Constraints and Opportunities:
The Framing Battle of the Desaguadero Oil Spill

Snow and Benford
(Amy Hill)
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CSM

The water overflowed with abundance and spread out onto the land offering fertilizer to the Bolivian farmers of the altiplano. At first the water was seen as "an omen of good luck" (49). However, as the black water overflowed with abundance and spread the toxic oil onto the land, offering Transredes' version of fertilizer to the Bolivian farmers of the altiplano, this omen was anything but good.

Introduction

In January 2000, a Bolivian oil pipeline burst filling up the Desaguadero River and its surrounding lands with over 29,000 barrels of oil. Transredes, the foreign owners of this pipeline, immediately began dealing with the situation. They called in the press, ordered environmental tests and promised those affected compensation for their losses. Yet, while Transredes broadcast their humanitarian and environmentally-sound cleanup efforts, livestock died, lands stopped producing and countless communities that continued to lack compensation rose up in protest.

Why did their protests fail? Why were these oil spill protestors largely ineffective in relation to Transredes' campaign? This report begins to answer these questions. In the following pages, we present our interpretation of what prevented the oil spill protestors' complete success. In order to accomplish this task, we separate our report into two brief sections. The first, argues for the importance of framing. It is our main thesis that the oil spill protestors' initial failure arose from their inability to control the oil spill's master framing. Working within this situation, we next offer suggestions as to how these protestors could have used their scarce resources more effectively to aid in their success and possible recuperation of framing control. In particular, we advocate the utilization of three broad strategies: (1) performing for the media, (2) division of labor and (3) exploitation of elite cleavages (Zald 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996; O'Brien 2003).

The Framing Battle

We define framing as something that assigns meaning to and interprets, "relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford 1988; 198). This definition focuses on framing as both a tool of strategic mobilization and as an offense against alternative frames. This dual task of framing is particularly applicable to the case of the Desaguadero oil disaster.

The moment that the oil pipeline burst over the Desaguadero River, the battle for framing control began. As the winners of this battle, Transredes emerged as the first framing movement within the Desaguadero cycle of protest (Snow and Benford 1988; 212). This early emergence gave the company a substantial advantage in the prolonged disagreement that surrounded this environmental disaster. As we have stated in other texts, "the point at which a movement emerges within a cycle of protest affects the substance and latitude of framing efforts" (Snow and Benford 1988; 212). In particular, it allows movements that have surfaced early in the cycle to create the master frames that will anchor all other movements, whether supportive or antagonistic. Thus, Transredes victory in this battle allowed them to effectively create the master frames that would dominate the rhetoric surrounding this disaster.

We traditionally break the framing process into three interrelated stages: (1) diagnostic framing, (2) prognostic framing and (3) motivational framing (Snow and Benford 1988). On all three of these levels, the oil spill protestors were oppressed by Transredes' master frames and the resources they could put into enforcing those frames, such as money, credibility and access to media. From the beginning, Transredes

identified the problem as "a manageable one thousand to five thousand barrel" spill of petroleum that had "spilled out of a tiny hole the size of a Bolivian coin" (Haglund 2008; 54). Thus, their diagnosis diminished the intensity and importance of the spill. The second framing stage, prognostic framing, reiterated the minor nature of the problem, but promised solutions that would go above and beyond what was environmentally necessary. For example, they promised high-wage cleanup jobs to many of the affected Bolivian farmers, while also offering community development compensation packages. The final stage of the framing process, motivational framing, was relatively unimportant to Transredes. Due to their status as a multinational corporation, they already had structural support and resources.

Transredes' early emergence within the cycle of protest and their accompanying high degree of resources automatically put oil spill protestors at a disadvantage. These protestors were forced to redefine the problem, present new solutions consistent with this redefinition and mobilize more people with fewer resources. In addition, they had phenomenological constraints. Their message seemed to lack "empirical credibility" and even to some extent "experiential commensurability" (Snow and Benford 1988). This lack of credibility is exemplified by the protestors' relationship with FOBOMADE, a nonprofit organization. Many of FOBOMADE's members were skeptical of the protestors' diagnosis of the problem as an environmental disaster, which involved the spillage of 29,000 barrels of oil. "They said, 'How are great energy companies like Enron or Shell (Transredes) going to mistake the amount of petroleum by 1,500%? They cannot have been so mistaken' (Haglund 2008; 69). This lack of credibility coupled with

the lack of support, lack of framing power and lack of resources available to the protestors made the conflict "totally asymmetrical" (Haglund 2008; 68).

However, the general failure[1] of the oil spill protestors was not totally dependent on their position within the cycle of protest and lack of resources. Rather, there was a fair degree of framing decisions made by the protestors themselves, which significantly weakened their probability for success. These decisions included the manner in which they articulated their demands and mobilized supporters. One of the main tasks of prognostic framing is articulating specific and well-developed solutions to the diagnosed problem. On this point, the protestors remained weak. Their actual demands were that, "the maximum authority of Transredes find the immediate solution to the damage caused, compensation for thousands of livestock at risk and hectares of forage contaminated by petroleum" (Haglund 2008; 65). By phrasing their demands in this way, they placed the burden of solution innovation on Transredes, actually strengthening the company's framing control. The second framing setback experienced by the oil spill protestors was the limited accessibility of their struggle. Their frame was only directed to those whose lives had been immediately altered by the oil spill. Other potential participants were forced to act as spectators, as they were not offered a clear incentive, whether emotional or tangible, to join in the struggle.

Beyond Frames: Suggested Strategies, Resources and Tactics

The protestors' flawed prognostic and motivational framing techniques coupled with Transredes' resources, early emergence and framing power, placed them at a great

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[1] The failure and success of the various movement's mentioned in this paper are measured in relation to their tangible gains. Thus the terminology, "general failure" refers to the Bolivian led movement's inability to have the majority of their demands even partially attended to and met.

framing disadvantage. Nevertheless, we must begin to look beyond this early

disadvantage and towards the resources that remained available to the oil spill protestors;

for while this report specifically advocates the importance of strategic framing to the

success of social movements, we cannot ignore the powerful effect of resources, political

opportunities, strategies and tactics (Snow and Benford 1988). The interplay of these

factors determines the end results of social movements. Thus, we ask, in the case of the

oil spill protestors, what other resources, strategies and/or tactics could have been used to

compensate for their framing disadvantage? We advocate three: (1) performing for the

media, (2) division of labor and (3) exploitation of elite cleavages.

We begin with perhaps the most obvious, but least accessible strategy, performing

for the media. Access to the media is widely recognized as one of the greatest resources

that a social movement can possess, for it plays an essential role in the mobilization

process of movements. For example, the media works to transmit the demands or

message of social movements to a wider audience. In this way, it functions as an

important component of the political opportunity structure, creating mobilization

opportunities through transmission (Gamson and Meyer 1996; 287). The protestors'

inability to effectively perform for the media and thus monopolize on its power weakened

their movement. While this inability is partially a result of their lack of resources, they

could have adopted other supplementary tactics to attract media attention. For example,

if they had adopted more divisive protest tactics and shocking extralegal action, their

access to the media would almost certainly have improved. As fellow scholars Gamson

and Meyer state, "Extrainstitutional action is better than institutional action in creating

controversy" and thus the media is relatively more responsive to this type of action

(1996; 228). This increased responsiveness would have magnified the silenced demands of the protestors and allowed for further integration of their demands into the dialogue surrounding the Desaguadero disaster.

We understand that it might seem presumptive for scholars, such as ourselves, to directly suggest that social movements adopt more radical tactics simply to gain media attention. Thus, we must qualify this suggestion with an explanation of the second strategy we advocate, a division of labor. A division of labor delegates the tasks of extrainstitutional and institutional actions to separate social movement actors. As Gamson and Meyer describe this division, "those who engage in the actions that open political opportunity do not attempt to be the main spokespersons (of the movement); for this, they defer to partners who do not carry the baggage of deviance but can articulate a shared frame on the issue" (1996; 289). Thus, a small group of the social movement would perform "deviant" tasks to garner media attention. Once gained, this attention could be redirected onto the leaders of the movement, none of who had actually engaged in deviant acts. In the case of the oil spill protestors, the degree to which a division of labor was instituted remains unclear. We do know that some of the most successful groups within the movement, the Chuquiña and Japo, used a combination of violence and legal protests to gain compensation for the oil spill (Haglund 2008). However, we are unsure as to whether those involved in the violence were directly involved in the legal protests. Our hypothesis is that these groups' successes would have been greater and the protestors' overall success more widespread if a firmer division of labor was implemented.

Our third suggestion looks more closely at the institutional measures adopted by the movement and how they could have been improved. It is stated about the protestors "in the absence of a strong response from the government, isolated communities turned to other allies. In the weeks and months following the spill, hundreds of community representatives joined civil and nonprofit institutions" (Haglund 2008; 68). While we commend this outward search for allies, a crucial strategy for any social movement, we find two flaws in protestors' rejection of the government as an ally in favor of nonprofit organizations. First, as we have previously mentioned, the empirical credibility of the protestors had been tarnished by their delayed emergence. This would make it hard for them to garner any allies, in particular nongovernmental organizations who were unfamiliar with the situation within Bolivia. Second, the government as a whole was not unsupportive of their cause. As O'Brien states, "Whether a regime is a democracy or anything short of the most repressive dictatorship, the segmentation built into a complex system of power cannot help but produce cracks in the façade of unity" (2003; 54). In the case the protestors these cracks existed. While President Hugo Banzer was silent on the oil spill, many members of the Bolivian Congress were ready to accept the protestors' diagnosis of the problem (Haglund 2008). Thus, we believe that many of the finite resources used to contract nongovernmental allies might have been better spent wooing the Bolivian Congress.

Conclusion

The Bolivian oil spill protestors fought a losing battle. Forced to compete with the resource-rich Transredes Corporation, they were automatically at a disadvantage. This disadvantage was increased by Transredes early diagnosis of the problem and subsequent

framing control, which constricted the protestors' framing options. However, once in this constricted situation, the actual protestors' framing decisions and less-than-ideal use of their scarce resources guaranteed the movement's failure. We offer three suggestions as to how this movement could have more effectively used the assets they did possess. In particular, we advocate the utilization of three broad strategies: (1) performing for the media, (2) division of labor and (3) exploitation of elite cleavages. If these three strategies had been implemented, we firmly believe that the oil spill protestors would have had a chance at reclaiming their land, receiving their compensation, and perhaps transforming this bad omen into a more sustainable future.

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