



Lessons From Miami: Information Warfare In The Age of Empire

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The smartMeme project provided media and messaging support to the demonstrations against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami, Florida in November 2003. We worked with a number of amazing activists from Miami and around the hemisphere to create the StopFTAA media team. Collectively, with almost no resources, the media team worked to MAGNIFY the voices of free trade's diverse opponents, PROJECT those messages around the world and PROTECT street activist by working to insure the world really was watching the police brutality and government repression that was unleashed on demonstrators in Miami. Below is a brief report smartMeme compiled from both our first hand experience of the policing operation and our monitoring of the media coverage of the demonstrations. As the title of our piece suggests we believe that the police operation in Miami was about far more than merely controlling the streets. The "Miami Model" as it's being called, was military-style information warfare, which used many of the same propaganda tricks being used in Iraq to control public perception of what was happening in Miami. We believe it's important for all of us organizing for a better world to carefully analyze the repressive tactics that were used by the state in Miami. To this end, we hope our article is a conversation starter and a point of inquiry for movement strategists both young and old.

Last fall in Miami the wide range of demonstrators opposed to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) were met with a massive policing operation. At a November 26th press conference, a coalition of protest organizers including the AFL-CIO, local community leaders, national peace, consumer and economic justice organizations blasted the Miami Police Force for repressive tactics, including illegal arrests, excessive violence and systematic civil rights violations. That same day, Amnesty International called for an independent investigation into the strong-arm tactics utilized during the FTAA meeting.

The police and state effort to crack down on protest in Miami was funded by an \$8.5 million grant passed as part of the \$87 billion dollar War on Terror package. The money helped fund over 40 different law enforcement agencies to participate in the operations -- the DEA, the ATF, Immigration and Customs, Miami Dade Police Department, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service were just a few of those present in the streets. Cash also went to state of the art weaponry, some familiar items like tear gas and rubber bullets and also new and exotic toys like taser guns, mobile water cannons, and electric shields.

Rising Resistance

The stakes in Miami were very high for the Bush administration. Across the Americas hundreds of millions of people are expressing their opposition to corporate driven globalization and "free trade". Meanwhile historic alliances were being forged between domestic movements inside the U.S. Gone were the messaging disputes that had characterized previous demonstrations at trade negotiations. Unions, local community

groups and street activists shared a clear, common message: "No FTAA!" Anti-war groups like United for Peace and Justice joined with the more de-centralized, affinity group based wing of the global justice movement to organize direct action. Local community groups representing immigrants, low-wage workers and communities of color organized marches and popular education events supported by global justice puppeteers and seasoned direct action organizers. Powerful labor groups like the AFL-CIO and the United Steelworkers made clear that despite tactical differences, there was solidarity across all the organizations and events represented in Miami. To emphasize this point, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney visited the mobilization welcome center where art making, training and planning were underway for unpermitted street actions.

Yet this powerful display of solidarity is not the glimpse of the action that most American's got wedged in between their daily doses of the Michael Jackson surrender. More and more concerned citizens should ask themselves -- why?

Two Pronged Attack: Control The Streets And Control The Story

What has become clear in the aftermath of the FTAA was that "The Miami Model" - as policing enthusiasts are calling it - had goals far more ambitious than merely controlling the streets. The bigger agenda of the Miami policing operation was to control the public perception of mass protest and domestic opposition movements. The state response to the anti-FTAA protests in Miami was a watershed moment in an escalating attack on citizens who are willing to stand in opposition to the Bush Administration's goals.

Miami represents the mainstreaming of overt information warfare against non-violent protest movements. Information warfare -- as formally defined by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction Number 3210.01. (Dated January 2, 1996) -- constitutes "Actions taken to achieve information superiority by affecting adversary information, information based processes, and information systems."

The relevance of information warfare to social movements and political conflicts has been the subject of study of Rand Corporation researchers John J. Arquilla and David F. Ronfeldt. Over the past decade, they have written extensively about an aspect of information warfare they call "netwar" which they define as "trying to disrupt or damage what a target population knows or thinks it knows about itself and the world around it. It may involve public diplomacy measures, propaganda and psychological campaigns, political and cultural subversion, deception of or interference with local media." (Arquilla, John and David F. Ronfeldt. "Cyberwar and Netwar: New Modes, Old Concepts, of Conflict" 1995 Rand Corp)

Learning From Iraq: Embed To Win

A central piece of the information warfare strategy in Miami was to borrow one of the military's latest insights in public relations and "embed" the media in the police operations. As the viewing public learned in Iraq, embedding the media has a deep and powerful impact on reporter's perception of the situation. Appearing on camera in their special issue flak jackets and riot helmets, embedded TV correspondents helped reinforce the perception of the protests as a threat to public safety rather than a free expression of opinion. The story was aggressively defined from long before the FTAA meeting as protesters versus police, masking the reality that people from all walks of life were uniting to protest against "free trade" and unchecked corporate power.

The Miami Herald's embedded reporter uncritically documented Police Chief John Timoney's description of protesters as "punks," "trouble makers" and "knuckleheads" as well as Timoney's personal commitment to "hunt them like a hawk picking mice off a field." Like most U.S. media corporations, the Miami Herald Publishing Co uses it's platform to uncritically promote the "free trade" ideology.. In addition to running

editorials in support of the FTAA the paper donated \$217,000 worth of advertising in support of the FTAA and another \$62,500 in cash to subsidize the actual summit.

The role of Miami Police Chief Timoney illuminates the tight connections between the war in Iraq and the increasingly militarized response to dissent at home. Timoney, the former Police Commissioner of Philadelphia, is infamous for his heavy-handed response to the protests against the Republican National Convention in 2000. He was also scheduled to go to Baghdad in May, as he told the Associated Press to "advise Iraqi officials on training, managing and organizing local police." Although the trip was delayed for logistical reasons, it is apparently still planned. The common denominator of Timoney between overseas military operations and domestic repression is a chilling indicator of the Bush administration's world view.

As Seen On TV!

The strategy of embedding media was most obviously effective in shaping the local television coverage running live for most of November 20th, the main day of protests. The coverage can only be described as surreal, as anchor after anchor verbally described situations that appeared completely disconnected to the footage running concurrently. At one point, an anchor's voice-over described undercover agents being chased behind police lines by protesters, while the film repeatedly showed a small group of demonstrators aiding a friend who appeared to have been attacked by other protestors (undercover agents).

Most live footage was from helicopter shots, which were creatively interpreted by the in-studio news anchor in conversation with a reporter or an "expert" commentator. Throughout the day the reporters providing live interpretation were disproportionately embedded reporters who were either behind police lines or in a police command center far away from the physical site of the protest as being broadcast from live helicopter shots.

The guests, with the rare exception of an occasional, quick protester-in-the-street interview, were almost all police spokespeople. The police spokespeople operated like public relations professionals, slickly framing the issue and by any standard exploiting the confusing events to make misleading statements. During his repeated television appearances throughout the day, Chief Timoney made numerous claims about police tactics that were later proved to be untrue. These misrepresentations included claiming the police never used tear gas, that police showed "remarkable restraint" while being repeatedly attacked, that police only arrested "violent" protesters and that people were allowed to peacefully demonstrate.

Perhaps most disturbing for the critical viewer, was the blurring of perspectives and roles as the voice over conversation between anchor and embedded reporter would shift to embedded reporter and police spokesperson. These shifts frequently occurred without clear identification and obfuscated the ability of viewers to interpret the information being provided to them.

The full effect of the embedding strategy became clear as reporters and anchors repeatedly slipped and revealed partisan pro-police bias. In one notable instance, as Channel 7 aired live footage of militarized police driving frightened protesters from the downtown area with massive force the anchor enthusiastically declared "So far, we're winning!"

Justifications for pre-emptive police action were plentiful: [The police are] "prepared", "have been preparing," "are ready for any scenario." "When something came up they put it out," were examples of anchor's comments. "Everything is going according to script," another triumphantly crowed.

Conspicuously absent was any analysis of what the police force was prepared for. The live coverage that was the compulsory fare of the day was largely comprised of uneventful shots of groups of demonstrators gathered in clumps in parks or wandering down streets followed at close range by lines of riot cops and

armored vehicles. A few repetitive shots of young masked protestors were peppered with hundreds of references by the anchors to the "trouble makers", "rabble rousers", "bad seeds", "protestors looking for trouble", and of course, the never defined but always scary "anarchists" or "suspected anarchists."

Much of this coverage comes not only from irresponsible journalism but also from a calculated campaign of police public relations to demonize demonstrators and create an artificial threat. This intentional media spin was accompanied by police pressure on downtown businesses to close during the protests which insured a city emptied of all witnesses to the policing operation. When none of the property destruction and chaos that had been promised by the authorities materialized, the anchors were able to declare triumphantly that this was a result of a "massive, well-prepared police force".

Age Old Formula: Divide And Conquer

The police propaganda efforts were clearly designed to disrupt the newly forming alliances. Starting with his first interviews of the day on Thursday November 20th, Chief Timoney attempted to create artificial dichotomies between the "credible" labor movement and the "suspect" direct action community. As he praised the labor groups for planning an orderly, non-violent march, Timoney continued his campaign of slander against the direct action community, describing participants in the unpermitted events as "violent trouble makers with no message". Police spokespeople throughout the day used their tight relationship with the embedded media to spread misinformation about schisms between the labor march and the other street actions.

Despite the repeated stories in the media describing the "good protestors" and the "bad protestors", the reality on the ground was quite different. Not only was their incredible solidarity between labor, community and direct action activists but also the police operation was also targeting the labor march for harassment and disruption. People trying to join the permitted rally and march were threatened, pepper sprayed and in the case of over a dozen buses prevented from reaching downtown. One story that did find its way into mass media was that of Bentley Killmon, a 71 year old retired union member who was one of a number of people arrested while trying to leave downtown after the march and held for hours without bail or food. Mr. Killmon's experience is proof of the chasm between police propaganda and reality.

Only days after the FTAA protests on November 23, the New York Times broke a story on the FBI's ongoing policy of infiltrating and spying on the anti-war and global justice movements. The article references the FBI's Cointelpro program, the well documented program of government harassment, dirty tricks and even assassinations used to discredit domestic opposition groups like the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement.

On the same day, the Los Angeles Times reported on the recent expansion of the military's "War on Terror" powers to include domestic spying on civilians. How many of these new state powers were being used in Miami? Clearly, there is a need for an independent investigation with the power to fully examine the methods and goals of the Miami policing operation.

If At First You Don't Succeed, Destroy The Evidence

One of the strengths of progressive movements has been to understand the power of producing our own media to relay our stories. Videotapes produced by independent media have been used as legal evidence and as irrefutable proof of state propaganda. In Miami, being an independent journalist meant you were a target. Numerous independent journalists and even un-embedded mainstream journalists, reported harassment and arrest during the actions. Some had their equipment confiscated and destroyed.

Even more ominously, in the hours after the major action, reports began to filter in about a rash of armed robberies of independent videographers. At least five independent videographers who had been documenting undercover police, brutality and abuses against non-violent protesters reported their cameras and footage taken from them at gun or knifepoint.

Brandon Jourdan, of the NY Independent Media Center described his situation. "After shooting over 90 minutes of unprovoked police violence against demonstrators, I went to take my footage to a safe location. On the way, I was robbed by two clean-cut men who were carrying stun guns. Eyewitnesses from the local community reported they had never seen these individuals before and that they were observed leaving the neighborhood with my camera."

Follow up interviews in the area produced a number of residents who went on camera testifying that the police had encouraged locals to rob protesters specifically targeting people with cameras. This type of attack on independent video documentation of a conflict is a tactic of information warfare - attack your opponents' ability to communicate their version of the story. It would appear as if elements within the police operation were willing to go to great lengths to prevent images of brutality and repression from reaching the outside world.

Lessons For The Future

Now that the tear gas has cleared from the streets of Miami the battle for the long-term meaning of the demonstrations against the FTAA is under way. Many questions linger, but what is certain is that both demonstrators and police are examining how the lessons of Miami will play out in future mass demonstrations.

The Bush administration is rapidly turning American into a propaganda state of Orwellian proportions. From calling clear cut public lands a "Healthy Forests Initiative" to weakening air pollution protections with a "Clear Skies Initiative" to lying about their motivation for invading Iraq, the Bush administration is using its weapons of mass deception to manipulate public opinion. The staging of next year's Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York, timed in the lead-up to the anniversary of 9-11 is just one more example of this ongoing spin war.

The convention is certain to be one of the next major flash points between the administration and the diverse grassroots movements for change. Already some organizations are calling for a million people to descend on NY to protest the Republican agenda. Judging by the experience in Miami, we can expect more of the same: militarized streets and little respect for First Amendment rights.

The Bush administration appears intent on continuing its military style information warfare campaigns as well. They have already tapped one of their most seasoned propagandists, Jim Wilkinson, director of strategic communications at US Central Command, to head up New York media operations for the RNC. Embedded media is already being assumed, and Wilkinson has promised other tricks of the trade to leverage the spectacle.

Battling the Story

Progressive movements must meet this spin machine with a more sophisticated definition of protest one that prioritizes contesting power in the broader symbolic, cultural and ideological arenas rather than competing with militarized riot police for control of the streets. We must learn to effectively fight the Battle of the Story the competition to define public interpretation of and shape the core values that are communicated by a mass action, campaign or movement. The Battle of the Story must be fought in idea space -- from the

corporate controlled airwaves and newspapers to the street level chants and ultimately, the dinner table conversations of middle America.

The Bush administration's attempts to maintain power, play on fear and the manipulation of America's ignorance about global public opinion. Implicit in the Bush ideology of permanent war and empire building is a superficial vision of security as rooted in American military and economic domination. The RNC offers a unique opportunity for progressive movements to win the Battle of the Story by weaving an alternative narrative to Bush's RNC/ 9-11 story of fear, isolationism and vengeance. Mass mobilizations provide the conflict, drama and sensationalism necessary to attract attention. But, in order to avoid becoming mere tabloid TV and background noise, we need to more effectively use mass mobilizations to offer America a powerful story based on hope, dignity and true economic and political security.

Effective story telling relies on sympathetic characters clearly articulating the conflict they face. As the list of victims of the Bush economy grows longer and longer every day, one of our best strategies for winning the Battle of the Story at future mass actions is to magnify these diverse voices of opposition. Imagine if teachers, steelworkers, disgruntled veterans, fire fighters, immigrants and working mothers are able to speak to America about the impacts of Bush's shortsighted policies on their lives. Imagine if ordinary New Yorkers are able to ask the hard questions about the EPA cover up of post 9-11 air pollution. Imagine if the family members of U.S. soldiers are able to demand answers about the Bush lies that justified the invasion of Iraq. These are the types of voices that can turn the Administration's strategy of hijacking 9-11 into a tremendous backlash that exposes the Bush Regime's flawed agenda.

We need to continue to use our alternative media institutions to document and disseminate the real stories that compel change. At the same time, we must magnify the voices of ordinary people highlighting the increasingly obvious contradictions and lies in the Bush story. These lies are like the loose threads on the unraveling fabric of the Bush era of fear and greed. Now our job is to keep tugging at the threads until the world sees that the emperor wears no clothes.

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