Anti-War Activism

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Anti-War Activism

New Media and Protest in the Information Age

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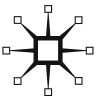

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Preface

15 February 2003 was a remarkable day in world politics. An American-dominated 'coalition of the willing' was poised to launch a military assault on Iraq. America and its allies alleged that Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein, posed a grave threat to their security and vital interests because he possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and gave succour to terrorists, notably Al Qaeda. Weapons inspectors from the United Nations were working under intense pressure, experiencing hindrance inside Iraq but finding nothing and requesting more time, while American leaders insisted that WMD were in Iraq. The UN Security Council refused to authorize the invasion, but the build-up to war continued and its outbreak appeared to be immanent.

Throughout several months of intense diplomacy and feverish media speculation, there had been a series of demonstrations from those opposed to the impending war, but the high point of protest was the coordinated demonstrations against the war that took place around the world on 15 February. Figures are imprecise, but none refute the fact that they were enormous: there were protests in over 600 cities round the globe; over 2 million demonstrators in Rome, over 1 million in Barcelona and in London (where some claimed 2 million) and hundreds of thousands in cities as diverse as Berlin, Melbourne and New York. To get a measure of its scale, take the London demonstration of that day. It dwarfed any previous protest in British history: the Chartist campaigns that culminated in their 'monster rally' of perhaps 100,000 at Kennington Common in April 1848, the suffrage campaigns during the 19th and early 20th century that 'filled' Hyde Park in 1908 with something like 250,000 people in attendance, the legendary anti-Vietnam protest outside Grovesnor Square in March 1968 that mobilized maybe 30,000 – all are small compared to 15 February 2003. So striking was this recent protest that Patrick Tyler (2003) of the *New York Times* was moved to describe what he saw as 'two superpowers' set against one another, the United States of America and 'world public opinion' as represented by the marchers. Jonathan Schell (2003) saw the same clash as nothing less than 'a global contest whose consequence far transcends the war in Iraq'. A central task of this book is to look closely at the character of this anti-war movement as it was manifested in the United Kingdom.

The unprecedented mobilization of anti-war support took place at a time when it was commonplace to point to declining participation in elections in established democracies (the general election turnout of 2001 in Britain was just 59% of eligible voters, the lowest since universal suffrage was granted in 1918), an inability to persuade people to join political parties and heightened scepticism towards and distrust of professional politicians (Baston and Ritchie 2004). On the one hand, there is evidence of a decline in interest and involvement in politics; on the other, the anti-war protests got unprecedented numbers of people onto the streets to resist this political action.

This paradox was one important reason why we undertook this study of the anti-war movement in Britain. We wanted to investigate distinguishing features of this massive social movement at a time when so much evidence suggested a turning away from politics among large sections of the public. The scale and intensity of the 15 February protests have not been maintained, but the anti-war movement has kept a visible presence throughout the intervening years. We wanted to examine how this has happened.

We were also conscious of the changing character of war. We write about this more extensively in Chapter 2, but in brief our view is that nowadays much armed conflict takes place in conditions of Information War. A good deal has been written about the hard side of Information War, about the digitized battlefield, command and control systems and smart weapons that make for astonishing asymmetries in combat. So long as an enemy can be identified (and it does not possess nuclear capability), then those with state-of-the-art satellite and aerospace technologies will quickly win – although occupation of a defeated nation's territory is a very different matter. Insufficient attention has, in our view, been paid to the soft side of Information War. Here we refer to the realm of persuasion and propaganda, of course, but also to the steady stream of information from and about military conflict. As a rule this is presented as a matter of the exercise of control by military and government forces, leading to media management that ensures the public is 'on message'.

But the information environment of war is today too volatile, even chaotic, for control to be so straightforwardly effected. Participants do endeavour to control what is reported in ways that are advantageous to themselves, they even train and plan for it as best they can, but in an era of email, satellite communications and the Internet, this is an impossible task. The enemy might be overcome militarily with ease, but if there follow digital photographs taken by servicemen torturing

prisoners, video film of soldiers beating civilians or even day-to-day questioning of the enterprise from opponents back home, then information control is not only demonstrably hard to maintain for those waging the war, but it is also of enormous magnitude since it threatens any possibility of winning peace.

This hard-to-manage information environment, one that is vastly expanded and more pervasive than ever before, also means that contemporary publics can have a massively heightened awareness of war compared to their predecessors. But this is overwhelmingly experienced from afar. Nations with Information War capability may fight now with little immediate consequence for their citizens, who are not called upon to fight in large numbers and are rarely subject to attack back home, yet these publics have access to information about war on a scale and with an immediacy that their forebears lacked.

Such mediation of war also means that nowadays we encounter intense symbolic struggles aiming to persuade the public one way or another about the rectitude and progress of war. The anti-war movement plays a key role in these matters, albeit generally removed from the war-fighting zones, and it struggles with pro-war forces to mobilize the public to its side. It was another goal of this study to examine the anti-war movement's operation in this changed information environment.

New technologies are a central aspect of this changed environment. The anti-war movement is an assiduous user of email, the web and the mobile telephone. Accordingly, we insisted that our research would not just examine how new technologies were used in the symbolic struggles between pro and anti-war forces, but also how they were integrated into anti-war organizations and campaigns. How might anti-war organizations be using information and communications technologies in coordinating their campaigns? How do they adopt new media in their mobilization of supporters and coordination of actions?

We brought different disciplines and histories to this study. Kevin Gillan was educated as a political scientist and has researched anti-globalization and peace activists in the English provinces; Jenny Pickerill is a human geographer who has done work on environmental and anti-capitalist activists' use of new technologies, while Frank Webster is a sociologist with a long-term interest in information issues and trends, including Information War. The team did not prioritize any discipline or background, but judge that the combination allowed an interdisciplinarity that enhances the study. One outcome

was adoption of a wide range of methods in data collection, which is reflected in our use of a variety of modes of presentation throughout the book. We endeavoured to paint a full picture of the anti-war movement in Britain by conducting over 60 in-depth interviews (mostly carried out in 2006 and early 2007), by hosting an online group discussion with dispersed activists, by hyperlink analysis of online networks, by observing activism at national levels as well as at local meetings of activists, by absorbing ourselves in available literature and content put out by the diverse groups that make up the movement, whether in electronic or hard copy, and by paying particular attention to 'hot topics' such as Israel's invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the arrests of a score or so of suspected terrorists in Britain later that year.

We could not look at every dimension of the anti-war movement, so we selected a number of examples for close study in our research. To allow a broad range of coverage of this variegated movement we included groups with alternative positions on several continua of difference such as those between broad ideological and single-issue focus; complete pacifism and a particular anti-war position; religious and secular backgrounds; or direct action and lobbying strategies. Working with these criteria we centred on six foci, presented in Table P.1. Social movements are never amenable to categorization in neat, exclusive typologies, and as the table indicates, we used a mixture of pragmatism and sensitivity to difference in selecting particular cases to study. Our investigation took us far beyond this initial set of groups and we conducted additional interviews as the opportunities arose. Appendix 1 lists all of our interviewees and includes independent activists and writers and members of groups such as Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp (aign) and Voices in the Wilderness UK that are not listed in Table P.1. For ease of reference, brief introductions to all the groups we discuss in the following pages are provided in Appendix 2.

Table P.1 Case study groups

Group names	**Structure and locations**	**Group aims**	**Justification for focus**
Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament	National organization based in London; regional and local groups also studied	Remit includes opposing any war that involves nuclear armed states	Major long-term peace organization. Co-organizers of high-profile national demonstrations

(continued)

Table P.1 (continued)

Group names	Structure and locations	Group aims	Justification for focus
Faslane 365	Steering group based near Faslane naval base; large number of blockading groups drawn nationally and internationally	Year-long campaign of direct action against British nuclear weapons facility. Focused on stopping the renewal of the Trident weapons programme	Not focused on the 'War on Terror' but very high-profile peace movement activism during the research period. Represents direct action focus and autonomous group structures
Justice Not Vengeance	Central group based in Hastings, East Sussex	Producing information on the 'War on Terror', Iraq and civil liberties. Protests focused on UK Parliament	Attained a high profile despite small size. Represents a range of looser networks of non-socialist activists
Muslim networks including: Muslim Association of Britain, Muslim Public Affairs Committee, British Muslim Initiative, Friends of Al Aqsa, Cage Prisoners	A range of structures. Our research began with a focus on groups represented in Leicester, but included national organizations and individuals	Most groups with a broad remit to represent Muslim interests but involved in mobilizing constituents for anti-war demonstrations. Some focused on civil liberties implications of anti-terror legislation and policing	Widely seen as expressing new involvement of a religious and ethnic minority in collective action. Range of groups for study partly determined by changing fortunes and affiliations of organizations during the research period
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)	National organization, London base	Denomination of Christianity with a very long history of peace activism since the 17th century. Wide range of campaigning styles	Permanent presence in movements opposing war offers a long-term view. Represents Christian pacifist activism
Stop the War Coalition (StWC)	National organization, London base. Local affiliates (e.g. Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth, Leicester) also studied	Socialist dominated centre entirely focused on the 'War on Terror'. New political party, Respect, developed from StWC, running on an anti-war platform	Major new anti-war organization from 2001. Co-organizers of high-profile national demonstrations

In selecting groups on which to focus, we were aware of potential for a skewed view of activism resulting from an excessive focus on London. To a degree this is unavoidable since the capital city is indeed a locus of activism, but as will be evident from the table, we took pains to ensure a much broader view. Most importantly, we undertook to examine activism in Leicester, a Midlands city of less than 300,000. Leicester's population includes a relatively large proportion of Muslims, study of whom gave us insight into participants that are especially noticeable because of their ethnicity and previous lack of visibility in public political affairs. We did not adopt the received view that Islam has introduced religion into anti-war activism and additionally chose the Quakers as a case study because here is a group of committed Christians devoted to peace that was established in the 17th century. This helped remind us that religion has long played a role in anti-war activism and one ought not to suppose that it is some recent intrusion brought about in response to the invasion of Iraq. However, despite the considered use of these examples we are aware that we have not, and could not, comprehensively include all in the anti-war movements. In this respect, we acknowledge there is an under representation of feminists, anarchists and performance-based groups and perhaps an over-emphasis upon the more formally organized anti-war campaigns at the expense of these often more fluid networks.

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under its New Security Challenges programme. Since this is easily misunderstood to be a programme dedicated to investigating threats to society in order that they may be better disciplined, it is important to make clear that we do not see the anti-war and peace movement as a threat to social order. Quite the contrary, we conceive of it as a constituent part of a vibrant democracy that is open to change and redirection. The anti-war movement helps call politicians to account, stimulates and helps clarify debate, critiques the construction of a 'War on Terror' and, perhaps as important, can enable often-marginal groups to engage in and with the wider society. It may be especially worth emphasizing this point since we shall argue in this book that parts of a marginal and minority grouping in British society, that is, Muslim communities, have been able to engage, at least to a degree, in political affairs through involvement with anti-war activism. (But we will also describe a failure to extend and deepen dialogue with such groups that may have been a missed opportunity to further integrate what is in truth a diverse Muslim presence.) In our view the continued marginalization and stigmatization of Muslims, especially the young, actually risks pushing

them into the arms of much more extremist groups who frame their claims in the name of Islam.

It remains for us to set out the structure of this book in summary form. Chapter 1 establishes the wide context of the study, mapping the post 9/11 terrain of the 'War on Terror' that has played a major part in galvanizing the anti-war movement. Chapter 2 considers at length the changing information environment within which the anti-war movement operates. It suggests that the control paradigm that currently dominates media studies of war needs revision, going on to observe the complexity of information circuits that now exist, before suggesting that there has been established an alternative information network within anti-war activism. The central concern of Chapter 3 is with the representations and identities of anti-war groups. Using analysis of their publications and online presence it explores the ways in which groups shape, control and project particular campaign messages by carefully selecting source material. However, these representations were neither as controlled nor carefully strategic as might at first appear. Moreover, such representations were an important part of the construction of a religious identity, especially for Muslims, which was both challenging and contested by anti-war activists.

Chapter 4 details the diversity of the anti-war and peace movement and considers how alliances and coalitions are constructed. We argue that while new media enable anti-war information to move across distances with ease, cooperation requires much more substantive connections, from interpersonal ties to ideological agreement. In this light alliances between Muslim and non-Muslim groups are investigated, as is the relative paucity of grounded interaction and exchange across groups. Chapter 5 concentrates on the national and transnational dimensions of the anti-war movement, demonstrating through hyperlink analysis high levels of transnational exchanges in informational terms. However, when it comes to organization, action and goals, we suggest that the priority of the national – indeed of place – is reinstated. We examine the multiple ways in which local activities constitute, and are constituted by, behaviour and beliefs oriented to national and international levels. Chapter 6 investigates how activists cope with the informational demands they must now encounter, from the effective management of their offices to the stresses of individually handling email messages. We identify filtering processes that are ways of reducing information overload, and reflect on activists becoming caught in what Cass Sunstein conceives as information cocoons. Chapter 7 centres on adoption of information and communications technologies

among anti-war activists. We record heavy use, especially among the most involved, but observe that this tends to be restricted to the orthodox capabilities of ICTs, what we term their manifest functionality (e.g. to cheapen costs, to distribute information) as opposed to their latent functionality (e.g. to increase interactivity, to adopt wiki practices in creating information). Finally, Chapter 8 pulls together our findings and arguments. Impatient readers may start there, though they will need to read specific chapters for substance.

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Anti-war activism is necessarily contentious. So too is writing about the subject. This being so, it is perhaps especially important that we state that we alone are responsible for what appears in the following pages.

Abbreviations

9/11	The terrorist attacks in America of September 11, 2001
ARROW	Active Resistance to the Roots of War
BMI	British Muslim Initiative
CAAT	Campaign Against the Arms Trade
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
ESF	European Social Forum
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
F365	Faslane 365 campaign
FAB	Faslane Academic Blockade
FMO	Federation of Muslim Organisations, Leicestershire
GSM	Groupe Spéciale Mobile
HOPI	Hands Off the People of Iraq
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language
IANSA	International Action Network on Small Arms
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IHRC	Islamic Human Rights Commission
IMC	Independent Media Collective
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
JNV	Justice Not Vengeance
LCSTW	Leicester Campaign to Stop the War
MAB	Muslim Association of Britain
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MFAW	Military Families Against the War
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MPACUK	Muslim Public Affairs Committee UK
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PDF	Portable Document Format
PGA	People's Global Action
QPSW	Quaker Peace and Social Witness
RNC	Republican National Convention
ROR	Rhythms of Resistance

SMS	Short Message Service
SPT	Stop Political Terror
StWC	Stop the War Coalition
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UCU	University and College Union
UFPJ	United for Peace and Justice
UN	United Nations
UoLISoc	University of Leicester Islamic Society
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
Wombles	White Overalls Movement Building Libertarian Effective Struggles
WSF	World Social Forum