

Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism

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During the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, a network of activists from across the country used human blockades reinforced with PVC piping and steel to close down six major traffic arteries for two hours during rush hour. At one intersection, a school bus filled with police officers in combat gear arrived, a gas truck rolled in, and news helicopters hovered overhead, while officers worked to dismantle the human roadblock. Activists who were not attached to the blockades filled the streets, dancing, playing makeshift musical instruments, performing skits, throwing confetti, and chanting to support those embroiled in the lock down. A handful of reporters crouched in front of the conjoined activists, posing questions and taking notes. Others watched from the sidelines, peering around bystanders who filtered through, despite police efforts to disperse the crowd and barricade the surrounding area.

I wandered between the rigid lines of stoic police officers with shielded chests and faces and the dense clusters of emboldened activists, marked by piercings, tattered shorts, and political t-shirts. Over the course of a tense hour and a half, the police detached the activists one at a time, binding their wrists with plastic handcuffs and dragging them back to the school bus against their passive resistance.

Amidst the turbulence, I was certain this was a historic moment. I envisioned my family watching CNN as the live events unfolded and feared that they would be worried. Yet, I soon would discover that the drama in which I was immersed had slipped completely under the radar.

By the end of the long, disruptive standoff, police arrested over 400 people. The *New York Times* gave the event one 640-word story, which was buried in the late edition of the paper. The story never mentioned what had compelled so many people to do something so outrageous. A voluntary association named *Disrupt!* had planned and carried out this complex, illegal action because the participants felt they had something exceptionally important to say that was relevant to the election. That “something” went unheard.

Presidential campaigns are powerful catalysts for civil society, inspiring a carnival of participation in which a broad array of voluntary groups, ranging from social movement organizations and interest groups to civic organizations, mobilize and work to shape political discourse. I show that most of these groups equate media success with political success and channel their energies accordingly. These media-centered mobilizations reveal the profound challenges faced by activists

struggling to enter a mass media-dominated public sphere that ultimately proves exclusionary. In the end, their elaborate public relations efforts are ineffective, come at the expense of other political activities, and bring with them considerable organizational costs.

Ironically, the very goal they hold most dear – communicating with the public – is one of the casualties of the media quest. The activists deploy public relations tactics in an effort to win coverage, and ultimately display a destructive inability to relinquish this marketing mentality when attempting to speak with curious bystanders. Sometimes activists ignore onlookers. At other times they answer pedestrians' questions, but are so tethered to prepared sound bites that they spew dogma rather than spark conversation, undermining their ability to communicate with outsiders.

Perhaps most perniciously, the dogged pursuit of publicity also distorts *internal* communication. In this public relations mode, association cultures transform into performance-oriented spaces, in which members are pressed to rehearse lines rather than to speak freely. This member management stifles internal political dialogue and quashes diversity. In the end, I show that for most organizations, this all-consuming media work is not only ineffective, but also damaging to group life.

Data

This book is based on my ethnographic fieldwork at voluntary association events in the host cities of the 2000 and 2004 Democratic and Republican nominating conventions in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City, and the three televised debates of 2000 in Boston, Winston-Salem, and St. Louis. I also draw on over 120 in-depth interviews with association representatives and political reporters. I supplement these data with news coverage of key events, association literature, website archives, and a selection of association listserv discussions. These data make it possible to create vivid snapshots of 50 associations, as well as to develop an intimate understanding of the social context in which their events transpired. The diverse associations in the sample include: civil disobedience collectives, interest groups, labor unions, religious organizations, and broad, multi-issue coalitions, among others. They are organized around issues ranging from the environment and global justice to abortion and war opposition. Progressive, conservative, libertarian, and nonpartisan organizations are all represented.