

COMMUNICATING PROTEST

HOW TO FRAME PERSUASIVE MESSAGES





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Not-for-Profit Law

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This guide focuses on the act of protesting and what this specific communication action entails. Framing a persuasive overall campaign message is essential. For a more fundamental guide to overall persuasive message-making, we recommend [Messaging this Moment](#) (from the Centre for Community Change), as well as [How to talk about civic space](#) (from Liberties), both freely available online. This guide was also informed by [scholarly work](#) from Daniel Ciurel of the University of Timisoara.

To put this guide together, we reviewed literature and interviewed civil society leaders and protest organisers from around the world. With help from their insights, we provide a list of considerations and advice to assist campaigners to use protest effectively to achieve their campaign objectives.

This guide considers the act of protesting in its most general form. Specific circumstances which arise with particular issues will affect the relevance of some of our points, but there is much to be gained from considering general rules which have worked across a variety of movements and issues. Experienced and even non-experienced protest organisers will recognise many of the situations this guide discusses. Our aim is to provide insights and examples to assist protest organisers to identify their priorities during what are always busy and difficult moments.



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INTRODUCTION



Every day, activists use protest to get attention and, more importantly, make a connection with others whose support they need for their cause and point of view. Protestors, specifically, do this in a situation where those with authority have already ignored, discounted or deliberately side-lined their perspective. Conflict and disruption is a more difficult context in which to make persuasive arguments and win new supporters.

This guide aims to provide ideas and examples of how protestors can frame their messages and organise activities to make a moment of conflict into a persuasive opportunity. We have looked at protests around the world covering different issues and cultural contexts, where protestors have successfully got their fellow citizens to choose their side against powerful opponents.

ABOUT PROTEST



Protest sits within the liberal-democratic tradition, where the legitimacy of the rules and laws governing society rests on an inclusive discussion process. Within that tradition, the right to speak, to gather together, and work with like-minded individuals to advocate for a collective cause are seen as essential and protected as inalienable rights. The right to delay or disrupt others is not inherently protected, but when necessary to realise the former rights, activities such as marching through streets or blockading meetings are understood as legitimate protest.

A protest usually carries an explicit message, part of a broader campaign, but the act of protesting itself also implies certain ideas:

1. Protest is speech, which implies a democratic belief that decisions ought to be made based on discussion between involved groups and individuals.
2. Protest is also interruption, which suggests that a perspective is being ignored.
3. Protest calls people together, and the number of people taking part adds weight to the idea that an important perspective is being left out.
4. Protest is often synonymous with 'demonstration'. Creative use of the visual and physical elements of a protest can illustrate a persuasive point in ways that are impossible with words alone.

PROTEST COMMS PRIORITIES



Given what protest is, protest communication priorities typically include:

1. Expressing an overall campaign vision;
2. Creating protest activities to enhance the message;
3. Directing responsibility to the person/group or authority that is ignoring your perspective and causing the protest;
4. Making it clear who is protesting and their perspective;
5. Encouraging people to join in.

● EXPRESSING AN OVERALL CAMPAIGN VISION

It is crucial that the main message of a protest speaks to the vision of the broader campaign, (and not organisational aspects of the protest).

Focusing on attendance or other 'process' issues is not persuasive. The number of attendees is likely to be self-evident. The most important message explains why they are there.

Share your vision

"Our message today is that we want a society where people are treated equally."

"We want a safe and healthy planet for our children and grandchildren to grow up on."

Not process

"Our message is that the government must listen to the 100 000 people who have demonstrated today."

"By protesting today we have shown that many people want the government to act."



CREATING PROTEST ACTIONS TO ENHANCE THE MESSAGE



Protests can be parties and they can be picket lines. The physical nature and other non-verbal aspects of a demonstration can add physical and emotional cues to the verbal message.

These examples show how the right choice of action and imagery can tell a story more powerfully than words.



Marriage Equality

Protests from the US to Bosnia to Australia included mock-weddings with people dressed-up to celebrate. This put the focus on the universal human nature of marriage (love between two people), rather than the exclusive aspects. The hopeful and celebratory tone of the in-person marriage equality protests was also reinforced by the content shared in online protest

spaces. Images posted by protestors on social media of people smiling and happy with their loved ones, often accompanied by positive hashtags such as #loveislove, helped to communicate the celebratory and hopeful tone of the movement.



Public Housing

In Barcelona, where the city government wanted to evict public housing residents, leaving them nowhere to go, the residents held sit-ins. Locating the protest on site put an obvious truth at the centre of the event: people were being taken from their homes. Forcing a confrontation with authorities in their homes (a safe and private place that all people need

and understand) showed the government as the clear aggressor. A similar protest in a more neutral public setting would have left more room for the protestors – who would have been visibly angry – to be seen as aggressors.



Dancing in the Streets

Protestors in Turkey led by workers' unions focus on rights like pay and safety. But every union protest in Turkey features traditional dancing. The dance obviously does not communicate anything specific like a wage demand or reasons for it, but it does communicate a deeper message of unity and of standing shoulder to shoulder, which connects their cause with advancing the way of life for all people

living in Turkey. The protestors' solidarity and unity of purpose is so much more powerfully conveyed by the simple act of dancing.



**DIRECTING
RESPONSIBILITY
TO THE PERSON,
GROUP OR
AUTHORITY THAT
IS IGNORING YOUR
PERSPECTIVE**



The disruptive nature of a protest is often essential, but it can frame the protestors as causing annoyance or inconvenience to others. Naming the person or group who have made the protest necessary is essential to ensuring those truly responsible are held accountable, as well as giving the audience the context they need to take a sympathetic view of the protest and its cause.

The legitimacy of protest rests in part on the implication that a perspective is being excluded or ignored by whoever is considering and deciding on an issue. For example, perhaps a parliamentary committee is considering changing or making a new law but is not holding open hearings, perhaps a corporation or government department is carrying out work which hurts a part of the community that has no avenue to object. Either way, the need for disruptive action to gain attention is caused not by protestors, but by an act of negligence or bad faith by someone with power. A carefully considered message should include an aspect which lands this responsibility with the authority or power at fault, obliging them to improve their approach. The greater the disruption or inconvenience to potential supporters, the more essential this becomes.

<i>Land the responsibility</i>	<i>Don't make yourself the target</i>
<i>"... the housing minister has chosen to evict thousands of people, causing them to blockade their homes..."</i>	<i>"... thousands of people left homeless by evictions have blockaded their old homes..."</i>
<i>"... the company has refused to discuss a pay increase with its workers, who have gone on strike to force the company to listen..."</i>	<i>"... workers have shut down production in protest to try to win higher wages..."</i>



MAKING IT CLEAR WHO IS PROTESTING AND THEIR PERSPECTIVE



It is important to show the issue in question from the perspective of those affected.

Demonstrating and explaining the demands of the protest from the perspective of the people who are protesting will allow the audience to see the perspective which decision makers and the media have thus far ignored. When the audience is shown how the desired outcome of the protest affects the protestors, they will be more likely to relate and support the protests.

Whoever is visible and audible at a protest (whoever leads and speaks) says something via their own personage, about the connection and authenticity of the protest and the cause it advocates. No matter how knowledgeable, articulate or genuinely experienced someone may be on an issue, if they lack a personal connection to the cause, then their presence can distract and even detract from the emotional authenticity and power of that message.

For example, many protests against corporations seeking to profit from the destruction of land belonging

to First Peoples are led by First Peoples. When communicated by those who have a connection to the place under threat, whose traditions and communities stand to be affected by its destruction, the importance of its protection is far easier to see.



Photo: John H. Harrington

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**ENCOURAGING
PEOPLE
TO JOIN IN**



Protests rely on a sense of togetherness and collective action which sends a message to the audience as well as those taking part. The message: “many people care about this” is both legitimising as well as providing greater hope for success.

It is important that physical or digital actions undertaken by protestors give those involved a sense that they are part of something larger.

This is natural in a physical crowd, but the same sense of togetherness can be achieved by coordinating digital actions at the same time and with avenues for interaction with others.

For example, in Nigeria, hashtags are commonly used to build momentum online and bring more supporters

on board. The #EndSARS hashtag, part of a campaign against police brutality, was used over 28 million times by protestors, signalling to both protestors and authorities that many Nigerians were demanding justice.



In the context of the Colourful Revolution in North Macedonia, the spectacle of protestors peacefully

throwing paint balloons at public buildings magnified the protest. Even once the streets were emptied of protestors, the residue of these colours throughout the city reminded citizens of the large numbers of people who had come together.



CHECKLIST



- What is your main message and vision?
- What are the actions and other non-verbal aspects of your protest, and how do they enhance this message?
- Who is responsible for causing the problem you are protesting about and what do they need to do to resolve it?
- Who is protesting and how does this issue affect the lives of the protestors?
- What can a supporter do to add their voice to this protest and as part of the broader campaign?
- How has/will this protest make a difference? What do you want/hope/expect will happen now/next?
- Does your communication plan, website, media kit, etc contain answers to all of the above?

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