Communications, connections and networks in the ‘new’ environmental movement against fossil fuel mining in NSW

In 2010 more than twenty-five companies were ready to explore for coal seam gas in Australia’s most populated state of New South Wales. Eighty-seven licences, approved by the soon to be ousted Labor government, covered more than a third of the state’s 850,000 square kilometres. By mid-2014, only two mining companies still had ‘live’ projects, and these too faced extreme community opposition.

This paper investigates how a messaging framework linked to water and food security, and protection of farming land and aquifers rather than the traditional environment movement themes of ‘nature conservation’, was able to bridge the divide from a traditional ‘greenie’ environmental campaign into a powerful broad-base social movement. What were the media and communications strategies that united a diverse network of farmers and urban environmentalists, health experts and scientists, academics and manufacturers, greenies and religious communities, conservatives and inner city social justice advocates into a powerful social movement that challenged the power relations between mining and government? How was ‘mediated visibility’ (Thompson, 2005) used by unlikely activists such as farmers and the Knitting Nannas Against Gas, each network the antithesis of the ‘politically correct vegetarian lefties’ and ‘tree-huggers’ who usually represent the environment movement?

Most social movement scholars still argue that mainstream media’s main purpose is as a stage to express dissent (Cottle, 2008; Rucht, 2004; Bennett, 2005) with the Internet’s role primarily as a communications or awareness building channel rather than a media channel. (Della Porta et al, 2006; Cammaerts, 2007; Ostman, 2014) Media and communicative elements still remain in the background of most literature on social movements. (Mattoni, 2013, p. 50)

I will use ethnographic research methods to show how activists used media to reject paradigmatic assumptions of the environment movement and instead “radically destabilize authorized forms of power, knowledge, and organisation, and in so doing, to create the space necessary for new acts of constitution” (Khasnabish and Juris, 2013, p. 7, see also Negri, 1999). How were new digital technologies used not only as a communications vehicle for environment protest and movement messages but also as a tool to change the paradigm (Khasnabish and Juris, 2013, p. 21)?

The relationship between mainstream media and environmental protest in Australia has been analysed extensively (Lester and Hutchins, 2006, 2009; Lester, 2010) within the uneasy framework of ‘exploit the media or they will exploit you’ (Lester, 2010, p. 37). The movement against coal and coal seam gas mining in NSW did more than create media photo opportunities, it created new media frames. Rather than online communication being the future of environmental politics (Lester and Hutchins, 2009, p. 591) this paper argues that it is when social movements start integrating media forms and acting like media organisations, negotiating access to power, amplifying alternative expert and witness voices, reporting on direct action and events, developing recognisable identities and symbols, uncovering evidence of corruption using freedom of information requests, and cascading the content through networks and social media in different forms and through a diverse range of messengers that they change the dominant messages in the public sphere (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Habermas, 1989; Cox, 2012) and mainstream media’s own hegemonic framing.

Bibliography


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