

Civil resistance as deterrent to fracking: Part Two, Shale 911

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By mid-summer 2011, as we were debriefing and evaluating the walk and its success, the organizing challenges and the lessons, Marie-Ève Leduc, one of our creative members suggested that we set up an early warning system to watch and sound the alarm should fracking activity resume on Quebec territory. She suggested we call it “Shale 911”.

We got working on the design. First, there would be the creation and maintenance of a monitoring website and a 1-800 number to serve as hubs for active, citizen-based surveillance.

The web site that we built, *SCHISTE911.org* in French, sports a big red button to signal suspicious fracking activity, and includes geo-mapping of all known potential sites, with a colour-coded level of alert with short descriptions.

We have secured the 1-888-SCHISTE emergency number, allowing for low-tech and more immediate contact with the campaign.

Eyes and ears in the community, watching remotes sites, important intersections and back roads, paying attention to rumours and talking with strangers, can provide important, timely information. It is the first and vital step in the system.

This kind of surveillance network doesn't always have to be built from scratch. In the Canadian province of New Brunswick, Canada , Neighbourhood Watch and Block Parent homes were enlisted to signal to protesters the presence of thumper trucks, used for seismic testing.

Any information received is first validated through a basic protocol. Journalism-style, we need at least two verified sources before an alert is made public. Point people in citizen groups stand ready to go out and verify allegations. Engineers and specialists are on call to validate.

One priority: train, train, train

If anything, the concept of preventative action rests on one paramount priority: to train communities in Nonviolent Direct Action (NVDA) and Civil Disobedience (CD). To reinforce their intended effect as a deterrent for the industry, the trainings themselves are publicized and mediatized.

Our trainings are full-day workshops, with advance registration, equal part theory, history of civil resistance strategy, and tactical training, all based on an experiential training design.

To anchor the training, and move the real work of organizing, we have started to facilitate tactical planning towards local emergency plans. What are the best locations to blockade? Where will civil resisters be sheltered? How will they be fed? Who will provide transportation?

As another innovation, we are using a Participatory Video process, adapted from UK-based *Insightshare*, teaching small groups in the use of video, the new literacy, to build a rapid deployment plan. With friendly faces from the community, this self-made video can show everyone -local folks, national authorities, and energy investors - the emergency mobilisation and direct action plans that are being prepared to resist shale gas development, should it ever dare come back in the area.

Direct action: costing the opponent

Although we knew intuitively, and politically, that preparing for mass participation in civil disobedience blockades would constitute a threat to the industry, the CEO of a major firm in the field of hydraulic fracturing provided a nice confirmation of the validity of one of our tactical assessments:

"A fracking operation costs about half a million dollars a day. That's why I won't pay this kind of money if the risk is too high that protesters will chain themselves to installations, or stop my teams from working."

—Michael Binnion, CEO of Questerre.

"Thank you Mr. Binnion, for sharing the recipe," we'd quip at every opportunity. "Now let's gather the ingredients!"

Although one would be well-advised to remember that one tactic alone is rarely enough, and that employing a vast repertoire of methods, with varying levels of risks, from none to mild to high, is key to mass participation, and thus victory, other stakeholders and analysts seem to share his assessment that direct action and nonviolent blockades represent a high risk and real costs for the industry.

In early 2013, London-based Control Risks, a global risk assessment consultancy for industries and governments, published an in-depth study of anti-fracking groups around the world entitled, [*The Global Anti-Fracking Movement: What it Wants, How it Operates and What's Next*](#). On page 10 of the report, Control Risks consultants provide this piece of analysis on direct action, weighing more specifically the relative cost/benefit of blockades as a tactic to the anti-fracking movement, vs. unconventional hydrocarbon developers:

"Direct action serves both strategic and tactical purposes. Strategically, it attracts media attention, raising public awareness of hydraulic fracturing, and thereby increasing receptiveness to anti-fracking messaging and aiding activist recruitment. Demonstrations, days of action and non-violent civil disobedience provide impetus and focus to the anti-fracking movement, helping to mobilise grassroots support, and generating solidarity both locally and globally. Direct action can also confer political influence on the anti-fracking movement, as the imposition of moratoriums in France, Bulgaria, South Africa, Czech Republic and elsewhere has demonstrated..."

"Blockades are a favoured non-violent direct action tactic across the environmental activist movement, particularly for rural gas drilling projects, which often depend on single, purpose-built access roads. Blockades generally do not require site security to be breached and can occur at a distance from the project. Furthermore, while the costs to activists of blockades are extremely low – both in terms of organisation and penalties – the potential for disruption to the target can be significant in terms of lost productivity and extra operating costs."

Providing further confirmation of our choice of tactics, Control Risks also had this to say about one element of the One-Generation Moratorium campaign, deemed a relatively sophisticated operation:

"In line with the generic evolution of social movements, online and social media are also instrumental in organising and mobilising the anti-fracking movement. Local and national anti-fracking demonstrations, for

example, are promoted heavily via Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, with websites providing ready-made templates for posters, T-shirts and banners. At the more sophisticated end of the spectrum, for example, the anti-shale Quebecois (Canada) campaign Moratoire d'une generation maintains a dedicated initiative – Schiste 911 – to alert activists by email to drilling activity in the province."

Making the most of direct action

The second key element of the preventative campaign design deals with training very much upstream of industry activity.

We put a lot of emphasis on non-arrest, support roles. Our goal is to get as many people to attend the training as possible. We also want to recruit people who might not otherwise attend, because it is a fact that support roles around nonviolent direct action often involve greater time commitments, and even courage, than the getting arrested part.

Civil Disobedience and Nonviolent Direct Action (NVDA) trainings can generate quite a bit of media buzz. Especially outside of urban areas, these workshops are not only a rare occurrence and a novelty, they generate enough controversy to provide prime newsworthiness. Especially when allowed to cover role-plays and other simulations, NVDA trainings provide this irresistible mix of anticipation and drama about the upcoming conflict.

Allowing media to cover civil disobedience workshops allows training to become an action in itself.

Since not only police and corporate surveillance outfits, but also journalists have been known to covertly attend these trainings, it is better that the movement allow access to the media, and hence exert some control over the message, and plan how to derive the most benefit from the coverage.

Pledging civil resistance

The training sessions in civil resistance always end with the offer to sign a "Pledge of Resistance" made out to each participant's name, followed by a graduation ceremony with diplomas also printed individually - we register people in advance through an online form, and ask for their personal information, to be compiled in a database.

Because it is formal and dignified, it strengthens people's resolve. It is a serious commitment, that not everyone, but most participants do make. It prepares people for not just short-term, but a longer-term vision of how they should contemplate being involved in this struggle. It provides a reassurance that this movement is serious, well-organized and that it will see to it that nonviolent discipline doesn't break down, and that high-risk roles aren't open to untrained participants.

We then take a picture of each graduate holding their diploma, and add it to the database of trained participants. Later, we send each one their laminated personal card, complete with photo ID, QR code, and a newsletter with a fundraising appeal.

When we reach 500 trained participants (right now, our numbers hover just above 300), we hold a press conference to show how many people have committed to take part in civil resistance actions, as direct participants and support, should the industry come back.

Learning from the experiment

Under a threat as immense as fracking, no town could succeed alone. Just the same, no single organisation, much less a leader, can claim full credit for such a vast and successful movement.

With a mix of friction and collaboration, the combination of everyone's diverse efforts and specific contributions generated the victory. Just as in nature, it takes many specialized roles to make an effective and resilient movement ecosystem.

Public framing

Choose a frame that allows you to talk to almost everybody, ordinary people who do not know about, share or even care about the premises of environmental activism, who know nothing about movement jargon such as "climate justice", "CO2 PPM", or even alternative energy sources. To become a mass movement, we need to develop language devoid of inside code words or policy-speak. If your framing allows the other side to win over the fence sitters, you will lose.

We chose to put forward the idea of a momentary stop -not a permanent ban outright - so that there could be a way to bring over those who are not yet convinced, or educated enough about the issue, to even "hear" a hard position such "no shale gas, ever". The One-Generation Moratorium idea was able to capture the idea of reaching into the future, to talk about life through caring about our children. Granted, "Moratorium" sounds technical, and soulless. It is itself a term that sounds like jargon. It was so widely held in the movement, it was the main plank: we had to also cater to the activists.

Ultimatum: take back the timeline

Citizen-based initiatives trying to oppose unwanted development tend to be very reactive. By definition, the building of new installations is a process controlled by the opponent. Therefore, the timing of events - when and how each of the steps will be carried out, cutting down trees, bulldozing the topsoil, bringing in the equipment -is controlled by the opponent.

Add to this that citizens often lack in-depth knowledge of the various steps involved in more complex development processes, and you have a very unequal power over the time and place for confrontation.

Where do you draw the line? When do you launch an action?

Extensive research, other groups with on-the-ground experience, and sympathetic experts are all ways citizen groups can acquire better knowledge of the upcoming process to define the important steps around which actions can be designed.

Another great device is the ultimatum -a set date by which a demand must be met, or else a sanction, or a series of consequences, will ensue for the opponent.

Mohandas K. Gandhi made good use of the ultimatum during his career, often in the form of a letter penned in concerned, amicable language.

Issuing an ultimatum provides a number of advantages, the most important being that it allows a campaign to regain the initiative, by setting a deadline around which to plan, for a better handle on preparatory steps for

mobilizations and resource-intensive moments.

Because an ultimatum warns opponents ahead of time of the likely consequences if they opt for confrontation, it tends to make the issuer look more composed and reasonable. At least, an attempt is made at persuasion, before coercion.

The denouement

One could argue that recent market conditions -in the form of lower gas prices - helped temper North American enthusiasm and urgency towards the development of extreme hydrocarbon deposits. True enough. But shale gas continues to be developed elsewhere, while it has been stopped in a province where the resource was found to be abundant, close to the surface, and cheap.

Sometimes, all it takes is some extra cost, some new unwanted risk, or a small increase in political uncertainty. Certainly, civil resistance can play a role in all three, for a winning combination to the benefit of people's short-term quality of life, long-term health, their environment, and the promise of a better life for their children's children.

Victories against extractive industries and other destructive projects sometimes come in the form of repeated delays and postponements imposed on promoters... until the conditions or the general climate, political and otherwise, change permanently. Winning time, especially if the time is used for more organizing, can mean winning, period.

Initially, the opponent in Quebec was wise enough to use public forums to try and pull the public toward their point of view. It started in the spring of 2010, when the Petroleum and Gas association toured the province to talk about the benefits of the industry. It was a disaster, helped along with the arrogance and mistakes of its spokesmen.

Then, the provincial government set up multiple environmental review boards. It designed their mandates so they would be constrained to look only at the how, not the whether if, or when. So alongside civil resistance, the public authorities and the industry were also doing their advocacy and consultations, often winning government officials over. While activist groups were tempted to ignore the flawed process, they were nevertheless important as a potential means by which public decision-makers would take stock of the deeper opposition that civil resistance had been stirring, as the included chronology shows.

Chronology

* Spring 2010, the issue comes to the fore.

* Fall 2010, Provincial government launches an environmental review process on how to mitigate hydraulic fracturing. Citizen groups and most environmental organizations want proceedings to focus on whether fracking should be allowed and demand a moratorium. *Moratoire D'une Génération (MDG)* stages a dignified act of defiance: one by one, everyone in the room stands up and asks the board for a one-generation moratorium.

* December 2010 to February 2011, the MDG strategy proposal is circulated.

- * March 1, 2011, Launch of the One Generation Moratorium Campaign, with ultimatum to government set for May 1.
- * March 8, 2011, Environment minister announces a new study, this time a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), but makes no commitment that test wells and experimental fracking will be excluded.
- * May 2011, Walk from Rimouski to Montreal, with educational campaign on fracking and proposed long-range strategy of preventative nonviolent direct action. First moratorium law proposed, then adopted on fracking under the St. Lawrence or any of its islands west of Anticosti.
- * June 2011, Environment minister announces full stop to drilling and fracking for shale gas. Walk culminates on Montreal.
- * December 2011, the SEA committee holds proceedings across the St. Lawrence valley. Everywhere, it is met with hours of opposition testimonies and statements from citizens, others standing in silent protest, holding signs with a giant eyeball saying: "Keeping an eye on you. The next generations are watching."
- * April 2012, first of series of trainings for Schiste911 (Shale911) begins. About three hundred citizens have been trained so far.
- * September 2012, Parti Québécois is elected as a minority government. In keeping with election promises, it soon announces it will impose a moratorium on fracking for shale gas, through a bill to be presented.
- * May 2013, A bill toward a 5-year shale gas moratorium in the St. Lawrence Valley is presented, but has yet to be adopted. The Parti Québécois also changes and extends the modalities of the SEA. For the bill to be adopted, the minority government needs the votes of at least one of the largest opposition parties.
- * September 2013, the situation is unchanged. Emergency action plans are being drafted by citizens trained in NVDA, using an innovative participatory video process.
- * And next, exploration for shale oil is slated for 2014 on Anticosti Island and the Gaspé peninsula, areas unfortunately excluded from the proposed moratorium. Two pipelines carrying Albert tar sands crude have also been announced to carry diluted bitumen across the province. Opposition to these initiatives is mounting. Victories bring new challenges, and extra layers of complexity. La lutte continue...

On a practical level, intentional civil resistance planning, relentless community organizing, and a powerful sequence of preventative nonviolent actions were able to prevent destructive development from being sold as a "done deal". Grassroots civil resistance organizing acted as a real deterrent against seemingly undefeatable extractive industries.

Activism and resistance

This kind of success does not come easily. And many threats in Quebec still loom. But the on-the-ground citizen victory against those who represented one of the most powerful industries in the world is the result of a multi-pronged, multiyear sequence of tactics that combined into an innovative, compelling strategy.

Civil resistance can change the politics of environmental threats, by mobilizing the very same people who, in democracies, elect the politicians. Activism and advocacy are with us all the time. But sustained pressure by organized groups of informed, determined people who will be affected by exploitative public or private action is still rare in open societies. When it is summoned by shrewd planning and the framing of a cause whose time has come, the result can be to pull the sword of the people's power out of the rock of even the daunting combination of governmental torpor and relentless corporate action – and finally put public interests ahead of private gain.