Greenpeace and the Media
Direct Action, Bearing Witness, and Marshall McLuhan

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Giant Whaling ships trailing carcasses and blood through the ocean, banners unfurled on cliffs and buildings, and streaks of blood on the ice from baby seals getting clubbed in Newfoundland: these iconic images were brought to the world by the environmental organization Greenpeace. By attracting media coverage to these events, Greenpeace aided in the call for action and policy changes on whaling and seal hunting, as well as a variety of other issues. In fact, Greenpeace's unique use of mass media has, more than any other strategy, dominated its history and successes. From its first event, Greenpeace created a direct action environmental strategy through the distribution of powerful, paradigm-altering photographs and video clips. This use of media, categorically different than the strategies of older environmental groups, was derived from the Quaker tradition of 'bearing witness,' as well as journalist and Greenpeace member Robert Hunter's idea of 'mind bombs,' a concept influenced by the writings of theorist Marshall McLuhan.[1] The influence of these strategies began in Greenpeace's first protests against the Amchitka nuclear tests by the United States government in 1971, and continued during an anti-whaling protest in 1975, despite the fact that the two environmental issues were very different. Today, Greenpeace is a prolific institution that encompasses a broad range of environmental issues, but they are still able to rely on the same media strategy for each issue: capture the event on video and in photographs, and then disseminate the images as widely as possible to influence public consciousness on the issue.

[1] Robert Hunter, The Storming of the Mind (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), 218.

Amchitka

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the social climate of Vancouver, British Columbia was unique. The city was a hotbed for Vietnam War draft resistors, radical ecologists, New Leftists, and hippies.[2] In 1969, it was made public that the American military was testing nuclear bombs at Amchitka, a site in the Aleutian Islands, off the coast of Alaska. A group of activists in Vancouver came together under the name of the Don't Make a Wave Committee to protest these tests, citing danger from radioactive fallout and the possibility of the blast triggering an earthquake and tsunami that could hit the west coast of British Columbia.[3] The group recognized the media as an effective tool immediately. They changed their name to the shortened, media-friendly version in use today: Greenpeace. With great success they launched the first of many expeditions to raise awareness of environmental issues using the mass media to influence public consciousness.

Greenpeace's voyage to Amchitka was its first major event, and it laid a precedent for all future protests. Bringing along three reporters in a crew of twelve to the site where the United States was planning to detonate a nuclear bomb was no accident, and it helped to establish public support for Greenpeace's mission, even though the boat did not get anywhere near the test site.

In October 1965, the *Longshot*, an eighty-kiloton nuclear bomb, was detonated in the Aleutians as a test by the American government.[4] The blast was not publicized, and there was no protest movement against it. In October 1969, the *Milrow*, a one-megaton blast, took place in the same location. This time, the public knew about the blast and voiced their disapproval, primarily through a Canada-wide, student-organized protest at the United States border crossings.[5] There was widespread fear of windborne radioactive particles or an

[2] Rex Weyler, "Waves of Compassion," *Utne Reader*, October 9, 2007, 2.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Frank Zelko, "Making Greenpeace: The Development of Direct Action Environmentalism in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 142/143 (2004): 231.
[5] Zelko, 231.

earthquake and subsequent tsunami being triggered by the blast, all of which would affect the B.C. coast but none of which the American government seemed to be concerned about.[6] The public was primed for another protest when the United States government announced that there would be a third nuclear test at Amchitka, the *Cannikin*, in October 1971.

Greenpeace's plan was to sail to the edge of Amchitka's 12-mile U.S. legal territorial limit and place their boat within international waters to 'bear witness' to the nuclear tests. The Americans would have to tow them out if they wanted to go ahead with the test, which would constitute an act of international piracy.[7] Among the crew that set sail from Vancouver in September 1971 were Robert Hunter, a former *Vancouver Sun* reporter; Ben Metcalfe, a CBC freelancer; and Bob Cummings, a *Georgia Straight* reporter.[8] Positive media attention had been gathering since the voyage was announced. In Hunter's words, "[c]alls came in from news services all over North America. Group after group rang up to pledge their support. Mail began to pile up until it overflowed in the mailbox. Reporters and cameramen arrived one after the other at the door."[9] During the voyage, Hunter, Metcalfe, and Cummings all sent reports back to their respective media outlets using the boat's radio.[10] As a result, even though the *Greenpeace* never reached its destination because of stormy weather, the voyage still attracted significant attention and public support. Prime Minister Trudeau himself wished the crew "good wind in their sails."[11] The Amchitka voyage laid the groundwork for all future Greenpeace actions because of its use of boats for non-violent direct action by a

[6] Ibid., 232.
[7] Ibid., 235.
[8] Robert Hunter, *Warriors of the Rainbow* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 10.
[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] One of Metcalfe's radio reports can be found on the CBC archives, http://archives.cbc.ca/environment/environmental_protection/clips/5000/, broadcast October 11, 1971.
[11] Jay Walz, "12 Sail for Amchitka to Fight Atom Test," *New York Times*, October 3, 1971, 14.

small group of protestors, its international character, its strong media impact, and the fact that the protestors were arrested for their actions.[12]

Anti-Whaling Expeditions

The next major event, the anti-whaling expedition of 1975, would build on the precedents of Amchitka and establish several of its own, including using Zodiacs for direct action in ocean-based protests. The anti-whaling campaign may have been even more successful than the Amchitka voyage because crewmembers obtained incredible photographs and video footage of the expedition, which could be shown on television, reaching a broader audience than the more newspaper-based Amchitka expedition had.

The origins of the anti-whaling expedition came in the wake of the triumph of the Amchitka protest. Dr. Paul Spong, a scientist at the Vancouver Aquarium, approached some Greenpeace members at the Cecil Hotel pub in 1974 and asked them to get behind his anti-whaling cause.[13] Spong had worked extensively with the killer whale Skana at the Aquarium and was amazed at her level of intelligence; he was convinced that whaling was an affront to such bright and self-aware creatures.[14] Many Greenpeace members were skeptical at first; Weyler remembers that "some of the anti-war activists thought this was a distraction from more important matters."[15] However, upon meeting Skana, the members were won over, and planning for Greenpeace's first large-scale anti-whaling protest got underway. The basic plan was to find the whaling vessels, then use Zodiacs to get Greenpeace members between the harpoons and the whales, making a clear shot impossible. On April 27, 1975, the so-called "Great Whale Conspiracy" sailed from Jericho beach in the *Phyllis Cormack* as a large crowd of media and well-wishers watched from the shore.[16]

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[12] Sally Eden, "Greenpeace," *New Political Economy* Vol. 9 No. 4 (2004): 596.
[13] Weyler, 2.
[14] Ibid., 7.
[15] Weyler, 7.
[16] Ibid., 11.

The *Phyllis Cormack* sailed the Pacific coast for two months, trying to find the whalers without alerting the Canadian or American Coast Guards to their exact location. The crew's biggest challenge, however, was remaining in the media spotlight for the length of their journey. Hunter's strategy was to report on anything and everything that happened on the boat, frequently transmitting stories back to the mainland. Hunter wrote that when nothing interesting was happening on the boat, he would "arrange for events to be staged and then reported as news."[17] Hunter's primary goal was to create enough media buzz around the campaign so that when they eventually found the whaling ships there would be a lot of support for the Greenpeace crew.

On June 27, 1975, the *Phyllis Cormack* tracked a Russian whaling ship, the *Vostok*, to the Pacific Coast of California. Hunter's "mind bomb" for this expedition was to overturn the Moby Dick image of tiny, brave whalers taking on a monster Leviathan, and replace it with a truer image of modern whaling: "huge mechanical factory ships and exploding harpoons hunting down the last remnants of the peaceful, intelligent whales."[18] As the *Phyllis Cormack* approached the harpoon boats and the whale processing factory ship, it became clear that modern whaling was no Melville story. Harpoon boats dragged sperm whale carcasses, some smaller than the legal limit of thirty feet, to the conveyor belt of the*Vostok* factory ship. Once on board, the blubber was stripped off the whales with massive cranes while blood gushed out of a pipe into the ocean, attracting scores of sharks.[19]

To stop the whalers and get better photographs, Greenpeace crewmembers boarded Zodiacs and raced towards the harpoon ships. Robert Hunter and George Korotva positioned their Zodiac between a ship and a whale while videographer Fred Easton filmed from another Zodiac. Unbelievably, a Russian harpooner intentionally fired at the whale behind Hunter and Korotva's Zodiac, narrowly missing the men in the boat.[20] Easton's footage of the incident was the ultimate "mind bomb" in the campaign, one that was played on every major

[17] Hunter, *Warriors*, 178.
[18] Weyler, 8.
[19] Weyler, 12.
[20] Hunter, *Warriors*, 225-226.

news network in North America and helped to solidify public opinion for Greenpeace's anti-whaling crusade. Walter Cronkite himself introduced the footage to the mass TV audience.[21] In *Warriors of the Rainbow*, Hunter described the impact of the footage, along with photographs of the whaling, would have on public consciousness:

> Images would be going out into hundreds of millions of minds around the world, a completely new set of basic images about whaling. Instead of small boats and giants whales, giant boats and small whales; instead of courage killing whales, courage saving whales; David had become Goliath, Goliath was now David; if the mythology of Moby Dick and Captain Ahab had dominated in human consciousness about Leviathan for over a century, a whole new age was in the making. Nothing less than a historic turning point seemed to have occurred. From the purely strategic point of view of a media campaign aimed at changing human consciousness, there was little more that we could hope to achieve.[22]

When the *Phyllis Cormack* arrived on shore in San Francisco, the American media was waiting for the Greenpeace crew en masse. Hunter's campaign of sustained media interest for the boat's two months at sea followed by the "mind bomb" of the whaling ships themselves had proven to be a highly effective media strategy. With the coverage of the whaling incident, Greenpeace emerged on the world stage as one of the most influential groups of the era.[23]

Mass Media and Mind Bombs

From the beginning, the media strategy of Greenpeace was mostly under the control of report Robert Hunter, a *Vancouver Sun* columnist. Hunter's idea of "mind bombs," or

[21] Ibid., 231.
[22] Ibid., 229.
[23] Weyler, 13.

powerful images delivered via mass media to alter public consciousness, were articulated in his 1971 book *The Storming of the Mind* and were derived from the writings of theorist Marshall McLuhan on the influence of mass media on public perceptions. Because Hunter was on board the*Greenpeace* boat to Amchitka, it is safe to say that Greenpeace's media tactics were strongly influenced from the start by the idea of mind bombing and public consciousness.

Historian Stephen Dale noted, "the engine at the centre of this thing called Greenpeace has always been its prophetic understanding of the nature of mass communications, which a handful of Greenpeace's founders picked up from the writings of Marshall McLuhan."[24] McLuhan wrote that people should "take over the control towers of the mass communication system and deliver new images that will liberate people from their primitive tribal mindsets, creating a new global consciousness."[25] The founders of Greenpeace decided to take McLuhan's advice but go one step further, moving out of the studio and newsroom and into an activist role, creating news instead of just reporting it.[26] Over the years, Greenpeace's key activism tool was not banners and Zodiacs but print newswires and satellite news distributors.[27] If Greenpeace's first anti-whaling voyage was not filmed and widely distributed, it would not have had any wider results than a Russian whaler being delayed for several days in taking in its catch. Instead, pictures of harpooned sperm whales below the legal size limit immediately captured the public's attention and popular pressure on organizations such as the International Whaling Commission resulted in a drop in the known annual harvest of whales from 25,000 in 1975 to 1,000 in 1988.[28] This is not to say that it was Greenpeace alone that caused whaling to decrease, but Hunter's "mind bomb" of a giant whaling ship bringing sperm whales into its belly on a mechanical conveyor belt certainly

[24] Stephen Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996), 2-3.
[25] Robert Hunter, *The Greenpeace to Amchitka: An Environmental Odyssey* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 18.
[26] Dale, 15.
[27] Ibid., 3.
[28] Michael Harwood, "Daredevils for the Environment," *New York Times*, October 2, 1988, SM72.

attracted people to the cause. There was no way for the International Whaling Commission to deny that improper whaling practices were taking place when Greenpeace presented photographic evidence that whales under thirty feet long, the legal minimum were being caught. Dale claims that the Greenpeace pictures were especially effective in "bringing the public face to face with bedrock reality that lodges itself in the human gut;"[29] they were, indeed, powerful mind bombs.

Cultural Influences

Greenpeace's media strategies, direct action approach and choice of targets were rooted in four schools of thought: popular ecology, counterculture, the New Left, and Quakerism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many members from such movements congregated in Vancouver's "hippie" Kitsilano neighbourhood. The result was the sharing of interrelated concepts, many of which contributed to Greenpeace's cornerstone principles of bearing witness in a non-violent manner, raising the level and quality of public debate, and independence from political or commercial interests.[30]

Popular ecology grew out of the development, proliferation and testing of nuclear weapons. During the 1960s, ecology was "raising critical questions about the cost of unfettered scientific and economic 'progress' and calling for a more respectful, humble, and holistic view of nature and the place of humans within it."[31] By the late 1960s, it had been transformed from a university-based scientific discipline into a popular way of seeing the world. In tandem with other intellectual movements of the era and a growing environmental movement, ecology placed humans within nature and emphasized the impact that humans had on their environment. Certainly, ecology fit into the broader counterculture of the day. The "disparate collection of social movements" that was counterculture also critiqued

[29] Dale, 157.
[30] Greenpeace International, "Our core values," http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about/our-core-values.
[31] Zelko, 210.

industrialism, but went a step further than ecology by proposing that people go back to a simpler, less commercial, more communal form of living.[32]

The New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s also influenced the paradigms of early Greenpeace members. The New Left and counterculture were rooted in similar critiques, but had different approaches: while counterculture focused on personal transformation and a consciousness revolution, the New Left was more interested in political action. New Leftists were especially critical of large industrial corporations like oil and chemical companies, which they saw as a new form of scientific and technological domination over humans and nature.[33] The roots of New Leftism in political action would influence how Greenpeace members dealt with their concerns about the effects of technology on nature, as in the Amchitka and anti-whaling voyages.

One of the strongest cultural influences on Greenpeace was Quakerism. The Quaker tradition of 'bearing witness' as a form of protest, or "registering one's disapproval of an activity and putting moral pressure on the perpetrators simply through one's presence at the scene,"[34] has dominated Greenpeace's methods from its inception to the present day. The Quakers had a history of nonviolent action specifically against nuclear testing, some of which future Greenpeace founders Irving and Dorothy Stowe took part in.[35] The Quaker Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) held non-violent protests against a nuclear weapons testing facility in Nevada, the Eniwetok testing zone in the Pacific, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) plant in Nebraska, and the building of nuclear-armed Polaris submarines in Connecticut.[36] During the Polaris Action, in 1960, CNVA members paddled boats bearing peace messages into the path of launching vessels, "strikingly foreshadow[ing] Greenpeace's actions in the late 1970s."[37] However, Greenpeace members

[32] Ibid., 214.
[33] Ibid., 213.
[34] Ibid., 198.
[35] Ibid., 202.
[36] Ibid., 200-202.
[37] Ibid., 202.

went one step further, not only bearing witness personally, but also using the media to allow the entire world to bear witness with them.

Environmentalist Influences

It is clear that Greenpeace was strongly influenced by interconnected social and intellectual movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, its roots were much more strongly grounded in these movements than in existing environmental movements. When tracing the history of Greenpeace, links to the New Left, Quakerism, popular ecology and counterculture are much more obvious links to the established environmental movements of the day. Instead of adopting the closed-door meetings and compromises with large corporations characteristic of "old environmentalism" groups such as the Sierra Club or the National Wildlife Federation, Greenpeace was part of an emerging movement known as New Environmentalism, which embraced direct action and sensationalism facilitated by the media.

New Environmentalism began in 1962 with the publishing of Rachel Carson's influential book *Silent Spring* about environmental damage wrought by chemicals and pollution.[38] By 1970, concerns about the environment had intensified into a mass movement that encompassed a much broader base than past environmental movements for preservation or conservation ever had. This new mass movement was action-based and grounded not just in the rational use of natural resources, but also in a radical reconception of the place of people in nature. It encompassed the idea that people were a part of the biosphere, not just in charge of managing it.[39]

New Environmentalism also represented a much more broadly based, political activist, anti-establishment movement,[40] while Old Environmentalism was represented by several large NGOs working with large companies to rationalize their resource use. In the same spirit as counterculture, popular ecology and the New Left, New Environmentalism was

[38] John McCormick, *The Global Environmental Movement: Reclaiming Paradise* (London: Belhaven Press, 1989), 47.
[39] McCormick, 48.
[40] Ibid., 47-48.

"predominantly local in nature, more participatory and focused on action, and critical of the roles of expertise and lobbying in defining environmental agendas."[41]

Greenpeace embodied New Environmentalism, both in the issues it addressed and the methods it used. The Amchitka campaign for example, fed on and fed into the populism of 1970s Vancouver. Two major protests were associated with the expedition. Prior to the first protesting voyage, on October 1, 1969, students across the country protested at Canada-U.S. border crossings against the American nuclear test *Milrow* in the Aleutian Islands; notably, an estimated 4,000 students from the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University blocked the Douglas border crossing in Surrey for an hour to protest the bomb.[42] This protest formed the impetus for the creation of the Don't Make a Wave Committee.

After the committee formed, they quickly found popular support. During the Amchitka expedition to protest the test Cannikin, on October 6, 1971, thousands of British Columbian high school students attended a two-hour protest outside the U.S. Consulate in downtown Vancouver to show their support for the Greenpeace mission and their disapproval of the nuclear testing.[43]

Greenpeace's use of publicity stunts and images was also a major departure from the way the Old Environmentalists operated. Bringing public attention to an issue instead of lobbying and meeting with large corporations fit with the nonconformist, revolutionary spirit of the age. The more traditional environmental movement did not appreciate Greenpeace's tactics; journalist Michael Harwood claimed "the conservation established worried that Greenpeace would bring the whole environmental movement down in disgrace with its crazy stunts."[44] It is clear that the New Environmentalists were not willing to work with the Old

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[41] Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 170.
[42] "Border demonstrations from coast to coast protest planned U.S. A-blast," *The Globe and Mail*, October 2, 1969, 8.
[43] "Thousands of B.C. students protest against A-test on Amchitka," *The Globe and Mail,* October 7, 1971, 8.
[44] Harwood.

Environmentalists to affect change because they thought their methods were too slow and had too much inherent compromise, while the Old Environmentalists thought the New ones were degrading the progress that they had made over the years and were diminishing the respectability of environmentalism because of their radical actions. Even in 1988, the executive director of Greenpeace International, Steven Sawyer, claimed that the stalwarts of the conservation establishment did not treat Greenpeace as part of the inner circle. The Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation and the National Audubon Society lost members to Greenpeace and other more radical New Environmentalist movements throughout the 1970s as North Americans embraced a more activist approach. However, the emergence of the far left was beneficial in some ways for the conservationists. It created a broader spectrum for the environmental movement as a whole, attracting a wider base of support for all groups and making policymakers aware of the public support for environmental regulation. It also pushed politicians to collaborate with the more conservative groups when they were forced to accede to some of the environmentalists' demands. James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior in the United States, was willing to discuss environmental policy with the Sierra Club when it seemed as though "the alternative was having people who the secretary regarded as long-haired crazies running around his woods."[45] It is clear that the Old Environmentalists and the New Environmentalists had a complex relationship, as left-wing groups took some popular support away from mainstream groups but contributed to their success in negotiating with policymakers.

Limitations of Mind Bombing and Mass Media Reliance

There are limitations to Greenpeace's reliance on the media and mind bombing. By relying on powerful images, meant to shock and awe viewers, Greenpeace necessarily limits nuanced discussion about the issues at hand. Although pictures work well in bringing public attention to an issue, they do not transmit a significant amount of information about the issue, its background or potential solutions. In recent years, Greenpeace has attempted to

[45] Rotham, Hal K. *Saving the Planet* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 173.

offset this problem by funding professional research, writing, and publications, most of which are available on its website. This new focus is a compromise between catching the public's attention and ensuring supporters are well informed about the issues involved.[46]

As well, media stunts may run the risk of becoming clichéd. They have the potential to become predictable, even if the issue at hand is an important one. To remain relevant and keep media and public interest, Greenpeace must be innovative in its protests and engagement, which can be difficult to do after forty years. This is one of the reasons that Greenpeace has taken on so many different causes and has started to use alternative media like the Internet to present its "mind bombs" in a fresh way, with the added benefit of reaching a younger generation.

Greenpeace members face two potential roadblocks with the media: publication and framing. Greenpeace can only offer photographs and footage to the media; ultimately, publication is up to the news editors. As well, although the campaigns are generally depicted in a positive light,[47] Greenpeace is constantly at risk of negative coverage. Before the age of the Internet, media was characterized by what Gamson and Wolfsfeld call asymmetrical dependency, which they describe as problematic because "the position of media at the centre of mass communications network gives media a spectrum of options for 'making the news,' while movements have few options beyond the mass media for getting their messages to wide publics."[48] Greenpeace members either had to be journalists or be friendly with a network of journalists to get coverage of their events. They attempted to control the framing of their issues by being proactive, directly producing media material and selling it as news copy, which helped them build relationships with media outlets. However, this was (and remains) a fine line: "[t]o be effective in putting out its preferred frame to a wide audience, Greenpeace

[46] W.K. Carroll and R.S. Ratner, "Media Strategies and Political Projects: A Comparative Study of Social Movements,"*Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24(1) (1999): 13.
[47] Greenpeace's early actions, especially, were covered in a positive tone by prestigious newspapers. See, for example, the articles about the Amchitka mission in the New York Times ("12 Sail to Amchitka to fight Atom Test," Oct. 3, 1971, p.14) and the Globe and Mail ("The Greenpeace's protest voyage north," Sept. 16, 1971, p.1).
[48] Carroll and Ratner, 3.

must facilitate and influence the media without being perceived as manipulative."[49] Journalists must at least appear to be reporting on issues in an objective manner, and Greenpeace's offerings of pre-packaged sensationalism threatens to tip the scales.

Conclusion

Founded in the early 1970s, Greenpeace has been defined, not by its specific issues, but by its brilliant use of the media in disseminating its messages. Beginning with anti-nuclear protests, Greenpeace is now an international, multi-branched environmental organization, encompassing issues as disparate as genetically modified foods and the disarmament of nuclear weapons. However, its basic media strategy, developed by Robert Hunter and based on the works of both Marshall McLuhan and Quaker activists, has remained steady over the life of the group: bear witness to environmental wrongdoing, and then invite the world to bear witness with you. Greenpeace's media tactics also served as models for other social movements, especially its early adoption of the Internet as a mass media tool.[50] Its roots in counterculture, popular ecology, and the New Left created its direct action strategy against large corporations and powerful governments, challenging the idea that humans were somehow outside of the biosphere. As well, its rejection of the methods of the Old Environmentalists ushered in a new era of environmental activism, which was much more populist, broad-based, and radical than the previous one had been. Although some more traditional conservation groups have argued that Greenpeace's campaigns are too emotional and sensationalist and do not leave room for discussion and compromise, they cannot argue that Greenpeace's media campaigns have been powerful influences on public opinion.[51]

[49] Ibid., 12.
[50] Dale, 22.
[51] Harwood, SM72.