

Media as resistance: Disrupting and shifting power.

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Abstract

The anti-coal seam gas (fracking) movement in Australia's most populated state of New South Wales (2011-2015) built broad public support for a disruptive nonviolent campaign that confronted the mining industry in situ and eroded financial, political and social legitimacy for the powerful fossil fuel regime. From fragmented grievance in 2011 the movement escalated to tens of thousands of active participants. As well as blockades at mine sites grassroots activists used strategic media practice to successfully disrupt elite power and remove pillars of support for the fossil fuel regime's pro-coal seam gas narrative.

McCarthy et al. (2013) define nonviolence as wielding influence through the "active process of bringing pressure to bear (even if it is emotional or moral pressure)" (p. xix). While there is no shortage of research into the communications opportunity of today's hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) to make visible protest and dissent, its ontology as strategic resistance is largely unexplored. Indeed, strategic civil resistance scholars emphasise that 'media' should not be over-exaggerated as a tool for movements and that "struggles for freedom, social justice and democracy can only really be won in the real world, not the virtual one" (Popovic and Alvarez, 2015, pp. 98-99).

This paper investigates how grassroots activist media practice wielded influence to confront and shift power during NSW's resistance against the coal seam gas industry and fossil fuel regime. I explore this influence on public narrative through the concepts of media practice as a form of activist commitment, media as networks and media jujutsu, the strategy of media as a process to turn opponents' own power against them. As well as the influence on public narrative this research uses a methodology that rethinks how media can be measured as a tangible count in the numbers game necessary for movement success (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011).

Media as resistance: Disrupting and shifting power.

Late on a Saturday evening @1EarthMedia tweeted: "Queensland Police Force ... proudly brought to you by Santos" with a photo that clearly showed the logo of Santos, one of Australia's largest gas producers, imprinted on the side of a police-car (@1EarthMedia, [tweet], 2014a). Twenty minutes later @1EarthMedia tweeted again: "Santos Queensland Police Service 'Stay on Track Outback' launch for real". This time the tweet included a link to a specific page showing the cars on the Queensland Police website (www.police.qld.gov.au).

Mark Anning aka @1EarthMedia was one of thousands of NSW citizens committing hundreds of hours of personal time to build the grassroots movement against coal seam gas becoming established in the state. From fragmented grievance in 2011, the networks of activism had escalated to strategic intent that included blockading mine-sites, community forums, and expansive nonviolent training in community halls across the state. What was at stake was not only the expansion of a fossil fuel industry in a world under the threat of global warming but food and water security (The coal seam gas campaign was successful. From a standing start in 2011 not only did thousands of people participate in visible protest but hundreds of experts and eye-witnesses emerged to convince a by-stander public and public figures to pick a side. In addition, grassroots media was used to escalate tension and directly engage elite power-holders.

Building a social media network takes time. Anning had used Twitter as a form of activist commitment to build a network of a few thousand followers through his dissemination of rich content that made the case against the risks of coal seam gas mining including known and unknown chemicals used in fracking, political donations of coal seam gas companies and studies on its health impacts. Citizens less and less receive news content direct from source, instead accessing it through online social media applications in a sharing economy driven by a slew of algorithms, individual preferences and digital participation. In a world of 'fake news', facts or content on their own can never "win arguments". But the labour-intensive building of connections and then using these channels to make an issue not just visible but legible can.

Activists spend significant time searching the Internet, following up leads in the way a professional journalist would, undertaking investigative research to add weight to the movement narrative. They now use digital technologies to watch and monitor the same elite power that in the past watched them (Garrett, 2006) and to forensically analyse, challenge or correct the 'facts' aka political misinformation of the powerful political elite (Bruns, 2008). Users pool knowledge as a form of crowd-funded fact-checking and, during events twitter hashtags becoming a convergence space to pool knowledge, news and updates. But it is the translation of this knowledge into power that shifts the status quo, disrupts elite power that shifts it to acting as resistance.

Anning's find was a powerful anti-narrative: police driving to arrest protestors in cars paid for by the mining company whose interests they were protecting. As media jujutsu it turned Santos' public promotion on itself, the sponsorship used as backlash against its donors. In one response on Reddit as the story escalated to a national concern, crossing from social media into national news, a user wrote: "I didn't know or care about them until now anyway. Now I'm a horrified at where their name has been placed and well aware of them. Win?".

Narrative and movement success

Influencing public discourse and how people talk about an issue is critical to movement success. The Women's Rights movement shifted the public narrative to create a new framework that promoted women's equality. The Gay Rights movement changed the way homosexuality was talked about in the public sphere. The US Civil Rights movement removed legitimacy for language and policy that systemised black segregation. Each movement identified and named the systemic oppression, making legible its inequities and introducing a new discourse. More recently the narrative of marriage equality has increased acceptance for LBQTI rights, calling out the inequality embedded by this discrimination and the story of its structural violence that puts gay people at risk. Through grassroots story-telling and the frame of equality and human rights the shared public narrative makes it socially unacceptable to treat or talk about gay people as less than equal. With this activism the narrative itself confronted hegemonic power, its direct challenge to an established paradigm and values transcribed through everyday discourse.

The way that news media talks about an industry regime is a significant part of its social licence and legitimacy. It legitimises private and public investment, planning approvals, consumer market and transnational supply-chain. To disrupt the hegemonic narrative requires a direct challenge to this accepted narrative. It is not enough to protest consent for the regime, the case must be legible of why. Here, digital forums – like the church hall or community groups – of the past become a place for making this case and raising questions. But it is through their intersection with elite power-holders and framing in a context of democracy and accountability that these voices sustain and escalate power. For those challenging fossil fuel projects either for the local threat to water and food security and the fabric of community or for the violence of global warming, media becomes a powerful method of nonviolent resistance if the opponent is framed as regime rather than project proponent.

Media as practice

After Anning's first tweets a process of corroboration took place on digital forums as campaigners cross-referenced to ascertain the story's veracity. Like me many were doubtful. @AustralisTerry tweeted "Santos logos on QLD police vehicles???!". @LockTheGate: "Yep, it seems that Santos is sponsoring the Qld Police #QldInc. Nothing odd about that! (coff)". The claim is interrogated on reddit with one user exclaiming "WHAT???????" and some minutes later "I just had another look. This must be fake. But if it's real there needs to be a shitstorm". A thread interrogates the possibility of the photos being fake.

Seaharechasr: It's real there's a shot of NSW police vehicles parked by a Narrabri/Coona/New England Hwy roadsign too - will try to find it

Bennelong: The mural on the car alone is quite acceptable, but it looks like the Santos logo has been Photoshopped later. EDIT: I stand corrected about the Photoshopping. It's genuine.

LineNoise: Not photoshopped. (Pastes a link to mypolice.qld.gov.au page) You'll notice it's not a service vehicle. It's still pretty tacky.

@1EarthMedia's first tweet was retweeted 150 times over the next twenty-four hours including by two journalists from the SMH with a combined 20,000+ followers and journalist Margot Kingston (24,000+ followers). It ranked in the top 1 percentile for retweets around the globe that day. An ABC journalist replied to the tweet with the question, "Santos sponsors the Police? Or are the police working for Santos?"

The facts of Santos' sponsorship were not secret. It had been openly sponsoring the Queensland Police's 'Stay on Track Outback' road safety campaign to improve safety on outback roads for three years. This included three television commercials produced for the 2010 campaign media launch each concluding with the slogan, "Proudly brought to you by: Santos, We have the energy. An initiative of Charleville Police District" (QueenslandPolice, [youtube], 2012). The campaign was communicated on Facebook (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/raagmackay>) and achieved such positive results through mainstream news coverage and engagement that Santos and the QP relaunched 'Stay on Track Outback' in 2013 and then again in June 2014¹.

What Anning had made new was the Santos' relationship to the Queensland government in the context of the NSW coal seam gas campaign and across the digital network of coal seam gas activists. Santos police cars as a media object had become a mediator, a transformer of meaning through a new circulation and a network of attachments (Latour, 2005, p. 217). As a media object of resistance, it made tangible a suite of public concerns including the relationship between political donations and the independence of government decision-making on fossil fuel projects. As a disruptive event, it put public scrutiny on the government's relationship with the mining regime and removed legitimacy for the regime.

Media objects of resistance

In the public screen and technology gadget society of the twenty-first century media has become *the* emergent form of social power in complex societies for its influence on mediating how we see and

¹ The Charleville Police District Police reported an almost 25% reduction in all traffic crashes, a 20% reduction in injury traffic crashes, and zero fatal traffic crashes since launch of 'Stay On Track Outback' in the first year. <http://thegreynomads.com.au/stay-on-track-initiative-reduces-risks-on-remote-roads/>

what we see (Deluca et al., 2011; 2012). But content alone (like facts alone) don't bring about change. Instead media as grassroots resistance comes from both practice and content driven by online and offline connections, participation and algorithms.

The vast quantity of social media data has turned datasets of tweets and Facebook content into a fetish object for academic researchers. Yet, there is a massive gap in the know-how and funding to make meaning of these academic-produced datasets compared to commercial operations with its significant investment in analyst skills whose expertise is to make sense of it (Zelenkauskaitė and Bucy, 2016). After counting public tweets across one-week periods during the Tunisian and Egyptian democracy protests Lotan et al. (2011) wonder "which tweets are actually read by followers, or seen as most valuable? How are different actors viewed in terms of their trustworthiness and accountability?" (p. 1401). Vergani (2014) describes the active communications process that takes place online between multiple actors to build consensus as a "grassroots orchestra" but admits the challenge to measure the impact of any single project. If story-telling a key tool to shift power Wasik (2009) argues social media's contribution is fleeting, its "nanostories" leaving little lasting impact. All these fail to link the practice of media to specific outcomes, and in most cases treat social media users as an amorphous whole.

Instead of counting tweets or hashtags² this methodology of analysing media objects creates a process for measuring the impact of grassroots media on movements. Here, the number of actors with a committed grassroots media practice becomes more significant than the clicktivism or fleeting engagement with an issue. A search of coal seam gas and protest would not show the disruption of this media process and the negotiation of legitimacy in the public domain. A movement leader talking about the campaign would also more likely talk about the spectacle of the banner drops and human signs, documentaries from the grassroots Lock the Gate Alliance and the blockade events than the media process I described. The everyday resistance that led to the shift of power through this specific media object isn't glamorous like the colourful enactment of protest. But a tangible and measurable method to trace how activity led to a shift in power.

Rather than a physical event or action I explore how online media practice by activists shifts and erode opponent power through the tailoring of "media object of resistance" as an analytical object or actor. The 'Santos Police Cars' story as a thing is a media object but its value to movement comes through its circulation and stickiness as narrative. In the week following the first tweet, value was

² A count of Australia's most popular hashtag #auspol makes up less than 1% of posts by Twitter users in Australia (Bruns, Moon, Paul and Munch, 2016). More significantly hashtag studies capture only those tweets with the hashtag, and nothing else - no @reply to a tweet or the conversation of tweets that a single hashtag tweet might stimulate.

added to Santos Police cars as a media object through photos, spokespeople, and commentary and the momentum of grassroots media nodes that moved it into new networks including mainstream news. Social media users sourced new content to add value and credibility to the media object now circulating as “Brought to you by Santos”. A tweet by Lock the Gate Alliance including a photo of a police caravan imprinted with the Santos logo (also sourced from the QP website) was retweeted 62 times, instigating a new cascade of tweets and discussion.

While multiple from the Queensland Police’s public campaign were found and circulated by grassroots media node one specific photo became emblematic. The photo, also first shared by @1earthmedia, shows two police vehicles carrying the Santos logos in front of a road sign for Narrabri, the town in the North West of New South Wales for Santos’ highly contested gasfield in the Pilliga State Forest. The image looks “fresh” as though it had been recently snapped on location, maybe by Anning, maybe a journalist. In reality it was sourced by Anning from the Queensland Police website. Its pertinence was to the location of the contested site in NSW and the swell of activism to stop this ‘jewel in the crown’ for the NSW Industry if it proceeded. Its reach was significant and his photo would be used in future articles that had no direct link to Santos or coal seam gas but to convey an implicit meaning of the problematic relationship between political donations and corporate sponsorship by industry (see Goldsworthy, 2015).

Multiple media objects were generated to escalate the impact of the Santos police cars stories, not only news stories that were shared and re-shared across networks but other communicate vehicles including a SumOfUs.org.au petition requesting that Queensland police “give the branded vehicles back to Santos”. This petition alone is shared nearly 5000 times on Facebook. In addition, 151 people who sign the petition also tweet “Queensland Police Service: brought to you by the gas-fracking industry” (stats as at 22 September 2015 that were made visible after I filled in the petition).³

There is no specific hashtag for the Santos story but the story as a media object was now well and truly in orbit, gaining value a media nodes frame through political donations, government capture, mining influence and a commentary that makes it an actor in the public narrative. The government is forced explain itself to a citizen audience (e.g. Safi, ‘Queensland police defend use of vehicles branded with Santos logo’, 2014).

Questions needing answers

Early non-violent scholars Richard Gregg and Gene Sharp used “moral jiu-jitsu” (Gregg, 1934) and “political jiu-jitsu” (Sharp, 1973) respectively to describe how nonviolent worked as strategic intent

³ As well as the sum of us petition Michelle Maloney from Australian Earth Laws Alliance also uploaded a petition on another community platform, communityrun.org <https://www.communityrun.org/petitions/stop-the-sponsorship-of-the-queensland-police-service-by-santos>

to leverage the power of well-resourced opponents. These interactions create new forms of engagement both for onlookers who rethink a regime through this framing of its violence, but also power-holders themselves who are forced to defend the action, or retreat from it. Sharp's emphasis in defining political jujutsu was in its use of the physical violence of the opposition to build greater support. Critical was the public stage that showed this difference, a powerful militarised opponent with the state on its side using this power against a disarmed, seemingly powerless other. In another conceptualisation of this outcome Martin (2007) used the term "backfire" to describe "action that recoils against its originators" (p. 2). As an act of resistance, the action turns the impact of an intended behaviour or action back on the proponent. It is a perverse outcome for the regime compared the result scaled disproportionately to if they had done nothing (Martin, 2007).

The reframing of Santos' sponsorship of the Queensland Police worked as backfire to scrutinise mining's close relationship with government. However, its sustained impact came through the escalation of questions that traversed the public sphere and confronted the bystander public with a series of question marks. "What exactly have (stet) Santos bought?" (Protecting the Pilliga, [Facebook], 2014), "So now CSG company Santos own the Queensland Police Force?" (Buckingham, [Facebook], 2014). ABC journalist Jess Hill reposted Anning's original photo with the tweet: "Santos sponsors the Police? Or are the police working for Santos?" (@jessradio, [tweet], 2014). Lock the Gate President Drew Hutton asked: "How can you enforce the law impartially against a company that's sponsoring you?" (Safi, 'Queensland police defend use of vehicles branded with Santos logo', 2014). The Queensland Police are forced to defend its Santos sponsorship. The Queensland government is forced into the open to explain. Santos' lack of a social licence to operate is made visible to new networks. I conceptualised this mediated confrontation as media jujutsu, both for how it negatively reflects the power of the opponent and the attention it draws from the bystander public.

The ABC frames the story as one of conflict of interest with the Queensland Police Commissioner Ian Stewart and high-profile movement leader Drew Hutton on the stand as witnesses, Stewart for the defence, Hutton for the prosecution:

Qld Police Commissioner: "These are PR vehicles that we use at shows, we use at expos, all of those sorts of things just as any PR machine would be used by a company or another government organisation. This is not just Queensland Police that do this, I think every police agency in Australia does the same thing. We're always looking for sponsorships for particular programs that quite literally we want to focus on."

Drew Hutton: “Advertising a company like Santos, which is a big coal seam gas company in Queensland, on the side of vehicles of the police whose job it is to enforce the law - including I might add against protestors who don't like coal seam gas - is a really bad idea.”

ABC: “Santos is one of the biggest players in Queensland's controversial coal seam gas industry.” (Small, Anti-CSG group Lock the Gate angry Santos logo being used on Qld police car’, 2014)

Media networks

Social media and mobile technology has expanded access to share content and participate in public discussion for grassroots activists. No longer is ‘media’ the domain of media manager in an activist or non-government organisation. Grassroots actors form their own direct relationships on Twitter with news journalists and power-brokers. On Facebook they become the digital producers of frames and scripts (Bird, 2011). Activism becomes a series of personal action frames generated through social media that act as both reports on the ground and a collaborative story-telling of event.

I saw the reference to Santos’ sponsorship early on and was one of the disbelievers, ignoring it as an exaggeration. Only when it appeared again and again on my feed did I finally delve in to the substance and realise it was true. This repetition is a characteristic of activist commitment manifesting as grassroots media practice.

It wasn’t until three days after Anning’s first tweet that the movement actor Lock the Gate Alliance shared the media object on its Facebook page with the post shared 500 times, the reach from this alone more than 57,000 people. It was after this that online media site Crikey became the first media outlet to comment in its ‘Tips and Rumours’ section, referencing the noise on social media and asking, “Protesters against coal-seam gas developments in New South Wales in particular have got to be asking themselves: just what exactly has Santos bought?”. Lock the Gate Alliance tweets a link to the Crikey story repeating the line “Just what has Santos bought”.

Multiple media outlets reference the extensive circulation on social media. The Guardian reports “opponents of CSG circulated images at the weekend showing police vehicles bearing Santos’s name” (Safi, ‘Queensland police defend use of vehicles branded with Santos logo’, 2014). Twitter is the source for a quote in the Sunshine Coast Daily: “Stop Brisbane Coal Trains spokesman John Gordon said on Twitter it was "a bloody disgrace" and called for all Santos logos to be removed” (Egan, ‘Santos sponsorship above board: Minister’, 2014). The Brisbane Times attributes the photo credit for the photo first used by Mark Anning to @NoCSGCoonabarabran, a sign its source of news to develop the story came via social media.



Caption: The image of police cars carrying the logo of mining company Santos that was used as a media object to materialise questions about the influence on government by the mining industry.

Media as a numbers game

Achieving success against a powerful regime is a numbers game. If the campaign is nonviolent more citizens are likely to participate, and the greater the participation the greater the chance of success (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, p. 11). A diverse set of actors publicly challenging a regime increases the confidence for more and more people to participate. Widespread participation makes it difficult for a regime to differentiate between movement and non-movement participants creating resilience against an aggressive government response (Schock, 2015, p. 109). Media nodes and media practice become a contribution to all these metrics.

A blunt count of media nodes generating and propelling media objects across digital platforms can also be used a quantitative count of resistance. As networks expand and the strategy moves from grievance to intent, media texts start proliferating from new nodes: first person blogs, community group newsletters, social media, news stories with local voices, photos, gonzo journalism, videos and film uploaded and distributed across the virtual world. These are shared, carried by social media users – activist or bystander public - into new networks, layered with local frames and personal comment. Each new generative media node becomes another actor in the networks of activism, expanding the count of participation and everyday reach for content and ideas. In comparison, the elite narrative often stays relatively static: government and industry speeches at business conference, statements from government ministers, a repetition of key messages.

Like the impetus for numbers against an authoritarian regime, the mobilisation of grassroots media voices expands the discourse into a wild-fire strategy of frames, facts and connections that elite power can't pick off one by one.

Sustaining it

Critical to strategic civil resistance is sustaining momentum and media objects of resistance become a way to achieve this. The Santos Police Cars media object continued to circulate on the mediated public stage for three more months, both for its imbued symbolic meaning but also the rhizomes of new angles. As part of his 2014 early investigation ABC journalist Josh Bavas had asked the Queensland police for a list of sponsors and sponsorship amounts. Four months later in April 2015 the information arrived: twenty-three corporate donations totalling \$475,000 given to Queensland police in the past financial year.

ABC's flagship program *World at Noon* queries why each sponsor's name is blacked out, the frame shifting from Santos-specific to the breadth of companies sponsoring the Queensland Police. Bavis interviews the Queensland Police Commissioner along with Drew Hutton from *Lock the Gate* and Terry O'Gorman from the Australian Council for Civil Liberties (Bavas, 'Queensland Police Service refuses to name sponsors', 2015a). The Police Commissioner says it is unnecessary to release the details of Queensland police sponsorships. O'Gorman demands better openness and transparency in government, a message backed up by Hutton who reiterates the democratic conflict of interest. In Bavas' online story Santos is only mentioned twice in the 980 words, yet in three separate places there is a hyperlink to ABC's December story. The image from the December is also used, only its caption referencing the original story.⁴

One day later the new Queensland Police Minister Jo-Ann Miller overrides the Police Commissioner explaining "it's very important that any sponsorship with the Queensland Police Service should be available for everyone to see. So, every quarter, any sponsorships will be put on the QPS website for anyone to see - it's about being open" (Bavas, 2015b). It must be noted that a search for "Santos" in a media database would not reveal its relationship to this shift in donations policy by the Queensland government.

Media as resistance

Industry regimes and political actors invest significant resources in media assets and expertise recognising its ability to influence and negotiate power. Grassroots media as power becomes a way to contest this influence.

Santos' sponsorship of the Queensland Police escalated to become a syndicated news story, crossing from social media into national news and expanding the legitimacy for the coal seam gas movement into new networks. From a clearly defined entry point Santos' sponsorship as a media object crossed from social media into national news through a star-shaped web of connections that increased

⁴ The photo caption reads: "The Santos logos visible on Queensland Police cars raised the ire of environmental groups earlier this year".

legibility and shifted power from Santos to create horizontal ties that added and expanded networks.

It wasn't just information or content or protest action, the media object was a mediator for the coal seam gas protest narrative taking it into the public discourse of democracy and legitimacy of the mining regime, a lever to interrogate government's relationship with mining, its conflict of interest, the connection between corporate donations and influence.

Activist media practice of activists made the story act: facilitated its appearance to a broad audience, linked it to the broader campaign and ensured that the story's purpose, to spotlight the mining industry's close relationship with government, would leave a trace.

Grassroots media practice created a media object and made it act: contesting government legitimacy, linking it to the broader campaign and ensured that the story's purpose, to spotlight the mining industry's close relationship with government, would leave a trace. Grassroots media practice and activist commitment facilitated the connections that disrupted elite power and escalated the movement and added new frames to add both legitimacy and legibility to activist movement.

This research is a new cleavage in the applied study of strategic civil resistance to industry regimes that in a globalised world cross international boundaries and exert power facilitated by the policy and laws of democratic government. This structural violence embedded in the 'peaceful' democratic state can't be ignored when its contribution to global warming threatens the peace of the world.

Footnote: The Queensland Police used police and kids dancing in front of a sponsor-branded caravan in a new video to promote its 'Stay on Track' program in May 2015. However, only two of the three original logos still remained with Santos no longer there. Neither is Santos listed in the multitude of sponsors later that year on the Stay on Track' website, this absence another trace of the strategic resistance that can be sourced back to a single tweet.

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