note that in a dictatorship, making requests can be a form of direct action, because it is an exercise of free speech.

For both direct and indirect actions there is a need to develop more types of actions. Creativity, fantasy, and experiments are crucial. Just as arms producers come up with more sophisticated weapons every year, activists need to develop new forms of action. Good examples should be tested, documented, and adapted for use at other times, places, and circumstances.

Nonviolent Action



legal



illegal

DIRECT ACTION CAN BE LEGAL OR ILLEGAL (CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE), AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE CAN BE EITHER SYMBOLIC/INDIRECT OR DIRECT ACTION.

IMAGE: WAR RESISTERS LEAGUE'S ORGANIZER'S MANUAL BY ED HEDEMANN

Audiences

On many issues there are three main groups: activists, opponents, and third parties. When a group wants to challenge a repressive government, the activists are those involved in protests. The opponents are the government and its agencies, such as the police and the army. The third parties are those not directly involved in the struggle: the general public and most people in other countries. People can move from being a third party to being an activist, and the other way around, as a consequence of actions. One goal is to engage more people. In most cases the media are carriers of information/propaganda and messages from the event to wider audiences.



For analysing where people stand, see ‘Spectrum of Allies’ Exercise, p130; for more on the media, see ‘The Role of the Media’, p49.

Alignment Between Methods/Medium and Audience

As well as looking at who the audiences are, it’s helpful to look at the interaction between activist methods and audiences. Media guru Marshall McLuhan said ‘The medium is the message’. For example, television encourages a certain way of viewing the world, irrespective of what’s on the screen. Personal conversation encourages a different perspective.

In activism, too, the medium – namely the method of action – is the message. According to a perspective in psychology called correspondent inference theory, audiences make assumptions about someone’s motivations according to the consequences of their actions. When activists threaten or use violence – for example, bombings, assassinations, or hijackings – many observers believe the goal of the activists is to destroy society. The method, namely destruction, is assumed to reflect the goal. For example, after 9/11, many people in the United States thought al Qaeda’s goal was to destroy U.S. society. This was the wrong message. Very few U.S. citizens knew that Osama bin Laden’s key goals concerned U.S. government policies in the Muslim world.

The same thing applies on a much smaller scale. If a worker on a picket-line spits on a manager, the message is one of contempt and disrespect, which can distract audiences from the message that the pay is too low or working conditions are unsafe.

Actions are more powerful when the method used – the medium – aligns with the message. In the U.S. civil rights movement, well-dressed blacks entered white-only restaurants and sat politely and quietly at lunch counters, not responding to abuse and police provocation. Their presence and respectful demeanour sent a powerful message that was aligned with their short-term goal (equal access to the restaurant), as well as the long-term goal of racial equality. On the other hand, the abuse by white patrons and aggressive action by police, directed only at blacks in the restaurant, sent the message that segregation was a system of racism, exclusion, and aggression. These powerful messages

helped discredit segregation among audiences in the rest of the United States and the world.

Dealing with Attack

Protesters often come under attack: they may be slandered, harassed, beaten, arrested, imprisoned, even killed. Their communications may be intercepted, their offices raided, and their equipment confiscated or destroyed. These attacks are hurtful and expensive, damaging to morale, and can discourage participation. But with the right preparation and tactics, and good luck, some attacks can be made to backfire on the attackers. It's not easy and doesn't happen often, but it can be very powerful.

Perpetrators and their supporters regularly use five methods to inhibit outrage from their attacks:

- cover up the attack
- devalue the target
- reinterpret what happened (including lying, minimising effects, and blaming others)
- use official channels to give an appearance of justice
- intimidate and bribe targets and their supporters.

For example, after police assault protesters, the police and their supporters may use every one of these five methods.

- Police, in assaulting protesters, often try to do it away from witnesses and cameras.
- Police, politicians, and commentators denigrate protesters as being unprincipled, foul-mouthed, ill-behaved brats, rent-a-crowd (professional protesters), thugs, scum, criminals, or terrorists.
- They claim that police were doing their duty, that protesters were violent and disturbing the peace, and indeed that it was the police who came under attack.
- When protesters make formal complaints or go to court, seldom are there any serious consequences for abusive police. Meanwhile, the whole process takes so long that most people lose interest while activists are tied up in technicalities and distracted from activism.
- In many cases protesters don't speak out for fear of police reprisals; in a court action they may accept a settlement to resolve the matter, often with a silencing clause attached.

Each of the five methods can be challenged.

- * *For more information about how to deal with the psychological consequences, see 'Coping with the Stress and Strain of Taking a Stand', p63.*

Conclusion

In deciding on what, when, and how to protest, it's useful to think of audiences and messages.

Context

Actions need to be designed with the context in mind. What is appropriate in one situation could be completely counterproductive in another.

Choices

There are two main types of actions: (1) oppose and (2) promote. The first focuses on what disagreeing with an action/policy/etc. and the other on an alternative.

Audiences

How do audiences and activist methods interact? Opponents, third parties, and activists themselves are important audiences.

Alignment

How do activist methods align with activist goals? If there is close alignment, the right message will more likely be received.

Attacks

How will an attack be perceived? It's vital to be prepared to counter the methods of cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, intimidation, and bribery.

Postscript: documentation, evaluation and dissemination

For actions to become more effective, activists need to learn from past experiences. They need to document and evaluate what they are doing and make this information available for others. (See 'Action Evaluation', p90.) Just as students at war colleges learn about historical battles from lectures and textbooks, activists must build a similar system for coming generations to learn from the history of social movements. This requires serious, critical evaluations of planning, actions, and outcomes. It is just as important to study mistakes as to celebrate victories. These evaluations must be made available for other activists, taking into account different languages and contexts. It is a large task. There are many actions from which to learn!

* *This is a shorter version of an article published in Gandhi Marg, Vol. 29, No. 4, January-March 2008, pp. 503-519. You can access the full article at: <http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/08gm.html>*

there were officially no trials, no prisoners, and no punishment. The cases of the total objectors went through the courts only to identify the objector, and the result was always the same: 16 months in prison. Sometimes the prosecutor never showed up because the result was clear anyway. KMV exploited this in one of their actions:

One of the activists dressed up as the prosecutor and overplayed his role, demanding that the total objector get an even longer prison term because of his profession (he was a lawyer). During the procedure in the court, nobody noticed anything wrong in spite of the ‘prosecutor’s’ exaggerations. One week later KMV sent their secret video recording of the case to the media, with the result leaving most of the Norwegian public laughing.

This example clearly illustrates the power of turning things upside down. A friend of the accused playing the prosecutor and demanding a stronger punishment than what the law can give parodies the court. In this action, KMV activists satirised the absurdity of having a court case with nothing to discuss; they succeeded in getting attention from both media and ‘ordinary people’. In addition to turning the roles upside down, the parody of the court also exposed the contradiction between what the Norwegian state said and what it did. If the politicians call Norway a democracy and claim that it has no political prisoners, why are people sent to prison for their beliefs? And why is that imprisonment not even called a prison sentence, but an administrative term for serving alternative service? This is an absurd situation. Through dramatising it in a humorous frame, KMV cut through all rational explanations and made people understand that this did not make sense.

However, this case also makes the important point that the activist using humour should be aware of the context it is used in. If you want to avoid long prison terms, imitating this kind of action is not recommended.

In a second example, we move from democratic Norway to dictatorial Serbia in the year 2000, before the fall of Slobodan Milošević. To support agriculture, Milošević placed boxes in shops and public places and asked people to donate one dinar (Serbian currency) for sowing and planting crops. In response, the youth movement Otpor arranged its own collection called ‘Dinar za Smenu’. Smenu in Serbian is a word with many meanings; it can mean change, resignation, dismissal, pension, or purge. This action, consisting of a big barrel with a photo of Milošević, was repeated several times in different places in Serbia. After donating a dinar, people would get a stick they could use to hit the barrel. On one occasion, a sign suggested that if people did not have any money because of Milošević’s politics, they should bang the barrel twice. When the police removed the barrel, an Otpor press release said that the police had arrested the barrel and that the action was a huge success. They claimed they had collected enough money for Milošević’s retirement, and that the police would give the money to Milošević.

This is an example of a dilemma action, because Otpor left both Milošević and the police with no space for reaction. If the police did not take away the barrel, they lost face. When they did do something, Otpor continued the joke