

## **Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 40, 16 April 2008: The Chinese Year of the Tracksuit: Creating Visual Language**

Any campaign needs to be communicated in two basic ways: in words and in images. The words need to be in the form of a story, not just a claim or 'facts' and the best visuals use 'visual language' by which I mean that the pictures speak for themselves because they contain symbols of meaning.

Prize for creating the strongest visual language of 2008 [1] so far goes to the Chinese Government, and in particular whichever officials, politicians or committee decided to send a detail of blue-track-suited 'flame attendants' to surround the Olympic Torch on its international journey to Beijing.

As we noted in the last edition of this newsletter, China and the Olympics were always bound to be the focus for 'issues' politics, especially around Tibet but the Chinese Government has managed the remarkable trick of creating an entirely new visual icon of the "Tibet Issue" by putting its paramilitary police in characteristic, easily recognizable tracksuits and ensuring that they will be in every photo or the video of the torch as it heads to China. By so doing they remind us all of the "Tibet Issue" even when there are no protests or protestors in sight.

As self-inflicted communications wounds go, this takes some beating, and from statements about 'dealing severely' with any protests when the flame passes through Tibet itself, and condemning protests as "vile behaviour" it doesn't seem that China is having any second thoughts.

If China had opted for lower profile and less visible measures, the mainly individual or token attempts to stop the torch's progress would have attracted far less attention. Each would have looked different, as the protestors seem to favour a 'jumble sale'\* type mixture of home made placards, ordinary day clothes and a variable assortment of Tibetan colours which don't stand out in a photo of a crowd. Knowing that these are set-piece incidents that will, if at all, be picked up in news photos or TV news, the Tibet campaigners could have worked back from a hypothetical photo, to plan what their element should look like (and thought about what headline it would prompt, for example by picking a particular setting).

However the Chinese Government has done a big part of the campaigners job for them. The Chinese Government is the direct target which the campaigners are trying to reach. By sticking their men-in-blue-tracksuits in between the Torch and everyone else, the Chinese Government has put itself squarely in the frame, and kept itself there: another communications mistake.

### **'Kidnapped' Athletes**

Imagine it without the Chinese track-suited heavies - any protest would be a protestor versus an athlete, or a protestor versus local police, trying to reach an athlete. All of the positive emotional capital that attends the Olympic tradition, sport, personal endeavour, national pride in winning and so on, would be personified in that Torch-carrying athlete. Even people very sympathetic to the Tibet campaigners might feel two ways about it. Now though, the Chinese "thugs" as British Olympian Seb Coe called them, have removed that dilemma by visually-kidnapping the athlete inside a military cordon. Only by wearing paramilitary uniform itself could their role have been made more clear but as it was, the bizarre spectacle very quickly led to the discovery of who these people really were and that further increased the power of the story and 'installed' the imagine in the minds of TV watchers as China-versus-Tibet, the very thing that China did not want to be talked about.

By putting its cordon around the flame in such a public way, the Chinese Government has also made itself the story, or rather a story starting with the 'Olympic Games Sacred Flame

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Protection Unit' formed from members of the 'People's Armed Police (PAP)'. Whereas the passage of the flame to Beijing might in a better outcome for China have been accompanied by background pieces on 'life in China', media space is now being taken up with investigative pieces into who the men-in-blue are [2]. It seems they have played a significant role in suppressing protest in Tibet – the worst possible choice for a flame guard if you didn't want to talk about Tibet ...

### **Track-Suited Tyrants ?**

A UK *Daily Mail* piece reported of imprisoned nuns in Tibet:

*The PAP were called in and beat the prisoners so severely that in the words of one survivor: "It looked like an abattoir. They beat us with their belts, until their belts broke. Then they used electric batons."*

*After several days of beating, and further tortures involving sand-filled hoses, stripping, electric shocks and sexual humiliation, the five nuns were dead, possibly after committing suicide by suffocating themselves with prayer scarves.*

The track suits themselves are another strange element in this official Chinese communications cock-up. I'm no expert but they seem to be official Olympic tracksuits. I'm not sure who makes them but they are not very subtly redefining the meaning of that manufacturer brand, as well as the whole Beijing Olympic Brand. Manufacturers are already jumpy about problems such as 'ambush marketing' at the Olympics but this is an issue on a different scale. Nevertheless any spats with a manufacturer or designer could be the least of the Chinese Government's self imposed communications problems.

What for example if the blue tracksuits became so notorious as a piece of clothing that they came to symbolise all of the repression which campaigners report from Tibet ? There are plenty of examples of shirts and other clothing with strong political connotations. What then, if Olympic competitors decided not to wear them (I'm not sure if they are supposed to but the possibilities are endless). This is what happens when you create visual language.

What if an enterprising campaign group managed to connect the the track-suits with torture for example, putting the reported role of the PAP in Tibet into the tracksuits before our eyes, through theatre or posters or online ? Once a symbol exists it can be appropriated, like a word, and used by anyone, in more visual language.

Choosing the official tracksuits for the security detail no doubt made sense to someone in the Chinese Government but it now has two massive drawbacks. First, it can't be changed without becoming an issue. If they'd been in plain grey in London they could have been in anonymous white in Paris and so on, and the whole visual impact would be lost or greatly reduced. Second, it raises questions about who the Olympics belong to. The flame symbolises the Olympics – the spirit, the event, the organisation, the heritage – but the Chinese Government is, through the men-in-blue, treating it as if it is its own property. Just in case some might have missed this hitherto esoteric concern, nation states and citizens along the route [3] are reminded of it because their own police are clearly not in control of an event on their own soil. Chinese paramilitaries have been allowed to 'be their own law and order' on French, British and American soil – though they will not be, apparently, in Australia.

In values and political terms this manages the astonishing trick of annoying security driven authoritarian Settlers concerned about national identity and security, at the same time as ethically minded Pioneers, and even probably success-seeking oriented Prospectors (because

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'Visible Ability' is a prospector value and this makes the national authorities look incapable). Concern and anger then, across the political spectrum, right-left, liberal-authoritarian. (For an explanation of Value Modes see <http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/usingvaluemodes.pdf>)

### Meaning Through Pictures, Not Words-In-Pictures

The Chinese Government has created new visual language by giving a particular meaning to those tracksuits. Like a Chinese Character this can be used alongside other symbols to say things without words, and to support or create a context for words. That's visual language.

Where campaigners often get this wrong or maybe miss a trick by not using it, is in trying to use pictures to 'show' something verbal. Typically this involves a play on words that "sounds good", and then a group tries to visualise it. This frequently results in a strained visual explanation that has to be explained with words (text on screen, captions, voice overs and so on).

That is not powerful visual communication which elicits an emotional response before you are conscious of meaning. Instead it requires a rational, conscious, exposed thought process which is not only slow but gives us plenty of opportunity to opt out, to disagree and not buy the links.

An example is a quite nice little video by the UK climate campaign group i-count that just arrived in my inbox via the useful Compass Network [4]. It's on You Tube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEaYbAzOfqE>. Pat Dade of Cultural Dynamics pointed out to me the other day that double-meanings are a classic Pioneer way to communicate: double or better triple meanings they find intriguing and interesting. In this case it's a play on the meaning of "balls" (= in the UK, courage and/or testicles), and Bill (= proposed legislation and Bill, short for William).

The idea of the video is that the proposed Climate Bill (see Newsletters 36 and 38 on *The Big Ask*) lacks "balls" but the video is laboured and indirect compared to the thought that inspired it and the visuals do not say what the problem or solution is, nor raise the emotional temperature beyond a titter. Nor does it show the action (call your MP) or the target (MP) or sell the benefits. Maybe the makers decided none of that was necessary. As an intended viral it relies on people already being 'aligned' and/or finding it too funny not to pass on. Like a lot of campaign videos it's probably only going to appeal to the converted. At any event it is an example of trying to visualise a text-idea.

There is one presumably unintended example of visual language in the video: the Jack Russell dog which bites Bill in the area where his balls should be. That type of dog has been made famous amongst British TV-watchers in recent years by appearing in award winning advertisements for John Smith's bitter [beer]. Symbolically that doesn't really help in this case.

Another double-entendre example of trying to visualise a verbal idea is "Every Tree Counts". Now a logo (see [5]) and originally a London tree covered in large numbers hung in the branches for a press launch, the excellent group Common Ground wanted to say trees were important, and to reinvigorate the ancient tradition of tree dressing (which they have succeeded in). As a visual though it is equally laboured, hence the logo has to have the strap line underneath it because the picture does not tell the story: we love trees, or we should love trees. I've put a [http://campaignstrategy.org/images/everytreecounts\\_sm.JPG](http://campaignstrategy.org/images/everytreecounts_sm.JPG) which says an element of this.

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**Are The Protests 'Effective' ?**

Just a word or two about the efficacy of the campaign of protest. Not surprisingly there has been discussion in the media about 'whether the protests are doing more harm than good?'. To answer this you'd need to know what could 'work', how it could work, what 'work' means (ie the objective), and what stage you were at in being able to make something work. (Of course many of those asking this question are disingenuous – they'd rather have no protests but not because they have a better way to reach the same ends, many just don't want to 'upset China').

In other words you'd need to have done issue mapping and power analysis, selected a point of intervention, developed and tested a critical path and all the other factors involved in campaign strategy. (See [http://www.campaignstrategy.org/cr12\\_intro.html](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/cr12_intro.html)) Then you'd have had to weigh up the pros and cons and taken a calculated risk before launching the torch-impeding protests.

In the UK at least the media have given more airtime to China pundits and journalists theorizing about whether or not the protests may have any affect on the Chinese Government, and if so, what type, than to the protestors and critics of China in Tibet. So it's hard to know what the strategy is beyond just registering protest, if there is one.

I have little idea what 'could work' in terms of changing Chinese government policy towards Tibet and suspect that many of those involved in the protests at any rate do not have a strategy of this kind. Such strategies are the preserve of those who can deploy an organisation as an 'organisational weapon', albeit for NGOs, ones whose weapons are non violence and communication.

Instead it seems likely that many of the individuals and quite possibly some of the organisations involved are operating on that other way of deciding what to do – principle, acting on what is right and wrong. If strategy is like a map and making a route by using the tools of navigation, reconnaissance and so on, principle is like a compass. It doesn't tell you how far off your target is, what obstacles lie in the way, or how likely you are to get there but it gives you a heading and sometimes it is the only tool you have.

\* Jumble Sale in American English might be Rummage Sale or Yard Sale

[1] see for example <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/world/5696103.html>

[2] for example Undercover in Tibet - and terrorised by the Chinese thugs in blue tracksuits, Patrick French, Daily Mail , 13 April 2008 at [www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk)

[3] see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7336639.stm> for the route

[4] sign up at <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/compassnetwork/>

[5] <http://www.grownupgreen.org.uk/library/?id=364>

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**HOW TO WIN CAMPAIGNS pub April 7 2005 Earthscan by Chris Rose see**

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