Environmental protest and tap-dancing with the media in the information age
Brett Hutchins and Libby Lester
*Media Culture Society* 2006; 28; 433
DOI: 10.1177/0163443706062911

The online version of this article can be found at: http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/28/3/433
Environmental protest and tap-dancing with the media in the information age

Brett Hutchins
MONASH UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA

Libby Lester
UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA

Environmental issues are a key focus of localized political experience and action. Companies dumping toxic waste, airports extending runways and developers encroaching on wilderness are resisted by people and groups who cherish and demand environmental justice: ‘an all-encompassing notion that affirms the use value of life, of all forms of life, against the interests of wealth, power, and technology’ (Castells, 2004: 190). A contest between the valuing of life, environment and cosmological time, and the market, capital and instrumental time takes place within the news media where large audiences are exposed to battles over the right to determine the uses of public space and environments. As Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2004: 168–91) observes, the constant presence of environmental issues and stories in the media lends legitimacy to green values and politics. Through interaction with media organizations, the environmental movement\(^1\) attempts to dig a trench of resistance against ahistorical and abstracted global ‘flows’, constructs alternative identities, and insists that places and unbuilt environments are defined by more than their potential economic use-value.

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we outline and critique a theoretical approach that can increase understanding of the relationship between environmental protest and news media representation. The sociology of Manuel Castells (2000a, 2000d, 2004) situates environmentalism at the centre of contemporary cultural politics and attempts to understand what happens when the market economy and capital meet actual people.
places and environmental experiences. He sees the power and influence of news outlets as a critically important factor in this meeting, as these outlets are the avenue through which the majority of the public becomes aware of impending environmental threats and economic developments. The two groups are mutually related. Environmentalists attempt to use the media to ‘get their message out’ and promote awareness of green issues. Journalists acknowledge the saliency of environmental issues to readers and audiences because of the threats posed to natural environments and people’s well-being by degradation and the unchecked activities of capital.

Castells describes the relationship between the media and environmentalists as tap-dancing (2004: 186): the two groups caught in an ongoing dance that changes tempo quickly and involves improvisation from both partners. His explanation of this dance and its choreography, however, is overly general, ignoring its specific features and workings in terms of representation. Our second aim is to detail some of these features. We have selected the 1982 Franklin Dam blockade in Tasmania as a ‘critical case study’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001); a specific set of events that provide insight into the relationship between media and environmental protest. The Franklin blockade is Australia’s most famous environmental protest and was a globally important moment for green politics. Specifically, we look at the way daily news media and environmental groups interacted during this wilderness protest, and argue that it was during the blockade that an enduring pattern of media–environmentalist relations was established in Australia. We then analyse how this interaction was repeated and altered in subsequent campaigns. The concluding section critiques current understandings of media–environmentalist relations and explains the dynamics of the mediation process that determines how protests are reported.

Castells’ tap-dancing metaphor is a useful analytical tool. Our study of the Franklin campaign and its aftermath reveals a relationship between the media and environmentalists of, for a short time, surprising synchronicity, before a period of contestation for control of the central message/image communicated to the public, followed by a falling out between the partners. The partners re-form for further performances throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In all of this time the media rarely gives up the lead and the environmental movement struggles to keep pace. It is never a relationship of equal power, which is a point reinforced by other studies of social movements and the media (Gamson and Wolfseld, 1993).

**Manuel Castells**

At a time when the short research monograph has become the norm, the sociology of Manuel Castells is encyclopaedic in both scale and depth. His trilogy examining ‘The Information Age’ (Castells, 2000a, 2000d, 2004) is
over 1000 pages in length and is an influential source for those interested in the ‘informational’ economy, society, politics and culture. Of special relevance to this article is the second volume, *The Power of Identity* (2004), which discusses the issues of environmentalism and politics, as well as the various articles and books that develop his theory of the network society (Castells, 1989, 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2000b, 2000c, 2001, 2002; Castells and Ince, 2003). The environmental movement occupies an important position within Castells’ theorizing. A pervasive social movement, environmentalism constitutes a principal site of resistance to global capital and the domination of social life by economic interests, or the new power system (Castells, 2004: 182).

What Castells means by this new power system are the prevailing social conditions within the network society. The origins of this social formation are in the 1970s, with the information technology revolution preparing the ground for the restructuring of the global economy and the evolution of advanced capitalism. These transformations have fundamentally altered social relations, cultures and collective identities globally. The structural logic of the contemporary age is based on networks and, more specifically, adaptable information and communication technology networks. This is the mode of development that has made a genuinely global capitalism and social system possible (Flew and McElhinney, 2002). Social institutions – markets, communities, media and political systems – are increasingly organized in a series of flexible and ever-changing nodes and hubs, giving rise to the expression of decentred and unpredictable power relations and new identity-based social movements (Castells, 2000d; Hutchins, 2004). In their positive and proactive manifestations, global social movements include environmentalism and feminism, while reactionary and occasionally destructive movements include the multiple manifestations of religious fundamentalism and nationalism. As Castells explains, by appealing to meaning, experience and values, these movements seek to contest and undermine the instrumental logic that dominates the network society.

There are shortcomings in Castells’ theorizing. Stevenson (2002) argues that he lacks a critical standpoint to evaluate social change. This presents a tension within Castells’ line of argument. On the one hand, he claims he has no interest in prescriptive social programmes and is obstinate in his refusal to tell people how they should act in the future. On the other hand, he regards the highly segmented social structure experienced under the conditions of the network society to be cause for concern, and finds hope in social movements such as feminism and environmentalism that contest this segmentation. He approves of these political trajectories, yet will not commit to a course of action. A second tension is apparent when Castells’ standpoint on culture is scrutinized (Flew, 2002: 74–5). Again, on the one hand, he refuses to engage explicitly with the fact that people act upon the meanings drawn from culturally mediated texts and discourses (Hutchins,
On the other hand, he devotes an entire volume to the existence of cultural codes that are embedded within networks and discusses the development of identity-based social movements (Castells, 2004). There is a disconnection between text and social practice. This article seeks to redress these problems by ascribing to Castells’ implicit case that a worthwhile global future needs both environmental and social justice, and methodologically, directly connecting environmental protest to media representation processes.

In understanding the position of environmentalism in the information age, the most useful theory that Castells proposes is the interaction between the ‘space of flows’ and the ‘space of places’ (1996, 1999a, 2000c, 2000d; Castells and Ince, 2003). The space of flows is a spatial logic, one that Castells asserts is new and that determines the expression of society:

The space of flows is the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows [without geographical contiguity]. By flows I understand purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society. (2000d: 442)

The space of flows is a privileged formation where most socially and culturally dominant activities occur and global elites exist (Castells, 2000d). Castells emphasizes, however, that no single entity within the space of flows is able to determine the outcome of power relations, although well-resourced parties are less likely to be disadvantaged by these relations. His point is that the power of flows takes precedence over any flow of power (Castells, 2000d: 500). The outcomes of social, cultural and economic processes are the result of complex interactions across time and space, and these outcomes can differ from whatever News Corporation or Greenpeace want because of multiple chains of linkages and power valencies operating within the network.

An attempt is made by environmentalists to circumvent the space of flows by assigning value to place. The historically rooted and spatially grounded space of places is where the majority of people live, share experiences and construct their identities:

... most people live, work, and construct their meaning around places. I define a place as the locale whose form, function, and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of territorial contiguity. People tend to construct their life in reference to places, such as their home, neighbourhood, city, region, or country. (Castells, 1999a: 296)

Environmentalism represents a unique conception of place in the network society, valuing the physical environment for its symbolic and physical qualities, not for its potential economic use value. Organizations such as green political parties, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth are
evidence that the ‘grassroots of societies’ (Castells, 1999a: 297) – those people and organizations with their feet, hands, minds and hearts firmly in and on the ground – continue to exist and announce themselves openly in the information age. Castells specifies the challenge posed by environmentalists to the space of flows:

What is distinctive of the new social structure, the network society, is that most dominant processes, concentrating power, wealth, and information, are organized in the space of flows. Most human experience, and meaning, are still locally based. The disjunction between the two spatial logics is a fundamental mechanism of domination in our societies, because it shifts the core economic, symbolic, and political processes away from the realm where social meaning can be constructed and political control can be exercised. Thus, the emphasis of ecologists on locality, and on the control by people of their living spaces, is a challenge to a basic lever of the new power system. (Castells, 2004: 181–2)

Significantly, in seeking to protect place, many environmental organizations operate and organize themselves in networked formations, helping to create widespread awareness of issues, disseminate information and coordinate actions. In other words, to generate knowledge of grassroots politics, a concerted effort must be made to engage with and move within the space of flows and, more specifically, the space of media flows.

The environmental movement has little choice but to engage with major news media outlets. In discussing the reality of democratic politics, Castells (2004: 375) argues that politics is framed by the inherent logic of the media system. The news media is the key structuring intermediary in the conduct of public affairs, and political communication and information are transmitted in the space of media flows. The choice to stay outside this space may offer the comfort of ideological purity, but the companion of this condition is marginality. Without the widespread awareness generated by news coverage, environmental action and values lose both legitimacy and effect, failing to appear on mainstream political and cultural agendas and register in the collective mind (Castells, 2000d: 365). Therefore, to achieve their aims environmentalists must deal with media outlets and their workers whose interests are more closely aligned with dominant powers existing within the space of flows – media conglomerates, managerial elites, ideological affinity groups – than they are grassroots social movements concerned with the preservation and/or conversation of place. For example, ‘deep ecologism’ (Lohrey, 2002: 7), a spiritual connection to nature where human welfare is not placed at the apex of concern, sits oddly alongside the business interests and political orientation of Rupert Murdoch’s newspaper operations. Yet environmental issues are a routine feature of reporting (Crook and Pakulski, 1995; Pakulski et al., 1998), cutting into public consciousness and featuring in both news sections and political coverage.
Media and environmental protest

In understanding the expression of power in the information age, the critical issue is not what happens in either the space of flows or the space of places, but what emerges when they meet (Castells and Ince, 2003: 55–8; Hutchins, 2004: 582–3). It is the media that serves as the primary and hotly contested communicative interface – the structuring intermediary – between environmentalists and developers as they compete for public awareness and approval. The media is more than a site for environmental action; it plays a significant role in shaping debate and influencing outcomes. It is here that representations are determined, images softened or distorted, and power granted or denied.

Numerous scholars have analysed the relationship between the media and social movement politics and, more specifically, between the media and the environmental movement, with noteworthy contributions from Anderson (1991, 1993, 1997, 2003), Cottle (2000, 2003), Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), Gitlin (1980), Greenberg (1985), Hansen (2000), Molotch (1979), Molotch and Lester (1974) and Pakulski and Crook (1998). Hansen’s (1993) exploration of the press coverage of Greenpeace over five years in British newspapers is of particular relevance to this study, in that it attempts to both quantify the presence of environmental groups in the news and to understand how such groups influence the media agenda. However, he is primarily interested in the strategies employed for long-term agenda setting and influence, rather than those used for capturing substantial short-term media interest, which he describes as ‘of a rather different magnitude of sophistication’ (Hansen, 1993: 151). Our aim is to analyse the mechanics of the short-term burst of coverage provided by an environmental protest. A protest is an intense and complex struggle for power over the news agenda and when successful in meeting its objectives, has lasting impact on the collective perception of an issue.

Daily newspapers are the source material analysed in this study. Newspapers are an influential medium in the discussion of political and cultural matters, particularly given their credibility in the eyes of information seekers (Castells, 2002: 198) when compared to entertainment-dominated media such as television and radio. This observation is supported by Pusey (2003: 127), who in his recent national study of ‘Middle Australia’, found that respondents consistently ranked newspapers as the most influential medium in their assessment of political and economic matters. As ‘forcing the government’s hand through publicity favourable to the demonstrators’ (Wilderness Society, 1982: 8) was the stated objective of the organizers of the Franklin blockade, attracting positive newspaper coverage was a first-order goal.

The energy expended by protesters in attracting newspaper coverage provides insight into the perceived influence on the public of different
mediums. Lowe and Goyder (1983) highlight the advantages of daily newspapers in the implementation of environmental campaign strategies. Given the amount of stories they cover each day, newspapers report environment-related issues more frequently than radio and television and possess the capacity to discuss complicated issues in detail. Moreover, radio and television often follow the lead of newspapers in reporting stories, which was the case with the Franklin blockade, and politicians and influential members of the public often read ‘quality’ newspapers.

The method used in this study is text analysis (Hansen et al., 1998), as it is in the realm of representation that the cultural battles over the use-value of the environment are fought. The evidence presented is based on an analysis of the full coverage of the 10-week Franklin blockade, as well as the months preceding and following the campaign in two major newspapers, which in total is a 12-month record. The two newspapers used are Melbourne’s The Age and Hobart’s The Mercury. Both began publication in 1854, are established metropolitan newspapers, and are politically and socially influential in their catchment areas. In 1982 The Age was one of three daily newspapers in Melbourne, with an average circulation of just under 200,000. A local publisher, David Syme and Company, owned the newspaper at the time. Exhibiting an editorial policy that reflected a liberal tradition, it was the broadsheet of choice for the educated middle classes of Melbourne. The Mercury was then, as now, the only daily newspaper in Hobart and serviced a broader readership. In 1982 it was a broadsheet, part of the Herald and Weekly Times group, and had a circulation of just above 56,000, the highest circulating newspaper in Tasmania. These newspapers have been selected for investigation because both provided long-term and detailed coverage of events on the Franklin, allocating substantial resources and editorial space to the demonstration. They editorialized regularly and with conviction on the issue – The Mercury for the dam, The Age against – providing a comparative context between a Tasmanian daily newspaper and a prominent mainland Australia newspaper. The results generated by this study are generalizable to the extent that the coverage offered by The Age and The Mercury over the planned damming of the Franklin River was more extensive than, or equal to, that of other national newspapers in Australia. The editorial tone and direction of reporting in both The Age and The Mercury are also demonstrably similar to other Australian newspapers.

The Franklin blockade

The Franklin blockade has been described as the first wilderness preservation campaign to attain global stature (Hay, 1991–1992: 64). It was a ‘tumultuous campaign’ during which 1272 people were arrested and 447 imprisoned, and according to Hay (1991–1992: 64), it focused international
attention on Tasmania for probably the first time in 150 years. Tasmania, a small island state with a population of just under 500,000 people, was the birthplace of the modern environmental movement in Australia and where the world’s first green party was established (Lohrey, 2002). The state has been described as having the only political system in the world focused primarily on environmental issues (Hay, 1991–1992: 64), which is reflected in the make-up of State Parliament. Green politicians have greater power in Tasmania than any other state in Australia, although this power is far from uncontested. The terrain of the island is a powerful physical and symbolic site for environmental politics and green values.

The blockade resulted from a unique confluence of social, cultural and historical phenomena. An organization attempting to affirm its place in a new age of information, technology and markets, the Hydro Electric-Commission (referred to as the Hydro), proposed the construction of a dam in pristine wilderness as part of an integrated scheme that would add 22 percent capacity to Tasmania’s electricity system and drown one-third of the 125-km-long Franklin River. A young environmental movement, led by the Wilderness Society, tapped into ideas emerging globally about the movement of and resistance to capital. At the end of this chain were the news media and its workers, charged with reporting the intricate dynamics between the rights of capital, the emerging politics of environmentalists, and the spectacle and tactics of protests. We argue that this event, occurring at a formative point in the information age, established a pattern of environmentalist–media interaction that was to have lasting influence in the Australian context. Perhaps paradoxically, the most notable consequence of the successful Franklin blockade was that the environmental movement would have difficulty afterwards in getting reporters to communicate a sustained and politically effective message to the public.

In 1982 direct action was established as a method of environmental protest. It was expensive and required a high degree of organization, yet had proven to be an efficient and direct route into the media arena, especially during events at Terania Creek in 1979. The four-week-long Terania Creek blockade in the Border Ranges of northern New South Wales in August and September achieved national prominence. According to Hutton and Connors, the protest ‘radically changed the nature of campaigning for nature conservation’ (1999: 153). Protesters used environmental theatre, non-violent direct action and press releases to convey their opposition to logging. Conservationists conceived of direct action as a ‘news factory’, in which news was designed, manufactured and exported to an eager public. This imagining failed to take proper account of the structuring intermediary in the export process, the media. As stated earlier, the short-term character of direct action campaigns is of interest here, as the mechanisms governing the coverage of such protests have received limited attention. The assumption has been that events during a protest –
the ‘news ingredients’ (Conley, 2002) – guide coverage. Our analysis reveals that this is too simplistic an understanding. In fact, what occurs is a concentrated struggle between reporters and environmentalists for control of the news agenda.

When the Franklin blockade began on 14 December 1982, media coverage followed the Wilderness Society’s choreography. Hydro’s plans to build the dam had already been news for six years. A Tasmanian government had fallen over the issue, and a referendum had taken place in which 33 percent of voters wrote ‘No Dams’ across the ballot rather than tick either of the options for proposed dams in the southwest of the State. On average, *The Age* covered the issue weekly in the months leading up to the start of the blockade, while *The Mercury* printed a story every second day. But in December, once protesters descended on Strahan, the small west coast town from which the construction site was accessed, story frequency tripled, featuring heavily in both newspapers. The protest appeared on *The Age*’s front page 12 times in December and 14 in January, compared to twice in October and not at all in November. *The Mercury* featured a story on the front page almost every day, which was double the rate of previous months.

The dramatic increase in space awarded to the protest was partly due to the increased use of photographs. The images of the opening day of the blockade that each newspaper printed on page one set the tone for the early coverage. *The Age* published an iconic image of the blockade: a row of rubber rafts lined up across the Gordon River, steep tree-covered banks in the background, and each paddler in the rafts holding his or her paddle vertical, as though readying for battle (see Figure 1). *The Mercury* focused on the intimate interaction between protesters and police: a woman with hands raised in a victory salute, a young policeman behind her preparing to make an arrest; another woman with flowing wet hair and clothes being guided ashore by police; two protesters in the stern of a police boat, arms wrapped around each other, while life-jacketed police gesture to other protesters and photographers on shore. The success of the blockade organizers in influencing the political communication process is evident in these front pages, which provide a sense of activity, anticipation and triumph.

Coverage of the early stages of the blockade in both newspapers generally followed the protest organizers’ choreography, vindicating their tactics and management of media relations. The majority of newspaper stories reported genuine action and drama unfolding on the river, with the commitment of the protesters to the fore in both stories and photographs (a point that will take on added meaning later). For example, *The Mercury* published stories with headlines such as ‘Big Names Join Blockade on S-W Centre Stage’ (*The Mercury*, 1982: 3) and reporter Rowan Burns (1982: 1) wrote a front-page article titled, ‘Arrests Could Top 170 Today’:
The number of protesters arrested in the blockade action by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society climbed towards 100 yesterday, and the total may surpass 170 today. Thirty-six protesters were arrested yesterday – on the HEC’s [Hydro Electric Commission’s] Kelly Basin Rd, and on the Gordon River, the scene of the initial mass arrests on Tuesday. The total number of arrests since Tuesday morning stood at 90 last night.

*The Age* presented a similarly dramatic picture with stories such as ‘90 Arrested in Protests’ (Ellingsen, 1982a: 1) and ‘Conservationists Combine to Fight Decision on Dam’ (Chester, 1982: 4):

The president of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Mr Murray Wilcox, said yesterday he was very concerned about what would happen when the blockade on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam in south-west Tasmania was intensified when it resumed on 4 January. Mr Wilcox said confrontation was undesirable ‘but when the Government cops out then there is nothing else people can do but physically blockade’.

By providing regular action, including a steady stream of arrests against a backdrop of wild river and ancient rainforest, blockade organizers momentarily assumed the lead in the dance, successfully influencing the news agenda. The media contingent appeared receptive to original protest
tactics executed by resolute activists in an isolated and unfamiliar setting. Organizers were helped by both the fact that green issues were emerging as a nationally and internationally recognized political issue, and a collective recognition, even at the time, that this was a landmark moment in the history of Australian (and global) environmental politics.

Events and stories ran in favour of the Wilderness Society in the early stages of the blockade. It would be wrong, however, to claim that each and every story was propitious for the protesters. For instance, an atypical story was written by *The Age’s* Peter Ellingsen (1982b: 1), who expressed disillusionment at the stage-managed character of events on the river:

> All it needed was a Hollywood producer and a symphony orchestra and yesterday’s showdown on the Franklin River could have been set to music and marketed as a sequel to ‘Ben Hur’. If only Sam Goldwyn were alive: he would have known what to do with a cast of hundreds and a media circus bigger and clumsier that any to attend an epic premiere. . . . From the start at 5 am, the long-awaited confrontation over the proposed Gordon-below-Franklin dam in the South-West was a media event, staged for the 50 reporters, photographers and cameramen who turned up in search of spectacle.

The difficulty for the protesters was that as time passed – roughly two weeks⁴ – the tactics and management of the blockade became increasingly obvious to observers. Ellingsen was only the first to distil a feeling that began to rise amongst other members of the media as the blockade progressed:

> They sang anti-dam songs and a woman in a green canoe recited poetry ‘inspired by the river’. Another woman, clad in a wet suit and green garbage bag, dived into the river and swam silently among the crowded rubber rafts and police and media boats. . . . Most [journalists] felt a river poetry reading had not been worth the $50 charter fee for a two-hour trip from Strahan across Macquarie Harbor. The feeling that the honeymoon between the blockaders and a previously receptive Press might be over were [sic] heightened by the return trip across the harbour through rough seas and relentless rain. . . . A woman journalist from the British ‘Guardian’ lay drenched and crumpled on the floor of the boat after being thrown from her feet by the swell. A photographer was hurled against a locker by a large wave. ‘That settles it. They can dam the bloody river,’ he said. (Beeby, 1983: 5)

*The Mercury* almost immediately followed *The Age’s* lead:

> The Tasmanian Wilderness Society appears to be gradually losing its grip on the protest against the Gordon-below-Franklin dam scheme. The media already has started to lose interest, despite the protest having resumed for less than a week. . . . But, when the media does see some action – and, for the numbers registered at Strahan, it really has been quite thin – there is nothing different from the pre-Christmas protests . . . when you have seen one arrest, you have seen them all. (Burns, 1983: 2)

Results of our analysis indicate that the growing scepticism among journalists coincided with a rapid decline in stories. Media interest
reignited only for brief moments over the following weeks, such as on 13 January when protesters attempted to stop the transportation of the first bulldozer by barge. By February 1983, the number of stories had halved in both newspapers, and well before the blockade officially ended on 8 March, the protest was over for the media. Nonetheless, the blockade was a success for environmentalists, despite a decline in the frequency of stories. A newly elected federal Labor government intervened to stop the dam in the face of a challenge by the Tasmanian State Government in the High Court (see Green, 1984; Thompson, 1984).

The dance between journalists and protesters on the Franklin is instructive in understanding media coverage of subsequent environmental protests. While the theatricality and drama of the blockade had initial appeal to media representatives, resulting in mostly favourable or, at worst, neutral coverage for the Wilderness Society, a process of inoculation to these protest tactics is observable. The key to the initial impact and success of the blockade, carefully coordinated tactics that few journalists had witnessed before, gradually became a liability, dismissed as artificial and aimed simply at attracting coverage. Arrests became intermittently viewed as a ruse to attract attention, not a demonstration of sacrifice for a worthwhile cause.

Two factors underpin the change in attitude described here. First, in the eyes of the media, the political commitment of environmentalists was diluted, if not invalidated, by repeated use of stage-managed tactics – poetry readings and protest songs – that were judged as more akin to environmental ‘theatre’ (Cohen, 1997: 11) and marketing than ‘real’ news. The difficulty for protesters was that the creation of real news involved frequent physical risk, clashes with police and time in jail, as evidenced by the front-page photographs discussed earlier, and even then positive coverage was not guaranteed. Second, as the constructed character of the protests revealed itself to journalists, they sought to take back control of the news agenda, becoming less receptive to the tactics and messages of protesters. The media would not follow the agenda of environmentalists and openly declared their resistance to readers. Reporters saw themselves as the legitimate mediators of public discourse and took back the lead in the dance. They would decide whether to run a major story following observation and assessment of whether a protest was a genuine confrontation or a ‘Hollywood production’.

The aftermath

Following events on the Franklin River and encouraged by their success, despite the falling away of coverage in the closing stages of campaign, environmental activists continued in their attempts to use the news media
to infuse the collective consciousness of the Australian population. Relations with the media had, however, changed. Reporters were increasingly vigilant in mediating public discussion, making it harder for protesters to communicate their desired messages. The pattern of media coverage that had emerged towards the end of the Franklin blockade endured throughout a series of direct action anti-logging campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s.

The events of 1986 at Farmhouse Creek in Tasmania indicate that the short-term burst of media coverage generated by direct action was continuing to atrophy. Drama unfolded on 8 March when violence broke out between forestry workers and protesters, while police watched. A now famous image appeared on the front page of The Mercury. Australian Greens party leader, Bob Brown, then a member of the Tasmanian parliament, is pictured being carried away from the front of a bulldozer by a group of hard-hat-wearing forestry workers. The fracas continued in the following week. Brown was shot at and a forest industry executive received death threats. Despite these events, some reporters appeared immune to the protest tactics. Even physical risk and confrontation was regarded as an attempt to manipulate the media and then dismissed. On 18 March, for instance, a report appeared without a by-line on page one of The Mercury (1986: 1), ‘38 Arrests in Light and Cameras Action at Forest Roadblock’, in which the protest was described as ‘stage-managed from start to finish’.

By 1992–3 the media virtually ignored the East Picton blockade, again in Tasmania, even though it was one of the Wilderness Society’s most successful campaigns. The protest managed to stop forestry road works for ten weeks. Three years later, the Wilderness Society refused to become involved in direct action at the Tarkine wilderness area, declaring that it ‘only encouraged them’ to build more roads (Law, 2001). Notably, direct action, conceived of as a short, sharp attack on the news agenda, was no longer considered an effective protest tool, and the Wilderness Society announced an end to these tactics.

The mediation of protest

Castells is correct to argue that a symbiotic relationship exists between the media and environmentalism. Protests provide good copy and compelling images for news outlets if they decide to run them, and a potential forum for activists to promote their messages to a broad audience. Our study shows, however, that his understanding of the interaction between the two groups – the tap-dance – is not manifest in the Australian context, intimating the need for a more context-specific reading of media–environmentalist relations. Castells (2004: 187) states:
the legitimacy of the issues raised by environmentalists, directly connecting
to the basic humanistic values cherished by most people, and often distant from
partisan politics, provided a good terrain for the media to assume the role of the
voice of the people, thus increasing their own legitimacy, and making
journalists feel good about it.

Neither *The Age* nor *The Mercury* saw their role as legitimating ‘basic
humanistic values’ and, in fact, saw their authority threatened by ascribing
uncritically to this mindset. A sceptical view of direct action tactics
developed amongst journalists and they began to filter or reject the
messages mobilized in the protest strategies of activists. It is also
problematic to conclude that the journalists covering the Franklin blockade
and subsequent protests had much interest in ‘feeling good’ about the
values of environmentalists, and by default, ‘most people’. In this case the
dance Castells refers to was not about the legitimation of a green-humanist
agenda, but a fraught contest for control of a media message.

How, then, to untie the knots in Castells’ analysis identified by the
events recorded in this article? The answer to this question is arguably to
be found in another area of Castells’ theorizing. An explanation for the
creeping intractability of the news media towards environmentalist protest
tactics in Australia lies in the structural logic of the network society and
the difference in how the space of flows and the space of places is
understood. Depending on their relationship to places and flows, issues and
organizations are approached and understood differently by journalists. An
excursus is required to explain this argument.

In all areas of news, reporters are required to negotiate and interpret the
agendas and messages of the individuals and groups that they deal with.
Yet the evidence presented above is consistent with the idea that different
rules of engagement, and types of critique, are applied to environmentalists
and political activists promoting humanist values and the sanctity of place
when compared to celebrities, politicians and prominent businesspeople
(usually men) promoting themselves, their power and/or the interests of
profit and capital. The common denominator between these groups is the
attempted control of a media message, but it is their relationship with
media organizations and journalists that differs. Those advocating or
acceding to the interests of capital are more likely to be located within the
privileged formation of the space of flows. In this environment, media
managers, public relations consultants, spin doctors, stage-managed events
and image manipulation are an accepted reality – ‘part of the game’ – of
engagement with the media. This situation has been cause for extensive
commentary and analysis of the established structural linkages and common
interests connecting the media and public relations industries both in
Australia and elsewhere, as part of an overarching promotional culture
(Hartley, 2000; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004; Turner et al., 2000).
The engagement between journalists and environmentalists is of a different order. Environmentalist media communication often involves appealing to reporters at one-off river protests or tree sit-ins in remote wilderness, in which the politics of the situation are both overt and emphasized by the presence of police. Compare this picture to the settings that predominate in the space of flows, in which political agendas are partially obscured under the routinized promotional veneer of the staged press conference, business breakfast or scheduled interview. The mode and logic of communication in and about wilderness are in sharp contrast to the conditions that prevail in the promotional greenhouse. This study indicates that the messages promoted by those representing the interests of place are subject to more stringent critique by reporters. The suggestion of a ‘manufactured’ message being ‘sold’ to journalists can be met with open disdain, somehow having betrayed the authenticity of the environmentalist cause.

The case presented here is not necessarily fair to environmentalists. The fact that a protest is (stage-)managed does not, or should not, invalidate the worth of environmental justice as a political message and cause. Nonetheless, the inconsistency outlined here makes sense. The structural logic of the network society means that the interests of journalists working for news media outlets, as explained earlier, are in closer alignment with dominant powers within the space of flows than with those individuals and groups dedicated to advocacy for, and protection of place. We contend that journalists are more likely to apply the agenda of green activists to consistent and sharply critical scrutiny than those of politicians and business figures, as this agenda fundamentally challenges the dominant logic of the network society. To have their voices heard clearly and regularly in the news media, those representing the interests of place must be relentlessly responsive and reflexive in their protest tactics and media communication strategies, which is underlined by the fact that Greenpeace and the Wilderness Society have paid personnel devoted to the pursuit of this objective. A failure to achieve this standard of communication provides journalists with the leverage to ignore environmentalists or dismiss them as representing sectional interests more interested in environmental ‘marketing’ and ‘stunts’ than credible threats to wilderness areas and people’s well-being.

The next step in building a better understanding of media–environmentalist relations in the context of protest actions is to assess the impact of new media and digital technology platforms. This is the subject of a follow-up article in which an attempt is made to assess the effect of the patterns and processes identified in this study on how new technologies are used in emerging environmental communication strategies. Evidence collected thus far indicates that the difficulties faced by environmentalists when dealing with major news outlets helps to explain their innovation in
the use of websites, weblogs and email to deliver direct, unfiltered messages to a diverse network of politically committed and curious publics.

Notes

Thank you to Janine Mikosza and Bruce Tranter for their helpful comments on drafts of the article.

1. This term is used in the knowledge that the environmental movement is diverse in its make-up and activities. For a discussion of the dimensions of environmental politics in Australia see Tranter (2004).

2. Selected elements of the analysis presented in this section are similar to that contained in a previous article by Hutchins (2004). The section has been modified and updated in accordance with the objectives and topical focus of this article.

3. Just as there is an analytical distinction between the existence and activities of industry and the term ‘industrial society’, so there is a distinction between information and the idea of an ‘informational society’. Castells uses the term ‘informational’ to signify a key historical shift in the organization of global social relations that has seen information become a fundamental source of productivity and power (2000d: 21).

4. The blockade was suspended over the Christmas and New Year period.

References


**Brett Hutchins** is a lecturer in Communications and Media at Monash University. His current research interests are social theory, the sociology of news and media production, and new media technologies. His most recent publications examine regional news media in the information age, newspaper letters-to-the-editor, and Australian national identity and sport. *Address*: School of English, Communications and Performance Studies,
Libby Lester coordinates the Journalism, Media and Communications programme at the University of Tasmania. She researches primarily in the area of environmental/political conflict and the news media, and has covered environmental politics for a number of Australian newspapers. Address: Private Bag 82, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia. [email: Libby.Lester@utas.edu.au]