

***The Yes Men Hoax the World:
Re-Imagining Utopia Through Humour, Trickery, and Sincerity***

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We had no grand plan.
We just started doing stuff that seemed fun and on target, and one thing led to another. - Yes Men

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PROLOGUE

This book marks a sincere attempt to make sense of the slippery, seductive, and deceptive modes of communication commonly referred to as hoaxes. More than any other brand of deceptive practices currently circulating, hoaxing has much to teach us about the changing nature and character of information, the sociality of sharing and commenting on current events and affairs, the power of false or misleading discourse, and the motives or incentives of propelling spectacular news stories into the public sphere. In the pages to come, I shed light on both how and why hoaxing has become a defining byproduct of twenty-first century news media reportage, offering a point of departure for reflecting on the deeper systemic failures of traditional arms of the journalistic establishment. More specifically, I argue that hoaxing calls into question broader cultural fascinations with notions of truth, falsity, and spectacle, particularly as they are played out by (mostly) clandestine figures in the nebulous regions of the Internet. By examining a wide range of hoaxes, I offer a foundational overview of how hoaxes are orchestrated, what they purport to do, why hoaxers set out to undertake this work, where and how far these practices circulate, and whom these acts influence or impact. In painting this broad but nuanced picture, I hope to lay the foundation for why hoaxes are significant to contemporary life and culture.

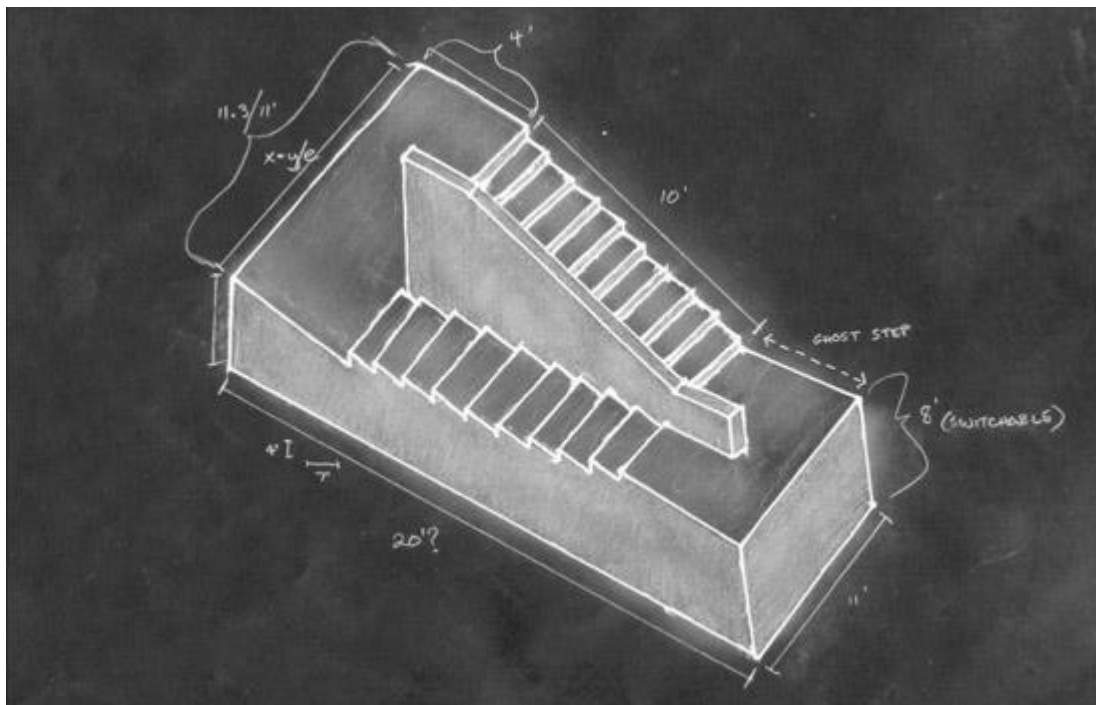
While the examples I present offer no universally concrete or predictable patterns, each instance reveals a great deal about how deceptive practices have the potential to hold a temporary power over audiences and onlookers. It is precisely in these temporary moments of transgression and opportunity that hoaxing is given its charm, its unpredictability, its chaos. In examining a wide variety of hoaxes--especially those presently earning continued traction on the Internet--I present an argument for channeling greater attention and scrutiny to the work deceptive hoaxes enact; at the same time, I wish to isolate the media hoaxing practices of practitioners that have consistently created deceptive stories in the interests of illuminating larger truths about the world around us. To do this, I have chosen the best representative examples I could find. This book represents a deep engagement with the satirical antics of the Yes Men, a group of media activists that harness the power of hoaxes to bring social justice issues to mainstream media audiences. In telling their story, I point to the largely untapped, generative power of lying in the service truth-telling, satirizing in the name of institutional critique, laughing in the interests of preserving humanity and dignity. Through their numerous interventions, the Yes Men present a powerful utopian narrative, one that privileges the power of sensational hoaxes to animate important discussion and debate on issues ranging from climate change, corporate responsibility, and government accountability. The Yes Men's work has taken on even greater resonance of late because they have taken it upon themselves to train and mentor individuals, community groups, organizations, and other members of civil society, in the elaboration of ethically motivated hoaxes. This progression figures prominently in the book's final pages because it marks an important moment in the sociopolitical significance of hoaxing as an agent for social change. And it is precisely this dimension of media hoaxing that this books sets out to describe: contemporary hoaxing takes several forms in today's cluttered news and information culture, but there are

two predominant aspects that warrant our attention: first, potentially harmful hoaxes must be scrutinized and discussed in a broader attempt to increase the average citizen's skepticism toward news content and to improve vital media literacy skills; second, hoaxes can assume constructive, progressive guises and citizens should be aware of their viability as powerful modes of critique, public discussion, and civic mobilization. Together, these concerns inform my immediate sense of media hoaxing's importance to twenty-first century media culture, social justice struggles, and the thornier existential questions surrounding humanity's complicated embrace of the false, the fake, and the untrue.

A Stairwell That Never Ends: From Hoax to Myth and Back Again

People are endlessly fascinated by hoaxes and myths because they are complex stories that command our attention, appeal to our curiosity, and incite our sense of wonder. But they also strain our intellects because they defy easy categorization and resist simple explanation. Collectively, they might be likened to puzzles in need of being painstakingly pieced together, cryptic messages begging to be artfully decoded, foreign languages to be skillfully deciphered. Stated in the simplest possible way: hoaxes and myths keep us on our toes. For many hoaxes and myths intersect along the borders of the tangible and intangible facets of a culture: known, rational, and verifiable epistemologies next to sublime, inexplicable, and mystified phenomena. We marvel at scientific researchers' ability to map the entire human genome in the same breath that we skeptically challenge evidence pertaining to human evolution. We know we have stumbled into their midst when the details of a story inspire awe and excitement, but fail to deliver a steadfast and convincing account of the events under scrutiny. If there is some detective or investigative work to be done--anything that requires the careful discrimination of statements, evidence, or facts--there may be reason to believe we are flirting with a hoax or myth. Of course, hoaxes and myths are not for everyone. We lead busy lives and there often isn't enough time in the day to tend to the basics, let alone exercises in debunking or affirming the legitimacy of these phenomena. This book is as much for lovers of hoaxes and myths as it is for those ignorant, oblivious, and uninterested in these cultural practices. Before I set out to introduce the complex architecture of this culture, I should note that hoaxes and myths are decidedly unrelated terms with vast cultural and historical differences and points of emphasis, but I engage each term here in an attempt to explain the continued appeal of hoaxing as a pervasive practice and as a broader set of narratives.

Let's begin with an example to illustrate the state of hoaxing today. In March, 2013, a graduate student at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) publicized an architectural marvel he'd discovered on campus. Inspired by the impossible structures of M.C. Escher, the "Escherian Stairwell" (as it is called) is said to magically loop back into itself, a feat that both defies logic and, in theory at least, violates the laws of physics. Built in the 1960s by Filipino architect, Rafael Nelson Aboganda, the stairwell allows you to ascend to the bottom and descend to the top.



At first glance, the evidence put forward (a press junket and video created by RIT) would suggest that the stairwell is merely an optical illusion, a *trompe l'oeil* meant to catch unsuspecting audiences and participants off-guard. In their “Can You Imagine?” video (a segment about “interesting facts, stories and myths of RIT”), the show’s hosts briefly describe the architectural anomaly, before proceeding to interview a number of RIT students regarding their knowledge of the stairwell. The hosts are surprised to learn that the vast majority of students interviewed had never seen or even heard of this engineering marvel. The video then depicts a small number of students and interested parties taking an innocent tour of the Escherian Stairwell. Each student is asked to walk up the stairs and to wait for the host at the very top. It quickly becomes obvious to both the participants and viewers that the host has not moved and that a trick of sorts has been played. In fact, students go on to refer to the stairwell as an “architectural trick,” a rite of passage for the RIT student body (a thing to do before graduating), and as a local urban legend. This family-friendly video featuring two downhome and good-hearted hosts inspires both awe and skepticism; viewers move from incredulity to a genuine willingness to believe (and vice versa). Is the stairwell merely an optical illusion, or does the space legitimately defy the laws of nature and physics? First, let’s let the Internet have its say...

At the time of writing, a Google search for “Escherian Stairwell” for Internet users in North America yielded roughly 51,000 hits (a high return given the story’s modest three-week history). On the first page, one immediately gleans two things from the results: the sensationalist character of the story (“the most incredible set of stairs ever created”) and the apparent fraud behind it (“Many people throughout the world are currently being fooled by this tour of the Escherian Stairwell”). The top entry is [an article on Snopes.com](#), a website touted as the “definitive Internet reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumors, and misinformation.” As they see it, the stairwell is little more than a cleverly devised hoax; elsewhere, the stairwell is described as a student’s “attempt at starting an urban legend.” If you make it to the second page of Google entries, one learns that the video was in fact part of RIT student Michael Lacanilao’s Masters’ project. Thus one of the real oddities of this example is that the project’s

origins are easily unearthed in a simple Google search. The project actually began as a crowdfunded campaign on Kickstarter (the popular crowdfunding website), in which Lacanilao explains the project in painstaking detail, including his broader motives for creating the stairwell story. From the outset, he confesses that his larger goal in bringing the Escherian Stairwell to life is to create a modern myth. Here is the pitch, as it appears on [his Kickstarter page](#):

The myth is that located in Rochester, NY, is the Escherian Stairwell, an architectural marvel that seems to violate the laws of physics and basic logic by looping back into itself. In order to lend credence to this myth, we're creating an episode for a family-friendly science show that demonstrates the staircase in action, various clips from a 1997 documentary with prominent thinkers grappling with the existence of this apparent contradiction and pontificating on its implications, and a whole slew of supplemental online materials for today's internet savvy audience to stumble across while trying to see if this thing is real (websites, scholarly articles, fan-pages, blogs, etc.). Help us build the myth!

It is at once rare and strange when the perpetrator of a hoax so brazenly communicates the full import of his ruse, especially when he does so *before* the hoax is set in motion. The project was meant to come to fruition prior to RIT's annual Innovation & Creativity Festival and the accompanying materials (sketches, clips, the 1997 documentary) were to be presented as a means of propelling this newly created myth. To his credit, Lacanilao demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of contemporary web culture, particularly with respect to how one might go about generating hype, speculation, and Internet chatter, in the interests of creating a viral media campaign. The staircase is in and of itself an excellent hook; the addition of websites, scholarly articles, fan-pages, blog entries, and other web tie-ins bolsters the speculative dimensions of this already peculiar case study; and finally, the creation of a fake 1997 documentary, as well as the cleverly orchestrated "Can You Imagine?" segment, help round out the story's fascinating arc.

When I began this discussion by alluding to the power of hoaxes and myths, I didn't set out to conflate the terms, but rather to suggest some of the interesting intersections between these two concepts. With the Escherian Stairwell, we see a clever and earnest grad student attempting to harness the power of hoaxing to create a full-blown myth. Here we see that hoaxing functions as *the* foundational mechanism needed to ensure the viral success of the story and to secure the future longevity of the larger narrative (i.e., myth). Calling out a crowdfunding community to build a modern myth is a novel idea, especially when the project calls for an elaborate deception. Interestingly, the deception is made transparent by its chief architect via the Kickstarter campaign, a project that fell well short of its \$12,000 funding goal. Despite only attracting 30 backers and a pledge of \$940 to finish the work, the project has since been liked by over 10,000 Facebook users and the video has garnered over 600,000 views. As one [YouTube user commented](#), "Looks like a harmless but fun prank. " It is a delicious irony that, in setting out to create a myth, Lacanilao's clever prank will likely be relegated to the realm of hoaxing. Only time will tell.

Despite the seemingly benign nature of the prank, the hoax also raises questions regarding the ethics of such an act. As Lacanilao himself asks in [his final Kickstarter post](#), to what extent "is building a myth deceitful? Is what we're doing wrong? These are some issues I wrestled with before diving fully into this.

And I'm always happy to discuss these things with others who might have similar concerns." It is fair to ask who the winners and losers are in exchanges that involve the deception of a broader public; it is also crucial to consider what exactly constitutes harm in these instances and to consider who benefits and profits most from these pranks. As far as the Escherian Stairwell is concerned, the hoax can be thought of as experiment in form (how does one orchestrate a hoax?) and as a call for greater media literacy (be suspicious, skeptical, and discerning in your consumption of everyday media). But the stairwell also serves as both a warning and a metaphor of sorts: if we do not participate critically in the circulation and proliferation of forms, ideas, and ideologies, we may very well enter into a world that spins deceptive stories along a never-ending conveyor belt that loops onto itself.

And herein lies the paradoxical nature of the contemporary hoax: on the one hand, the hoax functions as a politically motivated form of communication guided predominantly by self-interest that can forcefully distort or manipulate information in the interests of misleading and misinforming various publics; on the other hand, the hoax operates as a tool of enlightened communication that seeks to purposefully re-imagine the status quo in the interests of presenting a more just and egalitarian vision of society. While hoaxes are only as generative or progressive as the figures that create them, it is the latter function of enlightened communication that informs much of this book's key arguments. To bring these ideas to light, there is no better place to start than with the central figures of this book--the Yes Men.

When new figures enter popular consciousness, it's always interesting to consider how precisely they came to reach that point. A typical question you might encounter is "What's all the fuss?" In posing this question in relation to the Yes Men, it's crucial to first describe the factors and conditions that have made their work (and success) possible. I'll briefly outline the political, economic, cultural, and technological aspects.

Consider the following list of hypothetical scenarios that, if fulfilled, would leave very little incentive for the Yes Men to carry out any of their hoaxes:

- If there were no political corruption and elected politicians actually served the public interest, the Yes Men wouldn't need to hold them accountable
- If "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR), that is, "the voluntary activities undertaken by a company to operate in an economic, social and environmentally sustainable manner," amounted to more than greenwashing and multi-million dollar advertising campaigns to manipulate public opinion, there would be no need for the Yes Men to greenwash these corporations in reverse
- If journalists and news organizations were actively assuming their Fourth Estate duties as watchdogs serving as a critical check on power, and if news media were offering sustained investigative reports on broader civic issues not normally integrated in the routinized accounts of celebrity gossip and business-as-usual pronouncements from the power elite, the Yes Men would be less likely to antagonize their targets
- If multinational corporations were not actively exacerbating extreme social inequities, deepening the growing divides between rich and poor, and normalizing the exploitation of both natural

and human resources, it is unlikely that activist groups like the Yes Men would frame these corporations as the primary targets of their actions

- If contemporary media activists weren't introducing radically effective means of deploying new technology and new modes of organizing activist interventions, the Yes Men's larger project would have by now lost steam, thereby stamping out any desire to continue their attention-grabbing stunts
- If everyday citizens were adopting zany, unpredictable, and hilarious antics to convey dissenting perspectives and to communicate their larger disappointments with government, corporate stakeholders and news media, the Yes Men would have less impetus to continue their laborious (and often thankless) work because it would mean that a new generation of activists would have already continued their legacy.

General Structure of the Book | Chapter Breakdown

The book's opening chapter introduces the Yes Men under the assumption that the reader is encountering their work for the first time. For the uninitiated, those with little to no exposure to the Yes Men's work or for those largely unfamiliar with the realm of media hoaxing, I offer a concise overview of the terrain. To better situate the reader, I frame the Yes Men's larger story through the lens of three overlapping sites of inquiry: journalism, media activism, and popular culture. Given the group's dependence on mainstream media to disseminate their work by way of elaborate hoaxes, it is also crucial to shed light on the mechanisms that allow these activists to penetrate the gatekeeping establishment. If journalists and news organizations were fulfilling their roles as a critical check on power, there would be less impetus for the Yes Men to hijack their operations; if journalists and news organizations took greater care to vet their experts before a newscast, it would be inconceivable that the Yes Men would ever gain access to these channels of communication. To tell the story of media hoaxing requires explanation of the current systemic flaws and crises affecting mainstream news media. Thus, fake news figures prominently as an organizing theme precisely because it prepares the way for a better understanding of the hoaxer's relationship to contemporary journalism. Given the fact that the large bulk of their activist projects are both conceived of and executed via the Web, their story meshes quite nicely with recent developments in contemporary media activism. This third strand is meant to explain the rise of Internet activism in the 2000s, highlighting that the Yes Men's work runs parallel to a number of recent experiments in social media mobilization and protest—MoveOn, Avaaz, Wikileaks, and Anonymous. In wedding these three overlapping phenomena, I provide the reader with a brief overview of the book's larger terrain, before turning to a more focused discussion of what exactly the Yes Men do. I offer a concise overview of *what they do, how they do it, and why they do it*.

Chapter Two: On Hoaxing

Chapter Two explores the fascinating realm of media spectacle through the lens of hoaxing. I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of the broader terrain of hoaxing, informed by ideas surrounding truth,

lying, self-deception, and bullshit. This section grapples not only with the ubiquity of hoaxing, but also with human beings' susceptibility to fall for (or even relish) the hoax as an artful mode of communication. I then move on to a brief discussion of two notable hoaxes—the first, orchestrated by *The Onion*; the second, perpetrated by Jonathan Swift. While both examples are worlds apart in terms of the politics they enact (*The Onion* irreverently satirizing the entire Western philosophical tradition, Swift leveraging the hoax as a potent form of social protest), each respective hoax establishes the centrality of humour and satire to the hoaxer's larger goals (a crucial aspect of The Yes Men's work). But what exactly are the hoaxer's goals and why is the hoax the chosen means for carrying out a particular vision? To answer this question, I move to a larger discussion of the complex meanings behind contemporary hoaxing through an exploration of representative historical hoaxes. Given the broad range of materials—war propaganda, fake literary biographies, performance art, culture jamming experiments, art forgeries, magic tricks, fake newspapers, celebrity freak-outs, academic parodies, viral videos—ascribing positive or negative values to a given hoax is a difficult undertaking. That said, each set of hoaxes reveals the varied and complex motivations that underpin the act; some are rooted in anarchic aggression (challenging the illegality of pranking) while others are borne out of an ethical or moral desire to serve a greater good; yet another band of hoaxes is politically, socially, and ethically neutral. Together these tensions effectively give the hoaxes their magnetism, the charge that fuels the public's fascination with, and appetite for, even more kinds of hoaxing. Thus, this chapter's careful overview of various hoaxes (see TOC) suggests that there are gradations of both good and bad hoaxes and that no single hoax can be taken at face value. In concluding this chapter, I reinforce the strengths of hoaxing practices, particularly with respect to the ethical dimensions at work in these spectacles, as a bridge to discussing the Yes Men's media hoaxes—the subject of Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five

The following three chapters serve as the book's core case studies. In the interests of making their work as accessible as possible, I group their hoaxes into three categories: (1) conference hoaxes presented to an elite membership; (2) web-based hoaxes; and (3) news/journalism-related hoaxes. The through line for the book is that each chapter addresses the dynamic ways in which the Yes Men impersonate various corporate and/or institutional entities (e.g., World Trade Organization, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Dow Chemical, the Government of Canada, *NYT*), highlighting the core issues they seek to introduce to a larger public. In "Coming to a Conference Near You," I examine some of the Yes Men's earliest dalliances in the realm of media hoaxing via their outlandish impersonations of the World Trade Organization—from their championing of human slavery to their integration of a phallus-shaped management leisure suit.

Chapter Four delves into the Yes Men's sustained presence on the Web. While there is much overlap in the Yes Men's rich and varied arsenal of hoaxes, a large majority of their work materializes by way of their discrete (and not-so-discrete) operations on the web. This chapter seeks to contextualize the ways in which the Internet has helped facilitate and circulate a broad range of Yes Men hoaxes. In framing this chapter around the uses and gratifications of the Internet, the reader is afforded even greater insight into how the Yes Men function—and how precisely they are able to bypass journalistic and institutional gatekeepers in the creation of their media-savvy spectacles. For example, in their much-discussed impersonation of Environment Canada (EC) at the 2009 Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, the Yes Men deployed a number of elaborate tactics to convey their larger critique of the Harper Government's catastrophic record on climate change: fake EC websites, press/video releases, and press conference appearances, all circulated far and wide across the web. Within two days, the Yes Men had created a full-blown media spectacle, amplifying the government's poor environmental record to a global audience at a time when policymakers were actively trying to reach consensus on a global climate accord. This hoax represents but one of many examples of the Yes Men's sustained engagement with the web; each example provides a window not only into how the Yes Men make use of the Internet for political purposes, it also foregrounds a whole range of practices currently adopted by media activists around the globe.

Chapter Five shifts our gaze from the larger critique of the corporation and/or state to a critical reflection on the health, performance, and vitality of news media. In "The Yes Men in the News," I examine a third branch of the activist group's hoaxing practices—news parody. In the activist version of *fake news*, the Yes Men critique both the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* with the express goal of re-imagining contemporary journalism. What emerges in this work is the expression of a utopian sensibility, one largely missing from the thrust of everyday reportage. Rather than merely depicting the shortcomings of both newsmakers and news gatherers, these fake newspapers present a utopian vision of contemporary journalism and politics as practiced in the not-so-distant future. For example, the fake *NYT* is replete with stories about the end of the Iraq War, universal health care, economic reform, and other socially progressive causes. Together these fake editions deliver their critique through often hilarious (and sincere) dramatizations of a future in which citizens hold their elected officials and news organizations accountable for the work they do. Importantly, this chapter sheds light on the larger ethical dimensions at work in the Yes Men's media hoaxes; it is also meant to challenge and expand popular notions of the politics of *fake news*. Not content to merely satirize or parody the news of the day, I argue that the Yes Men hijack the genre to dramatize some of the most positive, progressive, and life-affirming headlines they hope to see in the world.

Of course, there is a great deal of overlap across these three core chapters, most notably in the sense that each chapter engages the question of (1) how the Yes Men's work is received in the court of public opinion, (2) how their work is covered by news media, and (3) whether their hoaxes achieve their desired/intended effect. Each set of examples prepares the way for the reader to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary media hoaxes. Central to my argument is the notion that the Yes Men's hoaxing serves a legitimate role in engaging timely discussions in the mediated public sphere. In highlighting these strengths across these chapters, I then segue into the most recent incarnation of the Yes Men story—the Yes Lab for Creative Activism.

Chapter Six

In “Expanding The Yes Men Brand,” I turn to some of the group's most recent activities; namely, their founding of the Yes Lab, a training ground of sorts for future Yes Men-style projects. The idea is simple: given the Yes Men's notoriety, (minor) celebrity, and visibility in the public sphere, they have shifted tactics yet again to introduce a model of activism that is easily reproducible. In training others to be Yes Men, the group is given even greater leverage to choose projects it cares about, and it frees them to open new pockets of activity for individuals, groups, and organizations that may already have a vision for social change, but that lack the means of executing that vision. This final case study, then, shows an activist group in transition trying to bring its vision of mass citizen engagement to fruition through a series of informal lectures, workshops, and meetings with community stakeholders (Occupy Wall Street, Greenpeace, Rainforest Action Network). Their presence in Canada has already produced a number of actions—from the C.R.I.M.E. hoaxes perpetrated by Montreal-based activists seeking Haiti reconstruction reparations from the French government to the youth vote mobs that shook university campuses during the 2011 Federal Election. Indeed the Yes Lab story serves as the perfect narrative arc for thinking about the deeper political motivations behind their hoaxing (and hoaxing in general). As the Yes Men make clear, they stage politically progressive hoaxes to demonstrate just how easy it can be to hijack a dominant media outlet and to bring important issues to a wider public. The goal, they argue, has always been to inspire citizens to expose wrongdoing and to stimulate broader public debate on matters of great importance to everyday people.

The concluding chapter makes a strong case for a deeper engagement with the wild and unpredictable culture of hoaxing. With the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, hoaxes will only continue to capture the popular imagination and will only further complicate our collective relationship to truth. While the Yes Men may provide a progressive template for media hoaxing, many media hoaxes embody destructive

properties that can be harmful to a broad range of actors. As such, I advocate for greater media literacy and critical thinking skills on the part of everyday citizens and media consumers. As the Yes Men's hoaxes make explicit, hoaxes can be unpredictable, unruly, hilarious, wildly imaginative—not to mention strange. This book will challenge readers to question existing structures of leadership and governance, but most importantly, this work will inspire readers to reflect more seriously on the shifting nature of twenty-first information dissemination and consumption.

CHAPTER ONE: FAKERY INCORPORATED

We have never laughed so hard as we did after impersonating WTO spokesmen to assemblies of highly qualified experts ... But there is a serious side to the story as well. These experts, after all, are the foot soldiers in the WTO's war on trade unions, environmental protections, and indigenous rights ... When they reshape the world economy in ways that much of the world's population opposes, their only claim to justification is that they know what's right for the world. But what if they don't? (9)

In *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization* (published in 2004), two anti-globalization pranksters retell their travels across the globe, in which they meet with lawyers, managers, engineers, corporate stakeholders, and policymakers. In these meetings they address issues such as global capitalism, corporate wealth, genetically-modified food, hunger and starvation, globalization, and workers' rights— from the perspective of their employer, the World Trade Organization (WTO). Of course, the Yes Men have never been formally employed by the WTO, but they did canvas the globe on their behalf, serving as plausible WTO spokesmen in a variety of contexts—mostly as presenters at international conferences. As they themselves confess, impersonating the WTO was undeniably hilarious: they wore futuristic golden-coloured suits that boasted equally golden phalluses; they presented outlandish CGI-themed Powerpoint presentations that were completely incompatible with audience expectations; they simulated partnerships with McDonald's that sought to repackage human waste as hamburgers to be sold to Third World countries; they proposed the selling of American democracy through a system that would pair American citizens with corporate stakeholders in an online auction ("The price of a vote in California seemed to hover around \$1—a bargain"); finally, they would even go so far as to dissolve the WTO, thus eliminating their own "jobs" within the organization!

As far as the Yes Men were concerned, they were merely pushing the corporate logic of global markets to illogical extremes, highlighting the dangers of living in what they ironically describe as an "era of enlightened profit-seeking" (141). The fact that these (then) unknown activists would incur such great

risks to make a larger point about the deep systemic failures of a powerful entity like the WTO makes explicit the strength of their convictions and the resolve with which they carry out their work. On the face of it, it is patently ridiculous that they have been able to pull off so many high profile hoaxes. For over fifteen years, they have made outrageous statements, told extravagant lies, and generated juicy front-page headlines. And they continue to do so, all the while training and supporting the actions of groups wishing to reproduce the style, substance, and impact of their special brand of hoaxing. Their actions have become so ingrained in discussions of hoaxing that when media hoaxes now circulate, the Yes Men often serve as the first point of reference; their work has become an anchor point for commentators looking to describe the style, politik, or tactic of various hoaxing phenomena. They have become, in other words, cornerstones of any discussion pertaining to media hoaxing today.

What is immediately apparent to first-time audiences of the Yes Men is that fun, humour, and absurdity serve an essential role in virtually all of their actions. Strip the Yes Men of these three core elements and you might very well feel like you're on the receiving end of a preachy, moralizing, intellectual, left-of-centre, Marxist critique of global capitalism run amok! These branches of critique are well-known and warrant the kind of engaged discussion and debate that Marx initiated in 19th century Europe, but the larger critique of capitalism is all-too-often conveyed in sober and sombre tones, making it both less appealing and more challenging to engage in everyday life. When we introduce irony, parody, satire--not to mention quirky, oddball, and absurdist elements--into the mix, our willingness to listen to and engage with these critiques is heightened. When, for example, the likes of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert tackle decidedly unsexy policy issues such as the regulation of financial institutions or the oversight of the Internet economy, they do so with all the flair, panache, and gusto one might expect from stand-up comedians. What makes their work so relatable is how seamlessly they are each able to move from political matters to popular culture, piercing the veil of seriousness so often attributed to current affairs with the keen eye of the comedic and satirical observer.

These instances of popular media and entertainment have now become the standard, bringing geopolitics and global affairs into the warm embrace of satirists and comedians looking to mine the boundless fits of human and institutional folly that characterize our era. The relay between sharp satirical commentary and deft critical analysis of cultural, political, and economic spheres of culture has proven an important hallmark of popular culture since the turn of the new century. Making humour central to the ways in which audiences encounter and (endeavour to) understand current events and contemporary phenomena is at the very heart of how interested parties wish to explain their stake in the world today. For the Yes Men, humour is *the* primary vehicle for "making it into the news" and of "collaborating with journalists." Humour is also the necessary ingredient to bring disaffected, apathetic, or ignorant groups and individuals into the fold; it is the proverbial dangling carrot, the sugar-coated pill needed to get people to care about issues they may not otherwise have the time, interest, or attention needed to get on side. As their documentaries make clear from the outset, their wicked humour, biting satire, and the eruptions of laughter that ensue all serve as a powerful hook or incentive to keep people tuned in and turned on to some of their more pointed critiques of the misdeeds and misbehaviours of the targets they ridicule.

With laughter and humour foregrounding many of the pranks and hoaxes they create, the Yes Men prepare the way for a different kind of political engagement on the part of audiences--one that neither (de)limits politics to the realm of serious discourse nor uses conventional rhetorical modes of

communication to make its point. By using laughter and humour as a weapon, those sympathetic to the more serious-minded Marxist and political-economic critiques of capitalism are better able to illustrate the shortcomings and maniacal underpinnings of globalization as it currently stands. And figures like Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and the Yes Men (to name but a few) excel in this regard.

The Yes Men's work enjoys a broad, elusive, and enigmatic quality. While their special brand of media activism is difficult to pin down, one might first begin to describe their efforts through some of the ways audiences have come to view, understand, and appreciate their work. We do this sort of exercise all of the time. For example, upon encountering a new genre of music, one might first look to the instruments involved; standard vocals, guitar, bass, and drums paint a pretty broad canvas, but once some defining elements are sufficiently narrowed--*reverb-heavy, melodic, quiet, lofi*--one can begin to make better assessments (or informed guesses) of the genre in question. Based on the limited information available, you might wager that we're listening to (indie) rock, but even these categories are insufficient to describe the layered complexity of certain kinds of music. This principle comes into play whenever new bands are unapologetically lumped in with other bands and genres.

The same logic applies to the Yes Men. To first-time audiences or onlookers, their performances might be labelled little more than juvenile pranks perpetrated by grown men with nothing better to do than to openly challenge and mock authority. Admittedly, you wouldn't be alone in that mainstream media accounts of their pranks have sided with this position. If you find yourself siding with the latter camp, you will have already noted the childishness of the pranks, the amateurish tone of the performances, and the (seeming) pointlessness of their endeavours. Perhaps, however, you find yourself appreciating the playful seriousness and sheer absurdity of the work. If this is the case, you've quite likely fallen prey to the group's comedic dynamism, not to mention its love of theatre, spectacle, and good old fashioned guttural laughter. If you find yourself siding with this camp, you may have at some point revered the writings of Jonathan Swift or Kurt Vonnegut, the films of the Marx Brothers or (early) Woody Allen, and the agit prop stylings of Michael Moore or Sasha Baron Cohen. Finally, if you are a keen observer of contemporary culture--particularly with respect to global affairs--you may have also noted the group's penchant for dramatizing social justice issues; namely, the broader impacts of globalization on individuals, communities, and the environment. An initial draw may have been the group's sincere attempts to present a corrective to numerous breaches in governmental, institutional, and corporate abuses of power. This third category may prove the most satisfying, in that there is no doubt an underlying universal appeal in seeing powerful figures and institutions parodied, satirized, mocked and ridiculed, especially when they are embodiments of arrogance, greed, folly, and foolishness.

It goes without saying that I've painted a broad canvas, if only to anticipate some of the responses the Yes Men have elicited over the years. These latter descriptions are meant to add some shape (or weight) to how we might first begin to appreciate the insanity, absurdity, and (to steal a term from another recent book) the "[beautiful trouble](#)" of Yes Men-style activism. Bereft of this kind of foregrounding, we're essentially left to make more or less educated guesses as to the import of the aforementioned vocals, guitar, bass, and drums analogy operating amidst the backdrop of a rich and complex musical genre landscape.

Straddling Three Realms: Journalism, Media Activism, and Popular Culture

If the Yes Men's work could be neatly distilled into discrete categories, the overlapping realms of journalism, media activism, and popular culture present the three most interesting points of discussion. Following these lines of inquiry, the Yes Men are perhaps best understood as (a) media activists that cleverly make use of the web to (b) influence the ways in which journalists tell stories about current events that (c) enable them to hijack mainstream media outlets in the interests of (d) shifting public opinion on important issues through spectacular, funny, and compelling stories. Put another way, media activism is what they do; the web is the central organizing platform they use; journalists are the vessels through which they tell their stories; and news organizations provide the platforms through which those stories are broadcast and re-transmitted across popular culture.

At a moment when contemporary journalism is experiencing a period of seismic changes, the Yes Men have repeatedly affirmed that just as mainstream media are all too prone to shine a spotlight on issues that have little bearing on the health and vitality of democratic societies (Honey Boo Boo, anyone?), so too are they vulnerable to pranks, hoaxes, and misinformation. Of course, the Yes Men are actively participating in these deceptions, but their goal isn't to maliciously undercut the integrity of mainstream journalists or news organizations; rather, they merely exploit flaws in mainstream news reportage—namely, the ways in which editors, journalists, and interns gather and vet news and information—to disseminate their own stories. If a group of media activists can hijack a trusted news program that broadcasts to over 300 million viewers (as the Yes Men did on *BBC World* in 2004), there is a real sense that the gatekeeping establishment doesn't always get it right. To discuss the Yes Men's work is to openly address systemic failures and blind spots that underpin the ways news organizations go about *making* or *constructing* the news. In this respect, it seems significant to note from the outset that the Yes Men don't describe themselves as anarchists looking to destroy the fabric of our news and information culture; instead, they liken themselves to co-conspirators that work with journalists to tell stories that wouldn't normally make the rounds of mainstream media coverage.

And yet the Yes Men are most commonly described as media activists. Since the appearance of their first documentary in 2003, the group has taken media activism to new heights, presenting compelling issues in a format that encourages engagement on the part of onlookers and audiences. Whereas media activism is traditionally linked to broader practices of challenging top-down hegemonic forces—electronic civil disobedience, culture jamming, hacktivism, and tactical media—it also shares a history with notable DIY (do-it-yourself) culture: marches, demonstrations, rallies, protests, sit-ins, zine and pamphlet production/circulation, and so on. The tools and tactics deployed by these and other activists are leveraged by groups that have historically occupied marginalized positions across the culture, thereby wielding very little power in the decision-making process. As the examples in this book make explicit, the Yes Men's media activism hinges almost exclusively on their ability to access, leverage, and manipulate various aspects of the web. They create fake websites, build and harness the power of servers, upload and distribute their own content, and rally their larger networked community through simple yet effective grassroots mobilization. It is near impossible to imagine the Yes Men's body of work ever materializing without the Internet as an organizing force.

Through their clever leveraging of the web they have re-imagined how individuals, social groups, and communities might make use of web-related tools and technologies to present arguments for a better world. Globalization not functioning in the interests of the people? Use the web. Thoughts of economic collapse keeping you up at night? Use the web. Environmental degradation becoming a source of growing anxiety? You get the idea. While there is good reason to keep pronouncements of the web's emancipatory (and utopian) potential at bay, there is a great deal of Internet activity that warrants further encouragement. The argument that follows in this book is that the Yes Men have begun to model a powerful mode of online activism that translates into offline, real-world activity.

The final category that helps explain the Yes Men's significance and relevance is popular culture. At the risk of expressing a platitude, without an audience to wow or a public to titillate, the Yes Men's sophisticated work might more readily be relegated to the dustbin of history. In an era marked by unprecedented changes in our tools, technologies, and media, many profound statements go unnoticed, due in part to the all-too rapid pace of modern communication systems, our shrinking collective capacities to absorb and make sense of information, and our passionate championing of entertainment media over the (seemingly) depressing current state of affairs. If the twenty-first century is increasingly marked by what *The Onion* playfully refers to as the 24-second news cycle, the so-called "partial continuous attention" of media consumers, and culture's ever-growing enchantment with entertainment-driven technologies and content, it remains to be seen what (if any) progress may materialize in the realm of human rights and civil liberties. To ensure that their work achieves maximum visibility across mainstream media—and by extension, across various facets of social media and popular culture—the group carefully engineers what they call "mediagenic" events. Such an event should feature a spectacular arc in the story that defies easy explanation or categorization. Ideally, the story should be uncommon, unbelievable, too-good-to-be-true, entertaining, and preferably, hilariously funny. Together, these elements will decide how much attention a given issue will generate, influencing the degree to which the issue will be shared, discussed, debated, and repurposed. It is fair to say that media activists are now presenting their work in the interests of galvanizing public support in favour of stimulating action, critique, and debate on broader (social justice) issues.

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No Media Hoaxing Without News

Mark Twain is famously credited with the following statement: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." Twain's insight is now the seat of a deliciously ironic debate because he is said to have never have coined the phrase. Indeed, C. H. Spurgeon had already penned similar pronouncements in 1820 and again in 1859 ("A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on"). Not to be outdone, Jonathan Swift provided this kernel of insight in a story in the *Examiner*, dated November 9, 1710: "Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it." What makes this benign story of authorship and false attribution so appealing is how amenable it is to the statement itself. Just as lies move through time and space at breakneck speed, truth is seen to sluggishly lag behind. In each instance, the author bemoans (and perhaps marvels at) the speed, frequency, and ease with which

lies travel across the culture. In Swift's time as in our own, the process of separating fact from fiction may at times prove a crucial undertaking; in others, relishing the sheer delight of an outlandish story may prove a more desirable response. Through and through, however, the Western world has come to rely almost exclusively on news media to parse out and disentangle truth from falsehood. It is for this reason alone that news media--the journalists, editors, organizations, owners, platforms, and technologies that shape them--occupy such an important place in the larger story of media hoaxing today. Because hoaxes are propelled through lies, deceptions, and misdirections, news media constitute the single most important outposts (or gatekeepers) for separating truth from falsity, especially when the deceptions are harmful to unsuspecting publics. To understand hoaxing in a contemporary light, some discussion of the performance and standing of news media is essential.

Unprecedented Crises In/Across Mainstream Media

Over the past decade, longform journalism has decreased dramatically. For example, *The Los Angeles Times* recorded an 86 percent drop in longform entries in 2012, publishing a mere 256 stories longer than 2,000 words (compared to 1,776 in 2003). *The Washington Post* published half as many, shifting from 2,755 stories to 1,378 in 2012. As the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) notes, the numbers are even starker for stories 3,000 words or more; *The Wall Street Journal*, the publication largely credited with pioneering longform, published a mere 25 such stories. While it would be a mistake to suggest that longer, more in-depth stories represent better quality journalism, the pattern has precipitated a much broader cultural shift to privileging stories of shorter and shorter length. The impact can be apprehended in a number of ways: the average local television news story is [41 seconds](#); news digests (or brief compendiums of the day's top news stories) can run under a minute; the Twitterization of journalism has encouraged the proliferation of 140-word character news items. Again, this has not necessarily contributed to a sharp decline in the quality of journalism, but it has certainly changed the nature and character of information. Media scholar Neil Postman would argue that these changes to the character of our information have the power to radically shift the epistemological foundations of a culture. If 41-second news stories or 140-word news items come to dominate how we understand the world around us, in what capacity will we ever truly apprehend our surroundings and our environments? What kinds of cultural and journalistic practices will emerge as a result?

With the constant push to produce Internet-based journalism, online news media have engaged in suspect activities to lure readers to their websites and platforms, publishing in the process stories of questionable accuracy and integrity. Bait and switch headlines have long figured as key editorial strategies for inciting readers to procure newspapers and to click-through to news content. Indeed, the notion of producing a misleading headline and revealing the switch in the body of the news story isn't the most problematic feature of contemporary journalism, but it does offer another window onto more problematic manifestations of newsroom practices. In the rush to secure readerships and advertising revenues in a deeply competitive 24-hour information environment, establishment journalists are increasingly having to produce work under tighter and tighter deadlines, often publishing several articles daily. Journalists confined to the web have witnessed even greater spikes in their daily news posts, placing rigorous and stressful demands on writers to produce stories (irrespective of the speed or slowness of a given news day). *Gawker* editor, John Cook, has readily admitted that it would be impossible to vet all of the stories

published in his online publication that caters to upwards of [25 million unique visitors](#) per month. As Cook reveals, “We are dealing with a volume of information that it is impossible to have the strict standards of accuracy that other institutions have.” To read *Gawker* is to approach news with a greater degree of skepticism and a higher level of sophistication in order to separate truth from falsity, fiction from fantasy. Fact-checking has also been regarded as a disadvantage because it necessarily slows down the move toward publishing a lead story. As one bureau chief at *The Huffington Post* admits, “If you throw something up without fact-checking it, and you’re the first one to put it up, and you get millions and millions of views, and later it’s proved false, you still got those views. That’s a problem. The incentives are all wrong.” Truth and veracity become liabilities in the march toward securing greater and greater page views. Perhaps the most fitting motto for accuracy in reporting seems to be [“publish first, correct if necessary”](#) (an interesting deviation from the Apollonian precept, “Shoot first, ask questions later”).

The only immediate respite we might find in this volatile world of online news is in seeing this issue through a comedic frame. Under the banner of comedy/satire, the scenario is altogether amusing. In *The Onion*’s devilishly clever, “Media Landscape Redefined By 24-Second News Cycle,” news journalists who were formerly given a mere “45 minutes to really dig into a story and check facts” are now faced with the prospect of posting new headlines more than 70 times per minute. Here *The Onion* harnesses hyperbole and overstatement to communicate the dangers of accelerated news production and dissemination. For example, the image of a *CNN:24* female anchor depicts the future state of this bastardized news model, one in which lead stories are captured in two-word summaries of the day’s events: *Fire burn, Iran bad, Game big, Coup on, Movie hot*. Not to be outdone, the news ticker at the bottom of the screen also provides an endless stream of two-word news bits: *food kills, Iraq boom, bank robbed, prez talk*, and so on. Under this schema, news and information retain a completely trivial standing.

Without this comedic veil, the situation is far more disturbing. Under even the best and most well intentioned scenarios, the acceleration of news media coverage and the growing pressures on journalists to produce timely, breaking news segments have all but weakened everyday citizens’ purchase on truthful, accurate, sensible reportage. If journalists have less time to vet sources, double-check information, and triangulate data, the credibility of their work is potentially undermined and news consumers are left with stories of dubious or questionable value. [As two NYT journalists convincingly argue](#), the implications are quite clear: “if a story is viral, truth may be taking a beating.” Such viral stories are on the rise, attracting millions of page views and encouraging the news establishment to produce news items of this ilk. Somaiya and Kaufman offer [these examples](#):

a Twitter tale of a Thanksgiving feud on a plane, later described by the writer as a short story; a child’s letter to Santa that detailed an Amazon.com link in crayon, but was actually written by a grown-up comedian in 2011; and an essay on poverty that prompted \$60,000 in donations until it was revealed by its author to be impressionistic rather than strictly factual.

On the face of it, these don't appear to be insidious stories capable of unraveling the fabric of democratic culture. In each instance, we are more in the province of performance and artifice than we are in the realm of deception and propaganda. [As Reuters journalist Felix Salmon writes](#), "There's now so much fake content out there, much of it expertly engineered to go viral, that the probability of any given piece of viral content being fake has now become pretty high." The constant proliferation of such stories, however, has created the conditions for information of all stripes and colours to travel with unprecedented freedom through both traditional and emerging gatekeeping establishments. [As Chris Hedges has argued](#), contemporary news media have "ushered in a culture in which facts, opinions, lies, and fantasy are interchangeable," a move that has signalled a pronounced shift away from fact-based journalism concerned with accuracy, integrity, and transparency. What's more, mainstream news media outlets have instituted a regular practice of publishing news items from taste-making sites that specialize in the peddling of viral stories (*Gawker*, *Buzzfeed*). Taste-making websites primarily broker in the proliferation of spreadable stories with popular appeal (truth and falsity are irrelevant); traditional news outlets are charged with making these distinctions concrete. In bridging the two worlds, making distinctions between trustworthy news and popular Internet fodder is becoming increasingly difficult, if irrelevant.

In the absence of such safeguards or distinctions, new models of information dissemination take hold. One disturbing outgrowth of news media's feverish quest to stay relevant is the widespread use of speculative reportage, now a hallmark of *CNN* coverage. In a moment of great insight, comedian Jon Stewart addresses the destructive nature of this practice by critiquing *CNN*'s daylong coverage of a mass shooting in Washington. The segment, aptly titled ["Wrognado"](#) (September 17, 2013), depicts and describes the numerous instances where journalists participate in widespread speculation regarding the shooting. As Stewart puts it, "breaking news" developments consist of a journalist "standing in front of a camera, naming the shit you see." *CNN* commentators are repeatedly captured on-air stating that the information they are reporting may very well be inaccurate or prove to be false; at no time do they refrain from reporting highly speculative information. Of these exchanges, Wolf Blitzer provides the best encapsulation of this language and rhetoric: "I want to alert our viewers that sometimes these initial conclusions can obviously be very, very wrong." These brash on-air acknowledgements--that they should not be engaging in this kind of journalistic practice--are leveraged precisely because they serve as disclaimers for presenting unreliable information. Blitzer's "initial conclusions" represent, for Stewart, "a semantic workaround for making shit up." As Stewart argues, this amounts to a "sheer accumulation of reckless wrongness," in that news organizations are irresponsibly creating deliberate chaos through a concerted effort to generate speculation on key issues. Coverage of this scope and magnitude surfaced five months prior during the Boston Marathon bombing coverage where *CNN* announced on-air an arrest that had not happened; similar strategies are presently at work in the daily coverage following the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370. In a culture where truth is mistaken for opinion--whereby accuracy surfaces only well after a story's falsehoods have been systematically debunked--it is no wonder that news organizations such as *CNN* have made the comfortable turn to unproblematically embracing partial, incomplete, and unverified forms of information gathering in their coverage.

Fake News Stories Saturate the News Media Landscape

Such changes in the character, style, and tone of news media reportage must also be contextualized in relation to other existing journalistic practices. Fake news has become so ubiquitous a term (and a

practice) that questions of what constitutes “real news” have assumed added significance. Indeed, the act of distinguishing between real and fake news has become increasingly difficult in the 2000s. With fabricated news stories from the *New York Times* (“*N.Y. Times Uncovers*”) and *The New Republic* (“Hacker Heaven”) to fake news journalists infiltrating the White House (“Gannongate”) – not to mention news media’s questionable coverage of Iraqi *weapons of mass destruction* (Stauber and Rampton 2003; Chitty 2004; Lapham 2004)--questions about the trustworthiness of news and contemporary journalism have loomed in the foreground. Add to this the alarming broadcast of deceptive video news releases (VNRs) engineered by PR firms, lobbyists, special interests, and government that have aired across North America’s local and national television stations and fakery seems to be the order of the day (Farsetta and Price 2006).

In April 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy (an independent, non-partisan, public interest organization) published a groundbreaking report that revealed the widespread use of “video news releases” (VNRs) by television news stations across North America. For the CMD, VNRs constitute highly problematic forms of fake news that seamlessly integrate corporately-funded and government-sponsored information into various arms of the news media. This brand of fake news--embedded in television news reports, government press releases, online news, print news releases, documentary films, and some of the world’s most respected print journalism--is disseminated to audiences and readerships unknowingly on the receiving end of false information. The full weight of these transgressions can only truly register when one appreciates that these propaganda pieces are incorporated wholesale--unedited, uncut, and untouched--into print/online publications and television newscasts. Call this disinformation or the drumming of a finely tuned propaganda machine.

That these pieces go largely undetected as agents of disinformation is largely a result of the legitimacy these spots enjoy as “news stories” appearing in some of the most respected news media. Several related factors all contribute to the successful manipulation of unsuspecting audiences: the authority of the news anchor, the field reporter, the experts, and the network logo, all work towards creating the guise of legitimacy, at once securing and authenticating the story’s veracity. In *Trust Us, We’re Experts!* (2001), Stauber and Rampton explain that the most disquieting aspect of the proliferation of VNRs is the lack of disclosure on the part of the PR machinery and the press who are willfully deceiving the public: “That these scripted stories are actually cleverly disguised advertisements is well understood by the people who work at TV stations and networks, but is rarely mentioned within earshot or eyeshot of the news-watching public” (23). “There is nothing inherently deceptive about issuing a news release,” Stauber and Rampton remind us, but the failure to disclose the news release’s funding source is a flagrant breach of the implicit contract between the journalistic establishment and consumers of news (22). Given the current state of our less-than-dependable news and information climate, examining the above shifts in news dissemination offer much needed frames for exploring the subject of this book--hoaxing as a contemporary practice that is now inextricably tied to everyday news media practices.

Thus far, I’ve chosen to highlight the changing dynamics of news dissemination, with an eye toward introducing how precisely media hoaxing fits within this complex environment. The hollowing out of content, the quest to make everyday stories go viral, the softening of stringent vetting and editorial oversight, the concerted efforts to circulate dubious information--all of these practices shed light on why hoaxing has assumed such a significant place in contemporary culture. Hoaxes can appear under

several guises--some benign, some malicious, others occupying a more nebulous position. Of late, hoaxes have emerged in the form of false death reports, Nigerian princes promising vast wealth, staged twerking performances, digitally-enhanced golden eagle abductions of children, spam emails suggesting the recipient has cancer, news reports identifying the detection of flesh-eating diseases. In several instances, the stories appear in traditional print and televisual media, as well as social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook; the stories gather traction as they are reported in the former and subsequently shared across the latter. In most cases, a story's sensational arc, emotional appeal, and spreadable quality will propel the story into a larger public sphere. In the initial stages of a hoax, the accuracy and verifiability of the story are less important to audiences than are the more visceral and affective dimensions therein. This in part accounts for how far and wide hoaxes can travel before they are discovered to be false. It would seem that the truthfulness of a given story is something to be pursued both by those directly affected by the story (the targets or victims of the hoax), and by a host of impassioned commenters, bloggers, journalists, and truth-seekers.

In combing through the variety of responses elicited by a hoax, we are afforded not only a better vantage point from which to parse out the various meanings attached to contemporary hoaxing, but also an opportunity to apprehend the chief motivations for hoaxers to carry out their work. What is the point of falsely announcing the death of a former NSA Director (Michael Hayden), a former NBA basketball player (Quinton Ross), or of a formerly popular television sitcom actor (Wayne Knight/Newman on *Seinfeld*)? On the face of it, to spread a death hoax constitutes a wilful attempt to cause distress and anxiety on the part of the target's family; the hoaxer may also paradoxically wish to rejuvenate interest in a figure long forgotten by reanimating discussion regarding the figure's legacy. What motives might one have for creating a false quote of a recently deceased musical composer? Upon Maurice Jarre's death in May 2009, a university student in Ireland posted the following quote to the Oscar-winning composer's Wikipedia entry: "One could say my life itself has been one long soundtrack. Music was my life, music brought me to life, and music is how I will be remembered long after I leave this life. When I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head, that only I can hear." In posting to Wikipedia, a site Internet users regularly consult for baseline information, Shane Fitzgerald sought to test whether journalists would be seduced into integrating the quote in their news stories. Fitzgerald's time-sensitive and seemingly complementary quote appeared in obituaries across the globe, and was featured in major British, Indian, and Australian news publications. Although Fitzgerald admits to the ethically suspect motivations for carrying out the hoax, he didn't expect the quote to travel very far. Much to his own surprise and dismay, the invented quote still figures prominently in a number of news stories, despite the revelation of the hoax. Such self-fashioned sociological experiments continue unabated.

One of the most interesting facets of the modern day hoax is the sheer breadth of its influence: given its positioning as a highly adaptive and adaptable form of deception, the hoax can figure in news, scientific literature, state propaganda, art forgery, literary fraud, academic scholarship, biblical narrative, Greek mythology, children's play, political discourse, popular entertainment, business and commercial trade, among other seas of human activity. Borrowing from art historian Jon Huer's insights, hoaxes are much easier to perpetuate in open, democratic societies than would be possible in closed, totalitarian ones ([74](#)). Because hoaxes enjoy such a ubiquitous place in contemporary life and culture, it is crucial to study their import, particularly in the interlocking realms of online spaces and mainstream media. Hoaxes prove fascinating sites from which to examine public discourse on issues as broad as homophobia,

political etiquette, technological innovation, scientific discovery, climate change, and health care reform. When, for example, a former Marine and struggling restaurant server posted that she'd been refused a tip from customers on account of her being a lesbian, the incident generated a tidal wave of emotional and financial support for the young woman. That it was later revealed to have been a hoax on the part the waitress proved a site of heated discussion and angry resentment on the part of those that fell for the deception (the restaurant patrons as well as those that followed the story on Facebook and other social networks). What began as a story centering on bigotry soon morphed into a tale of shameful opportunism and shallowness.

When footage of a child-snatching eagle garnered over five million views in one day, much Internet discussion focused on the quality and integrity of the video (Was it real? Did this really happen?), as well as general anxieties and fears associated with the potential harm to infants and toddlers. At the peak of the video's viral success, Montreal students at Centre NAD came forward to claim responsibility for creating the video using computer generated images (CGI). The video was created as part of an assignment meant to generate content that would earn the most amount of online views. In the wake of the hoax's discovery, discussion simultaneously turned to revelry over and dismissal of the clever prank. Once the hoax had been revealed, the video was then framed as a cautionary tale ("Leave your baby unattended in the park and an eagle will swoop in to take her away") and as a glowing example of how far and wide Internet hoaxes can travel (the original video has been viewed over 43 million times). It's important to consider these hoaxes not only as stories that manage to briefly capture the popular imagination, but also as barometers for evaluating trends or shifts in public perception regarding personal and political issues. Unsurprisingly, 2013 was widely regarded as [the year of the \(Internet\) hoax](#).

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Broader Currents of Media Activism

Activists today have turned to hoaxing as a means of intervening in the battles over public perception and public discourse. Indeed, for activist groups operating outside the structures of media corporations and news organizations, access to dominant media outlets must be won, if not stolen. Because mainstream news media do not "easily represent demands, movements, and frames which are inchoate, subtle, and most deeply subversive of [their] core principles" ([Gitlin 271](#)), these groups must resort to constructing spectacles that enable them to bypass an otherwise impenetrable gatekeeping establishment. Without these spectacular interventions, their participation in public life would be more or less muted because they would not be able to reach larger audiences.

It is surprising to me that the most poignant images I have of social and political struggle are not those of my parents' generation. There is no immediate flicker of imagery that summons the civil rights movement and the anti-war protests of the 1960s, in what are quite possibly the most powerful images of the period. When I was younger, these may very well have been immediate reference points for establishing my sense of the visual representation of how young people came together to draw attention to the plight of others and to protest the calamities of the day. Today, however, these images have lost their immediate

currency in my imagination, thanks in large part to the rich tapestry that is being created by contemporary activists the world over. The most notable images that most readily come to mind: the WTO protests in Seattle (1999), the global anti-war protests of 2001, the G-8 and G-20 protests in Toronto (2011), Occupy Wall Street (2011), the Quebec student protests for universal education (2012); the ongoing protest movements across the Middle East (Egypt, Syria, Libya), among many others. You may accuse me of either having a selective memory or of having a poor sense of what counts as revolutionary action, social movements, and political struggle (this is a less-than-exhaustive list), but I would argue that the visual culture surrounding these events has in many ways trumped the dominance/primacy of the now-iconic images of the 1960s. Perhaps due to the largely image-centered streams of content we now so heavily consume, the images we see circulate across broad networks that maximize the likelihood that these images will be repeatedly seen and thereby discussed, dissected, and absorbed. Just as the images of 1960s social movements have assumed their iconic place across the culture through repeated cycles of dissemination and display, so too have images of twenty-first century revolt. The only real significant shift to emerge is that there are greater opportunities for the visual culture of the current moment to assume a larger global significance with even greater leverage to travel across networks.

Struggles and movements to end injustices and inequities are as old as the human civilizations we've built and fostered. So long as the oppressors of this world continue to rule with impunity, there is legitimate room for subordinate and subjugated groups to revolt against the tyranny of their actions. In the twenty-first century, there is no shortage of oppressed individuals, communities, and nation-states. Add to this the notion that everyday citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the ways in which governments and bureaucracies have catered to corporate interests over the public interest, and one witnesses some of the larger imperatives guiding these groups to advocate for change. Leading the way are a loosely-defined group of activists, organizers, techies, hackers, and Internet users that are seeking to bridge the divide between apathy and concerted political action. Given the lackluster voting records of citizens in both Canada and the United States, the question of apathy amongst citizens has never been more crucial. If as American sociologist Robert Putnam argues we are truly "bowling alone"-- that is, if the rise of electronic media (television and Internet) has incited a drastic decline in civic participation--interested parties might want to unearth (if uproot) the very systemic issues that have exacerbated this decline.

Over the past decade, many groups have worked tirelessly to reverse these patterns. In the interests of shoring up the focus of this book, I will narrow this facet of the discussion to address the work of creative media activists. The term *creative activism* warrants special attention. What exactly constitutes creative activism and how does it differ from traditional models of activism? Creative activism is often lumped in with other overlapping terms, such as protest art, activist art, artivism, artistic activism, resistance art, and culture jamming, among others. To help differentiate the term from these precursors, creative activism here denotes a model of action dedicated to three fundamental goals: (1) introducing fun into the sometimes deadly serious realm of activism; (2) making education and awareness a primary concern; and (3) working towards bringing positive social change into the world. On the face of it, there is little to distinguish so-called creative activism from traditional activism; fun, awareness, and social change--to say nothing of creativity--from the kernel of many activist projects and social movements (past and present). Indeed the counterculture of the 1960s seems as good a place as any to trace historical precursors, with the likes of Guy Debord and the Situationists in Europe and Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and the Yippies in North America providing shining examples. When Hoffman and the Yippies

infamously showered the New York Stock Exchange with handfuls of one-dollar bills, they were said to have laughed the entire time. Their intent was to create momentary chaos on the trading floor, to incite traders to throw themselves at the money, and to symbolically depict their work in the most accurate fashion possible (as a ruthless and self-interested systemic cash-grab). As one journalist noted, the prank cemented Hoffman's standing as one of America's "most outlandish and *creative* protesters."

The relay between older protest forms and tactics with more recent variations is readily apparent in these newly configured creative casts. Creative activism builds on its predecessors in innovative ways, adapting and transposing earlier models to playful, digital, or virtual contexts. Consider the following examples: artistic vigils, virtual sit-ins, advanced leaf-lettering, viral campaigns, media pranks. Creative activism also expresses the desire to bring media creators, artists, and changemakers together to dramatize issues and problems in a compelling fashion in the interests of presenting solutions and alternatives. It adopts the strengths of traditional models in its explicit engagement with Internet culture. With the flourishing of Internet platforms and many-to-many communication technologies, activists are now enhancing their repertoires by "building rhizomatic movements marked by creativity, humor, networked intelligence, technological sophistication, [and] a profoundly participatory ethic" ([Boyd and Mitchell 3](#)). For example, distributed actions refer to a broad activist intervention that simultaneously spans diverse locations, connecting disparate groups of activists to a single cause. Traditional incarnations of this tactic have historically taken wing as sister rallies organized across different cities (viz. peace protests), but a distributed action projects and amplifies the power of a given movement on a size and scale rarely achieved (*BT* 37). For example, 350.org (a global environmental activist movement) was able to mobilize 5200 actions in 181 countries in a single day, in what is widely cited as the "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history." Herein lies the power of distributed actions. To collaboratively protest in this way and on this scale would have been unfeasible (if unthinkable) before the rise of the Internet and a mass user base. Returning to 350.org, the social dynamics at work are instantly tangible: disparate groups operating in local, national, and international contexts enjoy opportunities to organize actions on an expansive global scale that invite people to share, distribute, and participate in actions that foster solidarity and a collective sense of belonging to a larger environmental movement.

These dynamics are also present within Avaaz, a 21-million member online campaigning community that brings people-powered politics to decision-making practices worldwide. Avaaz brings its community into direct contact with global issues that may not normally receive due media attention and/or appeal to constituents that are not directly implicated in the struggles described. For example, in January 2012 more than one million people signed an Avaaz petition regarding the proposed SOPA/PIPA Internet censorship bill in the US; in May of that year, over two million Avaaz members pressured Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff (and Brazilian Congress) to reject a bill that would have given logging companies free rein to destroy huge swathes of the Amazon. The ties that knit Internet censorship and environmental degradation together may be tenuous to some and oblivious to others, but to the Avaaz community these issues are of pressing concern. Increasingly what happens in Brazil, the US, and in other parts of the world has a direct impact on the health and vitality of global economies, environments, ecologies, systems of government, education, health, and so on. That citizens of the world can express their support and/or dissatisfaction with global policies through online participation speaks to the growing clusters of solidarity these modes of activism foster.

This is precisely what distinguishes creative activism from other more traditional models of activism--the unapologetic appeal to affect, emotion, and feeling. Put another way, creative activism refers to a model of action that relies heavily upon its "emotional resonance." a term I borrow freely from branding *Lovemarks* guru Kevin Roberts. For readers uncomfortable with the notion that I am cravenly describing an activist sensibility using the language of corporate branding, I would remind them that "politics are also branded" ([Duncombe 93](#)). As Stephen Duncombe writes, although the suggestion of branding a progressive cause may to some seem hollow, counterintuitive, even downright sacrilegious, "a progressive brand could honestly encapsulate and communicate what [progressives] stand for and how we want to change the world."

In a culture brimming with Big Data, statistics, spreadsheets, flow charts, and even data visualization software often fall short of communicating the full import of complex issues. The expression of hard data in the absence of creative storytelling devices--a common feature of the traditional activist's reasoned, logical appeals to do the right thing--fails to stir the popular imagination or to trigger the empathy of others. That is not to say that traditional activism never appeals to the affective selves of their constituents or that creative activists never have any purchase on reasoned, logical arguments; that would be to miss my point entirely. To enact any meaningful social change, activists must "start from where the world is, as it is, not as [they] would like it to be...it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be" ([Alinsky xix](#)). What creative activism does best, perhaps, is to bring activist tools and tactics into the twenty-first century, that is, to bring them in line with the dominant features of contemporary social and political life. If branding is a given, progressives and activists must first ask who is participating in the practice and to what effect. As Duncombe laments: "Perhaps one of the reasons progressive are not winning much these days is that lately our game isn't much fun to play" ([65](#)).

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To bring important issues to the forefront of popular consciousness requires a deep and sophisticated understanding of popular culture. The latter is by no means strictly synonymous with entertainment, leisure, or the lowest common denominator, but much of what is considered popular culture carries with it elements of what was formerly called mass culture. My goal here isn't to revisit ongoing debates surrounding the impacts or effects of mass cultural production on things like hierarchies of artistic value, the uniformity of aesthetic tastes, or the divisions of low, middlebrow, and high culture. These debates are as heated as ever--and because the Yes Men serve as an interesting case study for thinking about the shifting scales of what does and doesn't constitute art--it is worth exploring this terrain more deeply. Just as I preemptively described three possible responses the Yes Men might elicit, it becomes clear that an individual's broader interpretation of their pranks and hoaxes hinges on a number of factors; for example, one's values, ethics, morals, class, gender, age, socio-economic standing, geographic location, and so on. It's not unthinkable that the Yes Men might prove something of a hit amongst young, passionate intellectual types that enjoy surfing the web, watching funny videos, championing a cause, and wagging a finger at the bad guy. To do so would require, among other things, an Internet connection, a degree of cultural or social capital, a sense of humour, justice, and righteousness. And depending on what you make of the caricature I've just described, this person may be a likable, deplorable, or irrelevant figure.

My point, however, is that the activities, penchants, behaviours, and attitudes I'm describing are significant markers of contemporary online culture. More than this, it is precisely this constellation of factors that brings popular culture into focus as significant seat of discussion. For every tweet, Tumblr blog post, Facebook update, Instagram image, YouTube video, listserv message, blog comment (the list could go on indefinitely), popular culture solidifies its footing as *the* terrain upon which ideologies, values, and cultural attitudes are shaped and organized. While this is far from new information, what has changed is the sheer number of Internet users currently navigating the web. At the end of the year 2000, there were roughly 360,000 online users; compare that number with current estimates citing the web's global Internet population nearing two and half billion, and suddenly discussions of popular culture--especially those facets catching the popular imagination--take on even greater meaning. That the Yes Men have devised critical strategies for hijacking media systems, creating media spectacles, and engaging popular culture makes their style of using the Internet an important subject of this book.

Media Spectacle

Spectacle provides yet another profitable theoretical frame from which to examine both the form (hoaxing) and its practitioners (Yes Men). Hoaxing expresses a fundamental debt to spectacle, in that hoaxes almost always simultaneously harness and challenge sensationalist stories. On the one hand, hoaxes are complicit with contemporary media spectacle, revealing if/when news media are distracting the public from substantive discussion and debate on matters of real civic importance; on the other hand, hoaxers also effectively engineer media spectacles in the interests of challenging the hollowness and artificiality of public discourse. To put it in semiotician Roland Barthes' terms, "spectacle is created to make the world more explicit" (28). Within the context of this book, spectacle is put forward as a process of constructing and deconstructing news media events and narratives, and as an act of disseminating dissenting perspectives in the public sphere. Spectacle, therefore, is a crucial vehicle in the hoaxer's response to the questionable logic and integrity of news media practices.

Pseudo-Events and Media Spectacle

In his groundbreaking study, *The Image* (1961), Daniel J. Boorstin argues that the interrelated realms of spectacle, propaganda, and disinformation have all contributed to a flourishing and self-perpetuating culture of "pseudo-events" and images. In a culture dominated by the "news leak" and the pre-packaged (non-)story, *newsgathering* has been systematically replaced by *newsmaking*. As a result, we have witnessed the rapid proliferation of other derivative forms of pseudo-events that have created an enormous gap between what citizens *need to know* and what they *can know* in the broader public sphere (17). Expanding Boorstin's position, Douglas Kellner's recent writings on "media spectacle" describe two overarching imperatives in corporate news media: first, media spectacles have come to dominate news coverage so commandingly that its journalistic endeavours do little more than distract the public from the substance of real public issues, and second, news media's deployment of spectacle works to construct a narrow frame through which to articulate issues and play out conflicts, creating in the process "a pseudo-participation, while decreasing involvement in actual sociopolitical struggles" (96). Media spectacles are often dramatized in the form of "megaspectacles"--sensational events emblemized by the O.J. Simpson trial, otherwise codified through celebrity and political sex scandals, terrorist bombings, shocking crimes, and natural disasters (93). As Kellner writes, these cultural phenomena at once "naturalize and idealize the given social system," (28) making them especially important tools in the elaboration of diagnostic

critique, that is, of a larger process of interrogating spectacle not only to “analyze the conditions of contemporary culture and society” but also to “provide the instruments of social change” (30). Despite anxieties regarding the spectacle’s monopolistic hold on culture, scholars like Richard Day cast a positive light on such developments, arguing that “no matter how totalizing a system might be, it will never achieve its ambition of totality – it is impossible to create a system with no outside, even a system that appears to cover an entire planet” (175). For Day, there will always be opportunities to challenge and dismantle these monolithic sites/sights of power. It is in this spirit that I now move to a more profitable reading of spectacle, one that explains in part the project of satirical fake news.

Re-Imagining Spectacle

In *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (2007), media scholar Stephen Duncombe offers new insight into how spectacle can be re-imagined and re-appropriated within the context of contemporary politics. In thinking about how spectacle functions in various pockets of everyday life, Duncombe argues for an active engagement with the visual and media culture of our age, one that is rooted in the languages of the spectacular and the fantastic. By making sense of how video games, celebrity culture, and advertising appeal to people’s desires, Duncombe suggests that progressives, activists, and satirists alike can use the languages of visual culture to push forward various political agendas. By appealing to the citizenry’s hopes and desires, his argument goes, progressives stand a much better chance of speaking directly to and engaging with a public that is otherwise deaf to its tired rational arguments. What Duncombe suggests, then, is that progressives don’t always have to appeal to fact, reason, and logic, but rather they should be finding ways of presenting and framing facts “in such a way that they make sense and hold meaning for people” (10).

Because spectacle can be used as an instrument to further a given political agenda, it should not be discredited simply on the grounds of how certain practitioners have manipulated reality in the past. All spectacles, Duncombe reminds us, can be ethical. That said, the ethical spectrum, it appears, is broad, if complex. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), for example, encapsulates the Nazi ethic of order, discipline, and obedience; the Nike corporation also wears its ethics on its sleeve, most famously in its unwavering trust in market freedom and profitability (125). Simply put, there are numerous ideological imperatives behind the use of spectacle. The goal for Nazi propagandists, for example, is to deceive so as to maintain control and manufacture consent. Hitlerian spectacle served the interests of deceiving the German masses, that is, of creating patently false perceptions of reality. As such, these distortions compromise the integrity of an ethically motivated politics of expression.

Unlike its Nazi and/or capitalist antecedents, however, satirists have the opportunity to construct spectacles differently. “The goal of the ethical spectacle,” Duncombe suggests, “is not to replace the real with the spectacle, but to reveal and amplify the real *through* the spectacle” (154-155). Importantly, ethical spectacles can also be used as valuable tools in the transmission and dissemination of dissenting forms of communication. More than this, ethical spectacles can work toward creating a better-informed citizenry, a diverse group of constituents that is subjected to a wide range of information, rhetorical platforms, visual patterns, and political viewpoints. As Duncombe insists, “We live in an age where spectacles make us stupid; [satirists] can engineer them to make us smarter” (120). Within today’s mediascape, such undertakings are not without merit. Within the context of political satire, the importance of spectacle in the construction of satirical fake news cannot be understated because it makes possible “a potent breach, break, or fracture in our spectacular mediascape that occasions a shift in our concepts of politics and truth” (Boler and Turpin 398).

Contemporary satirists engage these questions of spectacle directly in two primary ways: to critique media spectacles created by news media and to generate news media coverage to put forward dissenting

perspectives in the public sphere. When Jon Stewart attacked CNBC for its dubious coverage of the financial markets before the global financial crisis of 2009, it relied almost exclusively on the network's own footage to illustrate its critique. The spectacular aspects of *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer's on-air performance (punctuated by zany behaviour, huckster rhetoric, and misleading information) generated enough traction in the news media to propel Stewart's critique into other pockets of political discourse. The mere act of re-broadcasting and amplifying the shortcomings of the business news media's performance creates its own spectacle that then generates even more public discussion via various arms of the press (even the Associated Press would cover the story). Add to this Cramer's own fiery emotional collapse on another CNBC program (in which he likened the Wall Street meltdown to being a sign of Armageddon) and the spectacle would generate numerous opportunities to redirect the thrust of public discussion regarding the economy and to encompass a larger critique of the flawed reportage of business elites and the media personalities that cover them. In this regard, Stewart's decision to cover an existing spectacle ultimately amplifies the particularities of the financial crisis, only to re-contextualize and deconstruct the dominant issues at play. Based on Stewart's ability to illuminate these shortcomings, his MSNBC critique "advances the national debate on a comedy channel" at a time when substantive critiques of business elites weren't forthcoming ("[Has a Comedian?](#)").

A second tactic in the satirist's repertoire is to manufacture media spectacle in the interests of generating (widespread) news coverage on issues that do not easily enter mainstream media. One might readily point to Stephen Colbert's self-fashioned media spectacles--his performance at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner or his presidential bid as both a Republican *and* a Democrat--as preliminary examples that highlight existing flaws in both the news media system and the democratic process. But the Yes Men's impersonation of Dow Chemical on *BBC World* (on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal industrial accident) constitutes a salient example of how satirists can harness the power of spectacle to introduce issues, ideas, and debates within the larger arena of public discourse. By impersonating Dow and by falsely reporting that the corporation would sell its twelve billion dollar Union Carbide subsidiary to settle financial matters with the people of Bhopal, the Yes Men's daring intervention would provide an important blueprint for satirists looking to deploy ethical spectacles in the service of social justice. On this occasion, the appropriation of spectacle makes possible the dramatization of alternative perspectives within the hegemonic framework of mainstream media. In what might have otherwise been reduced to a soundbite recording of a Dow spokesman refusing to offer any form of compensation to the victims of Bhopal, the BBC hoax would guarantee a prolonged discussion of the issue that would reach an audience of 300 million. The artificially-created spectacle produces a wealth of critical commentary in the press--some constructive, some destructive--but the bulk of the work is largely meant to articulate critique (directed towards Dow), promote alternative perspectives in mainstream media (the Bhopal catastrophe must be properly dealt with), and to challenge news media to hold society's dominant institutions to task.

Journalism, media activism, and popular culture offer a foundational framework for thinking about the social and political significance of hoaxing today. In the following chapter I present a thorough overview of hoaxing as a powerful cultural force, before moving on to the book's deeper exploration of the Yes Men's work.

CHAPTER TWO: ON HOAXING

The liar uses the valid designations, the words, to make the unreal appear as real; he says, for example, 'I am rich,' when the word 'poor' would be the correct designation of his situation. He abuses the fixed conventions by arbitrary changes or even by reversals of the names. When he does this in a self-serving way damaging to others, then society will no longer trust him but exclude him. Thereby men do not flee from being deceived as much as from being damaged by deception: what they hate at this stage is not the deception but the bad, hostile consequences of certain kinds of deceptions.

– Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”

When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.

– Harry G. Frankfurt, “On Bullshit”

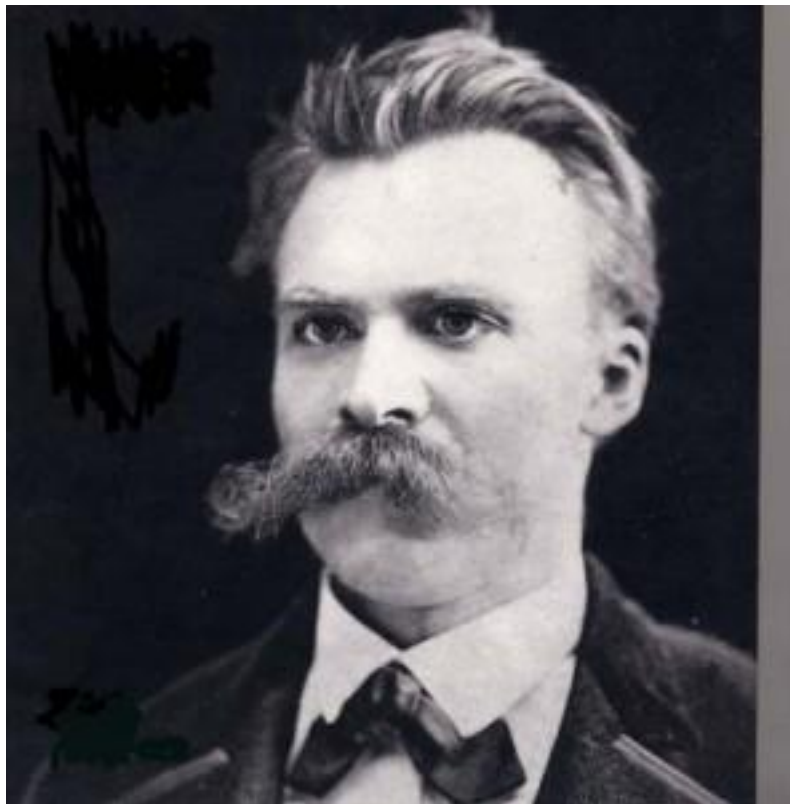
How Did We Get Here? Notes on Self-Deception, Lying, and Bullshit

Hoaxing represents a vast and ambiguous form of human communication. The term has traveled a great deal since it was first introduced in the seventeenth century. It is perhaps no wonder that the practice (as well as the terminology) has inspired a broad range of interpretations and definitions. To set the discussion in motion, let's consider a simple and concise definition of the word *hoax*: “a humorous or malicious deception.” From this provisional definition, we learn that hoaxing requires a dishonest act or statement--the concealment or misrepresentation of a more accurate state of affairs--that gives rise to humorous and/or malicious acts. The end point of a hoax is always contingent on the type of hoax being perpetrated: the design of the hoax, the motivations of the hoaxer, and the always unpredictable reception and interpretation of the act make for a wide array of possible scenarios. As a ubiquitous cultural practice, hoaxing requires an element, if not several layers, of deception. As we'll see, there is no shortage of hoaxing examples, but the motivations for and rationales behind hoaxing are at once numerous and complex.

Add to this the notion that people are generally fascinated by hoaxes--not to mention hearsay, gossip, urban legends, frauds, tricks, jokes, lampoons, mockery, conspiracy theories, pranks, and other sensationalist tales--and we ultimately set the stage to enter into a larger conversation about ourselves. We're all unwittingly and perhaps uncomfortably implicated in these affairs because we've all, at one time or another, been on the receiving end of a lie (well-intentioned or not), an elaborate ruse or deception, a prank or practical joke (think April Fool's Day); we regularly serve as fodder for and/or the agents of gossip; we participate, to varying degrees, in the circulation of jokes (the water cooler), the re-telling of urban legends (Sasquatch), the meticulous debates surrounding conspiracy theories (JFK assassination, 9/11), not to mention the collective finger-wagging inspired by frauds (Clifford Irving, James Frey). Given this susceptibility to engage with these kinds of everyday interaction, it seems crucial

that we make some attempt to decipher why exactly we encourage these activities.

Friedrich Nietzsche's work seems as good a place as any to begin to untangle our collective quirks and motivations. In "On Truth and Lie in a Extra-Moral Sense" (1873), a posthumously published fragment, Nietzsche depicts a pretty unflattering view of the human species--our feeble human intellects, unreliable systems of knowledge, unwavering dogma, elusive searches for truth and meaning, and so on. But his diatribe against humanity is instructive in terms of thinking about how we structure our lives to realize trivial goals and inauthentic pursuits. As he argues, human beings are "deeply immersed in illusions and dream images," making them perfectly comfortable to explore and abuse their "chief powers in simulation." As a result, our species is said to actively cultivate environments that place a premium on one's ability to master the art of simulation; for Nietzsche, those capable of deceiving, flattering, lying, cheating, gossiping, concealing, masking, and disguising will be better able to preserve themselves against other individuals.



Of course, individuals don't readily dismiss notions of (lower-case) truth--truth does hold an important place across civilizations and cultures--but they do "forever buy illusions for truth." This is where Nietzsche's argument helps clarify our fascination with hoaxes: if we accept that simulation, deception, and lies comprise essential facets of human life, it is not the hoax itself that causes ill will, animosity, condemnation, or general disapproval. Rather, the hoax is quite simply a natural extension of our thinking, scheming selves. Under this formulation, deception is cast as a given within the realm of human interaction; the goal thus becomes to minimize and deflect some of the "bad, hostile consequences" precipitated by deceptions. Where truth is concerned, Nietzsche suggests that our relationship to honest forms of expression is contradictory. On the one hand, we want access to truth, that is, we desire the "agreeable life-preserving consequences of truth," but on the other hand we are often indifferent to pure knowledge and even hostile to potentially damaging and destructive truths. We want to lie and deceive,

convey truth and beauty, all on our own terms. As is the case with most things, we want to have our cake and it eat it, too. While Nietzsche's work offers some insight into why we might paradoxically embrace and reject various hoaxing activities, it seems necessary to examine some of the finer points of deception.

Let's briefly survey the terrain of lies and lying.

In *This Means This, This Means That* (2007), Sean Hall offers a playful entry point with this gem of a sentence: *That's a good haircut*. Because it's sometimes hard to distinguish between truth and falsity, Hall considers the different inflections and modalities of speech one might attach to this kind of statement. He comes up with four different ways of thinking about "That's a good haircut," tracing the subtle differences between facts, values, ironies, and lies. In the first instance, "That's a good haircut" may be factual--that haircut has been skillfully done--and the intent behind the statement is to relay the fact. You may also like your friend's Travis Bickle-styled mohawk--in fact, you've *always* loved that style of haircut--offering a value judgment of sorts based on what you deem fashionable and aesthetically pleasing.

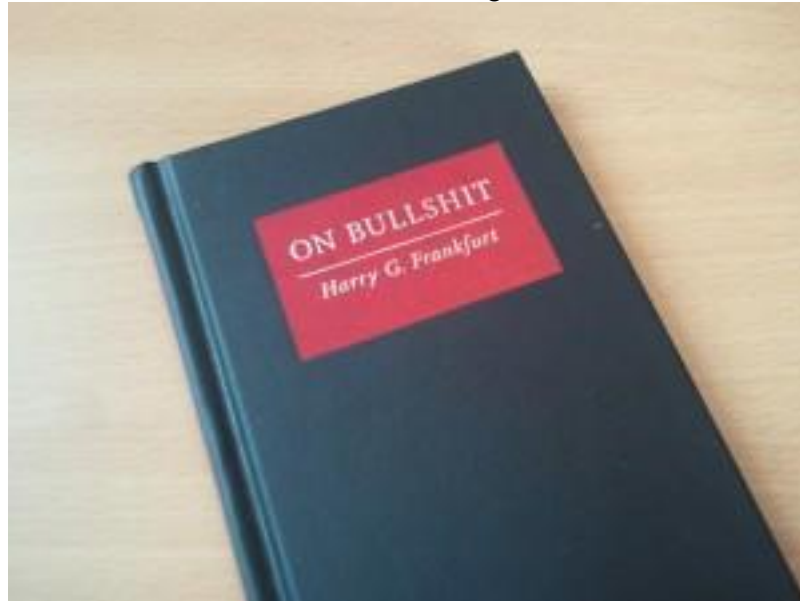


For those quick to embrace their ironic sensibilities, leafing through any number of magazines, television programs, or Internet flaming sites should provide enough fodder for them to say the exact opposite of what they mean, tongue-firmly planted in cheek (e.g., "That's a good [Flock of Seagulls] haircut!"). Lastly, one may choose to lie outright for a number of reasons. If your mother/best friend/significant other asks you what you think of their unflattering new haircut, you choose the white lie so as to cushion any possible hurt feelings or to avoid any unnecessary friction; a malicious liar, on the other hand, may very well mislead the recipient of a bad haircut so as to ensure that s/he will continue to parade the new hairstyle confidently around town.

At this point, it's fair to ask what any of this has to do with hoaxing and deception. Hall's example illustrates the complexity of everyday interactions through a seemingly straightforward statement; he rightly highlights the apparent and underlying messages we share with or withhold from others; and he sheds light on some of the motivations behind concealing and revealing the true nature of our thoughts. As he puts it, "Lies are like truths in being almost never pure and rarely simple" (46). And because truths and falsehoods often operate interchangeably, it becomes increasingly important for people not only to understand both sides of this divide, but to develop strategies for interpreting these conflicting modes of

address. For example, misinterpreting the phrase “I love you” can have disastrous consequences if you don’t draw the correct conclusion (i.e., buying an engagement ring based on a platonic “I love you”); the same applies for “I’m dying over here” (is this just hyperbolic rhetoric or is your best friend actually choking on a chicken bone?). Failure to correctly interpret these scenarios could have life and death implications for the parties involved (be they social or physical).

And the stakes keep getting higher: “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit.” So begins philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt’s widely read essay “On Bullshit.” At the heart of our love of a good hoax lies a culture’s robust confidence in being able to detect bullshit and a deftness



at not being taken in by it.

But hoaxes are often referred to as “elaborate deceptions” for a reason: there is a level of detail and sophistication that creates room for misunderstanding and confusion, meaning that individuals, social groups, and communities are all potentially susceptible to falling victim to a hoax. In the event of certain hoaxes, the bullshit (or deception) detector doesn’t trigger as it should. In a culture awash with bullshit, Frankfurt suggests, we should take note of two dominant figures: the liar and the bullshitter. Whereas a liar is “essentially someone who deliberately promulgates a falsehood,” the bullshitter is someone that “is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false ... he does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly.” Here’s how it breaks down:

- *The liar* understands his relationship to truth, but chooses to express the opposite (I may very well know where your car keys are, but I want you to stay; hence, I don’t know where your keys are.)
- *The bullshitter*, on the other hand, has no regard for truth, as s/he actively chooses to express a false position in the sole interest of advancing a specific agenda. It is no wonder that Frankfurt concludes that “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are” (61).

Somewhere amidst our Nietzschean love of self-deception, our propensity to accord indeterminate meaning to things and sayings, and our love of lies and bullshit lies a satisfactory answer to why it is we champion, denounce, love, vilify, contest, and celebrate all manners of hoaxing. While there is no definitive theory to help better explain this phenomenon, this loosely drawn sketch should help situate the reader a bit more thoroughly to appreciate the nuances at work in contemporary hoaxing. For the purposes of this chapter, we’ll pay special attention to the unpredictable terrain of everyday human interactions; as such, it will be useful to have some of these ideas in mind when we come to the larger issues surrounding media hoaxing, particularly with regards to the Yes Men.

“Historians Admit To Inventing Ancient Greeks”

Before moving into a broader overview of hoaxing, let’s briefly review a recent groundbreaking discovery regarding ancient Greece. On October 7, 2010, a group of leading historians held a press conference to correct a pervasive myth about one of the world’s most enduring civilizations—ancient Greece, a culture long credited with inspiring the intellectual, political, and systemic foundations of Western civilization, was revealed to be a complete fiction. In their shocking announcement, the group of scholars (among them Professor Gene Haddlebury, Chair of Hellenic Studies at Georgetown University) readily acknowledged that the fabrication of ancient Greece’s historical legacy was the product of some two dozen historians, anthropologists, and classicists collaborating in the creation of documents and artefacts between 1971 and 1974. In an attempt to explain a gap in the larger history of European culture, scholars sought to fill what was largely deemed the otherwise poorly documented 800-year period that preceded the Christian era. To do so meant to fictionalize various ancient Greek figures and phenomena: Homer, Aristotle, Socrates, Hippocrates, the lever and fulcrum, rhetoric, ethics, the Parthenon, the golden ratio, and Euclidean geometry, to name but a few. What largely began as an innocent joke—celebrating Greece as the birthplace of democracy, philosophy, and poetry, as well as the cradle of the Western literary tradition—soon spiralled into a sustained effort to fabricate and fictionalize every aspect of ancient Greek culture we know today. As one observer remarked of their activities during the period, “The historians immediately set to work, hastily falsifying evidence of a civilization that—complete with its own poets and philosophers, gods and heroes—would eventually become the centerpiece of school books, college educations, and the entire field of the humanities.” Thus the press conference would lay bare the otherwise unfathomable revelation that ancient Greek culture is a complete and utter sham, calling into question the pillars of Western epistemology, systems of governance, and traditions of poetry and art. And if you manage to read past the spectacular headline, you might easily deduce the existence of an equally hilarious and brilliantly executed piece of satire.

The unnamed authors of the piece offer the reader several clues to appreciate the ruse. For readers already familiar with *The Onion*, arguably America’s leading satirical publication, they would instantly read and relish the article as satire. For those encountering the work stripped of any context (i.e., readers taking the article at face value as “traditional news”), the outlandish use of hyperbole and jest set the stage for readers to decipher the satirical tone. Of course, the application of common sense is an absolute must. On the face of it, it is downright laughable to assume that a team of scholars could invent the most prolific and influential 800-year period in human civilization in a mere four years! It is also patently ridiculous to believe that ancient Greek architecture was based on buildings in Washington, D.C., “including a bank across the street from the coffee shop where they met to ‘bat around ideas about mythology or whatever.’” Indeed one of the most hilarious bits of information from the announcement surfaces in a statement made by one of the junior ghostwriting scholars, who cited that Greece was chosen as the birthplace of their “fictional” universe “because we figured nobody would ever go there to check it out.” In an attempt to cover their tracks once interest in ancient Greece reached dizzying new heights, the collaborators had to forge countless documents and produce a vast body of artifacts to corroborate their faked histories; to be truly convincing, they would also have to build the Parthenon, among other architectural marvels. If at this point the reader still accepts the story as true, we must admit to a number of interpretive failures: the inability to detect irony or satire; the willingness to accept a sensational story due to the trustworthiness of a news source and the credibility commonly afforded scholars/academics; the inability to grasp inconsistencies and illogical statements; and most importantly, the failure to apply common sense.

While it is perhaps unthinkable for some *not* to immediately see the article as satire or humour or bullshit of the highest order (I myself nearly didn’t finish the article on the first try because I was laughing so hard), a story of this kind will regularly fool readers. So much so that a group of disbelieving fans of satire created *Literally Unbelievable*, a website that circulates stories from *The Onion* and features

commentary from duped Facebook users. The site ultimately poaches reader responses from an *Onion* feed, capturing the best and most hilarious user comments and exchanges. The most insightful volley of comments on the site has surfaced in response to an *Onion* video entitled, “CIA’s ‘Facebook’ Program Dramatically Cut Agency’s Costs,” in which two tantalizing statements are made: (1) Facebook is the brainchild of the CIA and (2) Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg is actually a decorated CIA agent (codename: “The Overlord”). Facebook is billed as a dream come true for the CIA in that it has enabled the intelligence agency to monitor large swaths of the American public without having to devote additional human, technological, or financial resources. Compiling the personal data of millions has become an effortless undertaking because Facebook users are voluntarily giving it up. The piece was so brilliantly executed that the video began circulating on YouTube under different titles and taglines: “Facebook is part of the CIA - Amazing”; “Mark Zuckerberg is a CIA Agent Collecting all our Information?”; “Mark Zuckerberg is a CIA Agent!!” These three videos have collectively garnered over 500,000 views, making the original *Onion* piece a highly watched and recirculated text.

The video’s arc is important because the responses on *Literally Unbelievable (LU)* mirror those appearing on sites like YouTube: viewers are regularly shocked, confused, and unable to make sense of the video. Is it satire, parody, or the real thing? The majority of users eventually come around to the broader realization that they’ve been duped by a skilful group of actors, comedians, and satirists. But there will always be a small group of remaining holdouts who willfully refuse to buy into the narrative as satire, and choose instead to take the video at face value. All hilarity breaks out on the *LU* site with a Facebook transcript illustrating a two-person exchange on the nuances of the story--one, pointing to Zuckerberg’s deep ties to the CIA; the other, diligently aiming to explain how satire functions. The former reads it straight, sketching out an unwittingly amusing conspiracy theory; the latter attempts at each turn to explain what *The Onion* is, why it’s satire, what’s missing in his interpretation, and so on. Acknowledging defeat to his uninformed/clueless counterpart, the back-and-forth abruptly ends with “IT’S A FUCKING COMEDY WEBSITE ... JESUS.” The dynamic character of *LU* exchanges rests on the back-and-forth between savvy, informed commenters (*Onion* readers in the know) and the readers unwilling or incapable of deciphering the true (satiric) nature of the story. *Literally Unbelievable* positions the casual visitor as already being in the know, making the gullible and naive commentary all the more hilarious. One would also hope that the posting of foolish and ridiculous commentary made by people who have been easily duped by satirists would be instructive enough to encourage people to think twice when reading--and posting commentary about--everyday news stories.

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“I can believe anything provided it is incredible”

When Oscar Wilde pens these words he is presenting, in his own characteristic fashion, a contradiction in terms; here the sentiment conveyed defies logic in that the speaker is better able to believe something if it is impossible to believe. But Wilde’s playful aphorism also holds a second intended meaning when we consider the informal definition of incredible--as something extraordinary, amazingly good or beautiful. To believe, in this sense, is to be held captive by the power of spectacle. In eight words, Wilde expertly conjures up the powerful sway and pull of hoaxing and makes sense of the illogical trappings that shape our responses to these deceptions. With Wilde’s musings in mind, let’s explore the world of hoaxing even further.

Hoaxes are often introduced to fill a void in areas of culture that escape collective understanding: ideas that contradict established scientific explanation, phenomena that defy logic or challenge human perception, scenarios that push the boundaries of what is imaginable or believable. Just as hoaxes

can appear across popular culture to assist in making sense of complex phenomena that resist easy explanation, so too do hoaxers spin their tales in the interests of mining longstanding fears, anxieties, and fascinations. For each hoaxer, the hoax presents an opportunity to profit from the circulation of falsehoods and lies. Call it wish fulfilment, flights of fancy/imagination, perversions of the social order, reckless opportunism and profiteering, pranking and tricksterism. Each hoaxer devises his/her deception to secure a set of desired outcomes--money, fame, notoriety, revenge--and to demonstrate the skills associated with such a craft--one-upmanship, cleverness, intelligence, savvy, and foresight. There are ultimately two sets of imperatives at work: first, the perpetrator wishes to show the degree of skill and expertise required to pull off such elaborate deceptions, and second, s/he also intends to profit from the risk taken in concocting such a scheme. Importantly, hoaxes only materialize as hoaxes when they command the attention of the public.

Hoaxes become hoaxes when they capture the popular imagination, when they confound observers enough to set off a larger conversation about the plausibility, legitimacy, or authenticity of the spectacle under discussion. Indeed what distinguishes a successful hoax from an unsuccessful stunt is the degree of notoriety or public interest the hoax attracts; the more spectacle, controversy, discussion and debate generated the better the hoax becomes. Hoaxes are intentional, purposeful acts that demand broad attention from a massive and disparate group of observers and commentators. Hoaxes create sensational storylines that news media love to report and that audiences love to talk about. Hoaxers attempt to s(t) imulate this dialogue in the service of their own carefully laid out plans. And just as the actors behind the hoaxes work increasingly hard to deliver work sophisticated enough to bypass journalism's gatekeeping establishment (and its audiences), so too do observers of hoaxes work to catch, call out, and expose the lies and deceptions associated with the practice. In other words, the rise of the hoaxer has signalled the simultaneous emergence of the hoax detector/debunker. In the eighteenth century, for example, print-based hoaxes held great power in a culture shifting from orality to widespread literacy. A renewed interest in antiquity and ancient history contributed to the rise of literary forgeries and fakes. The ubiquity of forgeries in the realm of literature created a tangible need for greater scholarship to help curb the dissemination of fake manuscripts and doctored texts. Simply put, better forgers called for better scholars and experts (and vice versa). This relationship forms an essential part of the social dynamic created and sustained by hoaxes. The symbiotic relationship between the potential hoaxer and her unsuspecting public is what gives the cultural practice its vitality and ultimately guarantees its continued footing across cultures.

Due to its ubiquity and universal appeal, it is unsurprising that Top Ten lists about hoaxing abound on the Internet. These dedicated lists to popular mischief making speak directly to the currency hoaxing enjoys in contemporary online culture; on another level, they bear witness to the vast range and depth of hoaxes being dissected and debated; they also indicate the rise of niche taste cultures that rank certain kinds of hoaxes above others. How might one qualify the juxtaposition of the infamous Alien Autopsy hoax with Paul McCartney's *Abbey Road* death hoax? A "Top 10 Shocking Hoaxes" list appears in *Time* (2010), featuring stories about Hitler's diaries, Napoleon's premature death, a broken dam and accompanying flood, a Tibetan-trained baseball rookie capable of pitching a 168 m.p.h. fastball, and so on. Even an ill-defined Top Ten list reveals that hoaxes have attracted a broad spectrum of list-makers interested in science, literature, celebrity, video games, the Internet, astronomy, nature, government and the paranormal (no concrete link amongst them). Together, they painstakingly (and at times indiscriminately) lump the best and worst hoaxing examples ever documented. Hoaxes are described as (in)famous, unbelievable, bizarre, fantastic, crazy, notorious, dubious, debunked. Even if I had a Top Ten list, I can't imagine it ever staying the same. Having recently discovered pictures of an unearthed [mermaid skeleton](#) in Bulgaria and a nineteenth century photographer's [headless portraits](#), it seems inherently clear that while some hoaxes will continue to secure their place within a longer historical trajectory, some stories are so patently ridiculous, spectacular, and hilarious that they would warrant at least temporary inclusion in my once inflexible list.

Setting Things Up: Radio Theatre, Fake Biography, and Art Forgery

The names Orson Welles, Clifford Irving, and Elmyr de Hory may not carry the same weight or celebrity they once did for previous generations, but each figure has earned a reputation for being an iconoclastic and subversive artist. Welles (1915-1985), one of the most gifted actors and directors of his generation, as well as the creator of one of the most cherished films of the twentieth century (*Citizen Kane*), earned his reputation by pushing against the commercial Hollywood establishment and by testing the boundaries of both new and established media; Irving (1930 -), a celebrated writer in his own right, is best known for writing about--and popularizing--fakes, frauds, and hoaxers (himself included); de Hory (1905-1976), perhaps the greatest forger in the history of modern art, was catapulted to world stardom through his uncanny ability to imitate some of the world's most venerated artists. All three figures were delighted by--and notorious for--trickery, deception, and fakery.

This thematic relationship is explored at length in Welles' brilliant free-form documentary, tantalizingly entitled *F for Fake* (1975). Here deception and fakery take centre stage as Welles explores the intangible qualities that make something either real or fake, authentic or inauthentic. Welles moves through three sets of examples to make his point: he first alludes to the multiple forgeries at work in the province of writing (Irving's infamous "autobiography" of Howard Hughes), in the realm of art (de Hory's celebrated forgeries of Modigliani, Picasso, and Matisse), and in radio and film (Welles' own masterful *War of the Worlds* hoax). *F for Fake* shows with great clarity the extent to which each artist revels in the art of deception. Irving not only writes the most scandalous (non-)fiction work of the 1970s, he would also pen a real biography about a fake painter (de Hory), aptly named, *Fake!* Similarly de Hory is said to have produced some of the most convincing post-impressionist forgeries in his lifetime, many of them now unwittingly lining the walls of the world's greatest art museums and galleries. To paraphrase François Reichenbach, de Hory was a man of sixty names, sixty personalities, sixty lies, but one *real* profession: painting forgeries. Finally, in his famous staging of a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells *The War of the Worlds*, Welles and his collaborators incited a well documented (and overblown) moral panic because listeners failed to recognize the widely known story or register the troupe's early disclaimers that the story was in fact a literary adaptation and not a widespread infiltration of Martians on earth. *F for Fake* provides a rich exploration of the subject, offering an intimate look at a rarely understood facet of culture. In wedding these artist biographies together, Welles reveals many of the machinations and motivations that drive artists to carry out hoaxes.

And yet the motives and rationales for hoaxing are never easily disentangled. For Irving, the opportunity to create a fake biography of the world's most reclusive celebrity (Howard Hughes) meant a lucrative book contract, instant celebrity, entrance into a culture of access and privilege; it also offered him the creative license to invent elaborate fictions about an individual who likely wouldn't surface to challenge the book's authenticity (Howard Hughes hadn't been seen in public for over fifteen years). In short, he writes a fake biography of the world famous recluse to produce what he deemed would be *the* defining novel of the twentieth century. Irving's motives are clear-cut: money, fame, notoriety, and social capital. Though it is far too tempting to describe Irving's motives solely in terms of the financial windfall that would follow the publication of his book (not to mention the million dollar advance he received from McGraw Hill for the publication rights to the novel), there were other professional or writerly incentives.

Perhaps less implicit was Irving's desire to shake up the literary world and the autobiography genre by introducing some sweeping changes; for one, writing an autobiography without ever once contacting his subject! One could argue that Irving saw his Howard Hughes biography as an explosion (or implosion) of genre, as a critical reevaluation of a genre he felt had become stagnant. Irving may have also used

the story of Howard Hughes to write a novel that, for legal reasons, could not otherwise have been written. As autobiography, the book was described as pure fabrication, but as fiction it might have been considered a work of pure imaginative genius. If we classify the book differently--from an authorized autobiography to a fictionalized narrative account of the life of Howard Hughes--we move across genres and evaluate Irving's book according to a new set of criteria. However, because the book was discovered to be a hoax--not just any hoax, but *the* literary hoax of the twentieth century--these considerations cannot even enter into play. Due to this egregious false step, Irving's literary motives are largely dismissed and we return to the question of money, that is, to the economic and financial considerations that underlie Irving's hoax. While these critical questions are tantalizing, not all hoaxing examples materialize as insightful statements about genre, art, and imitation; rather it would seem the financial imperatives to hoax far outweigh the less spectacular critical considerations. It should also be noted that hoaxes of this kind will rarely if ever arouse enough journalistic scrutiny to probe such specialist forms of knowledge. Does it all come down to money in the end?

For de Hory, creating art forgeries on the scale of the most revered painters of the post-impressionist period enabled him to lead a very comfortable life as a bourgeois socialite and flâneur in Ibiza (his paintings have been known to sell for as much as the originals!). His mastery of forgery also gave him a degree of cachet and celebrity in the artworld, spurring him to boast that he could fool any of the art experts working in the field. But let's break things down even further. In de Hory's view, a superior forgery of an original artwork should hold as much currency as its predecessor precisely because it requires of the artist unparalleled skill, sensibility, and craft. In other words, for a forgery to be authenticated by an industry expert, it must meet all of the criteria of the original to be institutionally validated. As de Hory himself explains, the very act of painting or circulating forgeries prompts a critical evaluation of the gatekeeping role art experts play: if de Hory could fool the experts, he argued, what purpose could these so-called credentialed figures possibly serve? It also meant that forgeries and fake paintings could find their way into established galleries, collections, and museums, thereby fooling art patrons and ultimately compromising the integrity of already established artworks. Elmyr's work not only elevated the status of the fake to the level of art, but it also challenged the hidden and misunderstood aspects of the art establishment by breaking down questions of authenticity and calling into question the expert paradigm. In this sense, de Hory's forgeries downright challenge the arbitrary inclusions or exclusions of paintings in the artworld. Despite the critiques de Hory leveled against art experts, and more generally, against an art establishment that never warmed to his own style of painting, de Hory was invested in the culture of the fake for two simple reasons: 1) virtuoso that he was, he could easily reproduce a Modigliani, a Picasso, or a Matisse and 2) he knew better than anyone that he could earn a comfortable living reproducing and selling some of the world's greatest works/forgeries of art. Once again, the act of producing fakes serves the economic and financial interests of the producer--all other incentives are either incidental or complementary.

The War of the Worlds radio play was conceived of as an "experiment in broadcasting," a testing ground of sorts for establishing the degree of influence a new medium could wield. In this way, the now iconic broadcast figures as an important historical example of how new media have the potential to shape communication environments. As Welles recounts, he and his acting troupe weren't merely adapting a famous novel for a mass radio public, they were also staging the event to test the limits of what was possible and permissible within the new medium:

We weren't as innocent as we meant to be. When we did the Martian broadcast, we were fed up with the way in which everything that came over this new magic box (the radio) was being swallowed. People do suspect what they read in the newspapers and what people tell them, but when radio came (and now I suppose, television) everything that came through that new machine was believed. So in a way our

broadcast was an assault on the credibility of that machine. We wanted people to understand that they shouldn't take any opinion pre-digested and they shouldn't swallow everything that came through the tap, whether it's radio or not.

The real irony is that the broadcast does not readily qualify as an intentional hoax. Welles and his entourage were not expressly looking to create a spectacle or controversy, but the mechanisms they used to tell the story certainly created the conditions for a hoax to materialize. For example, by interspersing the story with straight radio news bulletins reporting the arrival of Martians and soon after the invasion of New Jersey, undiscerning or uninitiated listeners were prone to mistake fiction and drama for reality and chaos. Indeed, the radio performance was framed precisely in this way to test listener skepticism. As Welles attests, one of the primary reasons for devising this strategy was to sharpen the audience to think more critically about the power of "this new magic box." The most fascinating aspect of the hoax is the producer's calculated "assault on the credibility" of radio. As the moral panic that followed makes clear, listeners both lacked a basic understanding of the medium and a deeper propensity to "swallow everything that came through the tap." Thus this hallmark example confirms the hoaxer's capacity to stimulate broader thinking surrounding a culture's consumption of mainstream media through subtle experiments in form, taste, and technological know-how. Welles' admission that he and his collaborators were fed up with the ways in which news and information were being uncritically and indiscriminately absorbed reveals the hoaxer's deeper fascination with presenting a corrective to a problematic aspect of culture. In theory, the function of the hoax is to entertain and to educate. In practice, it is unclear how well these objectives were met at the time of the incident. In the decades since the broadcast, Welles' experiment has become a focal point for educating people vis-à-vis the power, influence, or impact of mass media. Thus it can be said that not all hoaxes are reducible to financial or economic motives, but rather can be deployed in the service of education through entertainment, a key distinction in the larger argument of this book.

What sorts of risks did these hoaxes entail? What are the consequences? Are the risks warranted?

To put forward a convincing account of the accuracy of his autobiography to his publisher, Irving forged letters and documents, faked audio interviews, embezzled a £750,000 advance that was meant to be forwarded to Howard Hughes. Irving is said to have pulled off the literary caper of the era. At the time, Irving hadn't considered the full import of what he was doing; indeed, he assumed that the hoax was merely a playful fiction being peddled on the literary establishment, one that he could retract at any time. But as the web of lies grew and the stakes grew higher, Irving fell victim to his own hoax: "In June 1972 Irving was sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment on charges of conspiracy to defraud, forgery, using the federal mail to defraud and perjury." de Hory's risks were the byproduct of a man who suffered great hardship after WWII, a man desperate to find success, fame, and praise. Before he had earned a name as a bankable art forger, de Hory is said to have led a precarious existence as both a struggling artist and as an impoverished Hungarian aristocrat. It is thus ironic that he was unable to earn a living as an artist in his own right (his paintings never sold), but achieved enormous success as an interpreter and copier of greater artists. Like Irving, de Hory's actions were clearly illegal: it is estimated that by 1968 (the heyday of his counterfeiting exploits in North and South America, Europe, and Japan) he had "had passed off as genuine 1,000 drawings and paintings [he] claimed to be by Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Dufy, van Dongen, and Derain" (Reed). The full weight of the risks would eventually prove too great; while under investigation for art fraud and under the larger threat of extradition to France, de Hory is said to have committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills (Kahn). For the twenty-three year old Welles, the risk was limited and the payoff was huge: soon after the radio broadcast, the young provocateur rocketed to stardom and became a major Hollywood contender, going on to write, direct, and star in *Citizen Kane* and several other popular films and plays. The Mercury Theatre players attracted very little backlash in the wake of their guileful performance. Much to their credit, the tact with which they

integrated their disclaimers throughout the program (four in total) and their final revelation of the play as a Halloween trick worked to minimize any future backlash. Rather than inciting the wrath of the public, the troupe actually managed to secure a major sponsor in the process (Campbell Soup) for its weekly program. Such is the unevenness attributed to hoaxing in the realm of art.

In alluding to these three controversial artists--author, painter, filmmaker--I present a preliminary frame for thinking about the complex motivations, stakes, risks, and rewards associated with contemporary hoaxing. Why would an individual, or as in the case of these examples, an artist, choose hoaxing as a means to pursue a specific course of action? The boundaries crossed are at once cultural, legal, economic, artistic, aesthetic, moral, ethical, and personal. These three examples illuminate some key characteristics of hoaxing but, more importantly, they explain some of the key reasons why cultures embrace and penalize this widespread cultural form. In thinking through these questions, we open the door to larger questions surrounding the boundaries between truth and falsity, fact and fiction, authenticity and artifice.

Fact + Fiction = Factual Fictions

But perceptions of hoaxing have shifted over time. In the eighteenth century, what is most commonly referred to as the golden age of the hoaxing, the practice was deployed as a tool to educate and enlighten the broader public, as a means of “improving the human condition itself” (Boese 29). These eighteenth century practices stood to firmly counter the lingering medieval superstitions of the age. Whereas the eighteenth century hoaxter was more often than not committed to Enlightenment ideals, medieval hoaxing existed in large part to cheat, dupe, scam, trick, fool, swindle, and deceive. Whereas the notion of distinguishing between fact and fiction is a distinctly modern enterprise (one that carries a great deal of importance in the current era), drawing such distinctions in the medieval period was muted, if insignificant. As Boese explains, many “curious half-truths, superstitious fantasies, and outright lies persisted for centuries through the medieval era, completely unchallenged, even when contradictory evidence was clearly available” (7). History has shown that faith and belief held greater weight than skepticism and criticism.

To appreciate the historical significance of the relationship between fact and fiction, one might review Early Modern accounts of journalistic reporting. During the early seventeenth century, fact and fiction were seamlessly integrated into journalistic content by way of the era’s popular broadsheets. In *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (1983), Lennard J. Davis examines cultural debates surrounding the intermingling of fact and fiction through a study of two burgeoning and already dominant cultural forms: news and the novel. As Davis describes, the era underwent radical changes in the realms of art, culture, and public discourse: the ballad was replaced by the news pamphlet as the dominant form of journalism, and prose replaced poetry as the primary vehicle for describing the world and ongoing events (71). Interestingly, earlier conceptions of fictionalized news evolve during the seventeenth-century when noted playwrights such as Ben Jonson openly ridiculed the news for two reasons: (1) “the news was made up” and (2) it was “published to cheat people of their money” (75). The mixing of truth and falsity would become increasingly problematic, Davis argues, due to growing expectations of what novels and news were meant to offer the public--the news, factual discourse; the novel, fictional discourse (100).

Indeed, the emergence of prose news would have an undeniable impact on how fact and fiction would circulate across cultural forms and, by extension, across public spheres. As news began to assume a more pointed ideological function, it came to be regarded by government as a dangerous institution. With the emergence of an increasingly politicized press came the “pressing need to define legally the nature of ‘factual’ news,” (71) an undertaking that gave the state apparatus (or elected officials) some recourse in the event of invented or unfounded slanderous accusations; legal changes also gave the government for a

time the right to censor or ban news reportage and content. The cultural turn toward factual news spurred the creation of new forms of fictional narrative, the novel in particular, and in the process wedged a then unfathomable split between news and novels into two more or less distinct spheres. The move toward greater accountability in the realm of journalism not only redefined the ways in which fact and fiction were discussed across the culture, they also radically shifted the ways in which journalism and the novel evolved. To this day, journalism adheres to (if falls short of) the primary tenets of factual reporting; the contemporary novel, however, enjoys greater flexibility to conflate, mix, and blur fact and fiction through the once undifferentiated pairing of news and novels. Despite the innovative changes in the perceived structuring of the factual and fictional elements of the culture, the wedding of fact and fiction continued unabated through the intermingling of both cultural forms. It is undeniable that much of contemporary journalism and fiction writing hinges upon the contradictions embedded in the notion of proliferating “factual fictions,” but in an age of “truthiness” the “objectification of factual news and the factualization of fictionality” (Jenner 223) lead us nowhere closer to apprehending truth or discerning fact from fiction.

It is perhaps due to the ambiguities and uncertainties created by these tensions that eighteenth century writers began to deploy hoaxing as a critical tactic to entertain and enlighten their readers. The general idea amongst noted writers of the period--Jonathan Swift, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Defoe--was to lure a predominantly mass reading public into believing a fake story to test the limits of their skepticism and credulity. To perform this task without incurring the wrath of the public, writers turned to satire as a means to expose the folly, vice, pomposity, and stupidity of its victims. Jonathan Swift, one of the great practitioners of the form, speaks to the positive dimensions of satire: namely, its undeniable “public spirit,” as well as its “virtue to mend the world [and] to make mankind better” (11). For Swift and his contemporaries hoaxing didn’t have to assume a malicious form for it to be successful; rather, an ethical hoaxer could harness the power of satire to critique (and potentially reform) one’s target *and* earn a name as a writer of merit and substance. Indeed the “identity correction” tactics pioneered by the Yes Men were already circulating in Swift’s time; it is Swift, in fact, who first patented and perfected the tactic. Despite the strong ethical currents running through his work, I’ll draw from two infamous Swift hoaxes to raise larger questions about the unpredictable nature of hoaxing--both in terms of outcomes and motives. Swift is arguably the most important figure in the history of satirical hoaxing, but his hoaxes illustrate some of the defining grey areas associated with hoaxing. Upon reviewing the “Bickerstaff Hoax” and “A Modest Proposal,” we might ask to what extent Swift emerges as villain or defender of morals and ethics.

“Bickerstaff Hoax”

In 1708, Swift became irritated by a burgeoning culture of writerly hacks, a group he labeled the “vulgar almanack-makers” (astrologers making gross predictions about the following calendar year). He assumed the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff to criticize the impostors (or quacks) he deemed were bastardizing the art of public discourse. Bickerstaff had one target in particular that he sought to discredit--John Partridge--a shady figure “who import[s] a yearly stock of nonsense, lyes, folly, and impertinence, which [he] offer[s] to the world as genuine from the planets.” The almanac hoax was meant to materialize as a very imaginative April Fool’s jest in which Bickerstaff proclaims that the famous astrologer Partridge will in fact die by way of “a raging fever.” Presenting himself as a revered astrologer with a proven record of predicting the future, Bickerstaff makes the following claim:

I have consulted the stars of his nativity by my own rules, and find he will infallibly die upon the 29th of March next, about eleven at night, of a raging fever; therefore I advise him to consider of it, and settle his affairs in time.

Of course, Partridge immediately decried the pronouncement as a deception on the part of a fraud. As Partridge would have it, he would prove him wrong by outliving the date earmarked in the announcement.

Upping the stakes of his hoax, Bickerstaff would publish an *Elegy* on March 29th, announcing Partridge's death and describing a deathbed confession in which the astrologer repentantly admitted to being a longstanding fraud. Over the next two days Bickerstaff would also publish two pamphlets vindicating the accuracy and veracity of his earlier prediction, the first entitled "The Accomplishment of the First of Mr. Bickerstaff's Predictions." As the news trickled in across London, Partridge, still very much alive, was treated to further public humiliation when no one heeded his second attempt to out Bickerstaff (printed on April 1st, or April Fool's Day). Instead, Londoners were all too eager to accept that Bickerstaff's predictions were true. What a strange thing to be declared dead and for no one to believe the living!

In the end, Partridge would never recover from Swift's cleverly executed hoax and he would cease publication of his *Merlinus Liberatus* almanac altogether. Of course, Swift's motives for creating the hoax were far from benign. While it would be accurate to suggest that Swift crafted the stunt to critique the merits of astrology as a cultural phenomenon and to openly ridicule Partridge as one of its primary hacks, it would be misleading to conclude that Swift explicitly sought to destroy Partridge's reputation. Conceived of as a hoax in four parts with four separate publications, Swift had no way to anticipate whether the ruse would be instantly deciphered or whether the story would garner any interest at all. To be sure, Partridge's demise was brought about by the cleverness of the deception, but not all hoaxes capture the popular imagination in quite the way Swift's did. Because the hoax was so widely discussed and contained such a sensational storyline, Swift was able to unseat a figure he deemed unworthy of an audience. Because Partridge was widely held as a quack, bully, and hack his public humiliation was greeted with praise. In this respect, one might argue that Swift chose his target wisely and put forward a corrective brand of satire that shook up and discredited the dubious realm of hack astrology literature. On a final note, it is equally disturbing that Swift's hoax would utterly ruin Partridge's standing in the community and rob him of his dignity within his chosen profession. Whatever Swift's real motivations, the outcomes were dramatic and the implications far-reaching: a hoax could serve as a powerful brand of corrective satire, but it could also work to destroy a man's reputation and livelihood.

"A Modest Proposal"

If the Bickerstaff hoax hasn't yet convinced the reader of the thorny ethical dimensions of pranking, perhaps Swift's "A Modest Proposal" will suffice in presenting a more convincing argument. Swift's modest proposal remains one of the most poignant indictments of injustice ever written. As the essay's subtitle makes clear, Swift is concerned with "Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country." Using a plain, unassuming, matter-of-fact delivery, Swift presents a carefully reasoned argument that champions the feeding of poor children to the rich. From the outset of his argument, Swift expresses great concern that the "hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born" present an enormous challenge to the health, vitality, and well-being of the country: they cannot be employed in handicraft or agriculture; they do not have the skills or capacities to build houses or cultivate the land; they will not earn a livelihood and will likely begin to steal by the age of six. If these children are born to parents who cannot provide for them, Swift suggests, they will prove not only a burden to the parents, but also to the country at large. The existence of these beggarly children bears witness to "the deplorable state of the kingdom" and as such, "a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children useful members of the commonwealth" must be adopted. To remedy this unfortunate state, Swift proposes with true precision and attention to detail (materials to which he anticipates the least possible objection) the ways in which the British might turn an undesirable scenario into a utilitarian triumph. Based on rigorous calculations, the children would be most profitably used in a stew:

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust.

For readers incapable of registering or accepting the essay's ironic, satirical tone, Swift presents a vile, hateful ordering of human existence that privileges the rich by way of a profoundly disturbing utilitarian argument. Through the use of reason, Swift calmly and swiftly outlines his argument with a cold and calculating eye. He anticipates that his proposal will be embraced for its measured overview of a social problem that had persisted without any tangible solutions in sight. And yet it is precisely in this way that he pushes his polemic forward. Over time, he observes, such an endeavour would reduce the number of Papists in the kingdom ("the principal breeders of the country"), lessen the state's responsibility to the poor (increasing the nation's stock by fifty thousand pounds per annum), improve the coffers of the poor (via the sale of their children), diversify English cuisine and broaden the English palette (skillful cooking and good eating). In an interesting rhetorical turn, Swift admits that he presents his argument without explicit biases or motives, presenting a fascinating counterpoint to the real motives at work in the piece. Consider his final admission: "I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the publick good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich."

If one discounts the moral, ethical, or humane elements of his proposal, one could argue that Swift does indeed solve the social problem he so accurately describes. If, however, one appreciates the full weight of his ruse one readily situates the hoax as a powerful document that seeks to politicize and make public the sufferings of children and the poor--those disadvantaged social groups that do not have the means of influencing legal, state, and civic apparatuses. More than this, Swift's proposal functions as a striking piece of social satire and as a powerful moment in the articulation of social justice advocacy. While the author ironically frames himself as a proponent of how to maximize the benefits of doing away with a hundred and twenty thousand unwanted children, the reader is afforded the rare opportunity to see how arguments of this kind function to benefit the rich and powerful. The hungry, homeless, and downtrodden represent societal challenges and problems to be surmounted, not resolved or eradicated. In the simplest possible terms, Swift pretends to "make a serious case for the benefits to be had by feeding poor children to the rich, although he clearly was making a dark comment on the inhumanity of the rich toward the poor" (Boese 33).

Rather than merely attack a figure who stands in for a disappointing/depraved branch of human activity (John Partridge's wilful deception of the reading public and his bastardization of knowledge), Swift here moves to an even greater site of injustice to denounce the existing state of affairs as being both unconscionable and wholly unavoidable. In both instances, Swift relies upon the cloak of irony to peddle a deception that will ultimately enable him to illuminate uncomfortable truths about the era and culture in which he lived. The hoax, as Swift engineered it, was a refreshing tactic that served to amplify the moral and ethical spirit that informed his major works (viz. *Gulliver's Travels*) on occasions that warranted another medium and a different mode of expression.

Hoaxing and Mass Media

If the great hoaxes and hoaxers of the eighteenth century are characterized for their mischief-making as well as their instructive, educational role as popular forms of entertainment, nineteenth and twentieth century incarnations prove to be almost universally concerned with spectacle and sensationalism. The greatest proponents of spectacular hoaxing--P.T. Barnum, Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst--ushered in a new era where sensationalism was used in the interests of selling newspapers and promoting

professional entertainment. They came to hone and perfect the finest public relations scenarios to build mass readerships and audiences, and in doing so, inspired a host of imitators to continue in their guileful ways. In what is perhaps one of the greatest examples of the sensationalized media hoax, the *New York Sun* spun a remarkable story in 1835 that depicted a famous British astronomer's discovery of life on the moon. Sir John Herschel's groundbreaking new telescope was so powerful it was not only able to capture images of the moon's "man-bats," biped beavers, and hut dwellings, it could also facilitate the documentation of its unicorns, birds, and insect colonies. Aside from the *Sun*'s sizeable increase in its circulation, the paper also profited from the sale of prints and images of the fascinating man-bats. When competing newspapers began to denounce the story as a hoax (for obvious economic and competitive reasons), the *Sun* cleverly deflected reader suspicion and skepticism by claiming that if Herschel's findings were fraudulent, they too would be the unwitting victims of a clever hoax. Unable to compete with the *Sun*'s foolproof tactics, the *New York Herald* would soon after publish a confession of the hoax on the part of the story's suspected author. Nevertheless the controversy continued to bolster the public's growing interest in the story, translating into a brilliant spike in the *Sun*'s circulation and readership. The Great Moon Hoax speaks to an emergent mass reading public's fascination with spectacular stories and expanding story arcs; at the same time, it offers keen insight into the cleverly deceptive tactics developed by journalists and editors to simultaneously attract readers and discredit rivals.

There was no greater hoaxer during what Edgar Allen Poe referred to as the "epoch of the hoax" than P. T. Barnum. The self-anointed "Prince of Humbug" earned his place as the world's greatest entertainer and promoter by carefully manipulating public interest based on the trends and fascinations of his day. He was just as comfortable pedaling exhibits featuring George Washington's former nurse (an alleged 161 year old woman), hyping a mermaid exhibit, creating an unauthorized replica of an attention-grabbing statue (the Cardiff Giant), and promoting a free, albeit non-existent, grand buffalo hunt in Hoboken, New Jersey. No matter the angle, Barnum was always able to deliver spectacular fodder for a mass audience, making him a fascinating case study for thinking about the ways in which artifice can work to create and reinforce the desire for spectacle. Of all his contemporaries, Barnum masterfully navigated the fine balance between overt deception and mass entertainment. So long as Barnum's "humbug" (deceptive false talk or behaviour) was cast as entertainment, the deceptions were tolerated, if not totally embraced and encouraged. Barnum's entire career might be founded on the notion that audiences cultivate a desire to witness spectacles (and their larger unfolding) at the same time that entertainers (and hoaxers) exploit that interest at every profitable turn.

Nowhere is this desire to stir up controversy greater than at the turn of the twentieth century when journalism tycoons like Pulitzer and Randolph Hearst sought to control the penny press industry. This period saw the pervasive influence of two competing journalistic models that are particularly useful when addressing the question of what constitutes responsible journalism: the entertainment model (made famous by Pulitzer's *New York World*) and the information model (introduced and championed by *The New York Times*). These two journalistic ideals--the former centred on providing "satisfying aesthetic experiences," the latter emphasizing the "truth value of news" ([Schudson 89](#)), reinforced dominant news paradigms that still form the kernel of journalistic standards for reporting. It was precisely the chase to deliver "satisfying aesthetic experiences" that brought stories of questionable accuracy and integrity to a mass readership.

The Unevenness of (Mass Media) Hoaxing: Motives, Outcomes, Longevity

The history of hoaxing across mass media systems is rich and varied, illuminating a complex web of human desires. These type hoaxes appear most often to be motivated by financial gain. An 1864 Associated Press news release announced President Lincoln's continued investment in the Civil War by ordering the enlistment of four thousand men. The announcement caused the New York Stock Exchange

to plummet, enabling the hoaxer (newspaper editor Joseph Howard, Jr.) to quickly invest and sell his day's gold shares for a sizeable profit. Howard's stunt neatly encapsulates the hoaxer's explicit economic motives, as well as the means needed to secure great wealth. At the level of nationhood, hoaxes emerge to promote false images of rival nations, like when the *Times* of London mistakenly published a story in 1856 about violent and murderous duels taking place in trains traveling across the state of Georgia (a tale meant to warn the British of the violent nature of American society). As it turned out, the *Times* reporter had merely misinterpreted American slang, mistaking heavy drinking for violent murder. No matter the hoax, a successful stunt always captures the popular imagination through spectacle. So strong is the desire to witness awe-inspiring spectacles that even when such sights are openly discovered to be false, the public continues to buy into the illusion. Such was the case with the unearthed ten-foot carved Cardiff Giant, an elaborate deception concocted by two enterprising figures looking to earn a quick fortune. Even when the statue was discovered to be a fake by a famous paleontologist from Yale--and despite a public confession by the hoax's chief architect--the public's fascination with the Giant continued unabated. It was such a hit that P. T. Barnum would create a replica of the statue to capitalize on the original's success. Once catapulted to greater visibility across mass media, hoaxes can also render human beings susceptible to believing in the existence of fairies (Cottingly Fairies), sea and land monsters (Loch Ness, Sasquatch), extraterrestrial beings and UFOs, weather-controlling machines, whiskey-drinking jackalopes (rabbits with antlers), spaghetti harvesting trees, as well as the cloning of our own species! There is truly no limit to what facets of human life (past or present) will be deceptively misrepresented and passed off as true, only to be simultaneously embraced and questioned by a range of observers. Some hoaxes begin with modest aims, but go on to produce full-blown media spectacles. Others are never revealed to be hoaxes. Certain deceptions stir controversy for decades; others die away within hours. Some of the worst hoaxes retain an incalculable longevity; some of the best are relegated to the dustbin of history. With the influence of hoaxing reaching far and wide through the increasingly powerful arms of mass media, it is useful to frame news media as complicit actors in the circulation of hoaxes, for without their reach and impact hoaxes would rarely be afforded the opportunity to materialize.

Incentives and Motivations (A brief overview)

- Some of the incentives are purely economic--there are vast sums of money to be made from a successful hoax (Elmyr de Hory, PT Barnum);
- Some hoaxers zero in on the potential for media attention, notoriety, and fame that comes with a well orchestrated hoax (Balloon boy);
- Hoaxes exist to challenge fixed and dogmatic assumptions of the world, cornering often misunderstood provinces of human thought and intellectual endeavour (Scientific research);
- Hoaxers can operate purely in self-interest, passing off falsehoods in the interests of proving their skill and agility in fooling mainstream media establishment and the broader public;
- Hoaxes also figures as exceptional playgrounds for those wishing to test the limits and opportunities of emerging media (Welles' *War of the Worlds*).

Media Hoaxing as Welcome Deceptions

In certain cases of economic, literary or artistic fraud, the architect of a hoax wishes to conceal the stunt in large part to avoid the unseemly consequences of legal action and to secure, albeit covertly, a degree of credibility, power, fame, or social standing; recall Elmyr de Hory or Clifford Irving and the lengths to which they each went to keep their hoaxes hidden from view. Importantly, the information disseminated in a given hoax is presented as truthful, legitimate, and official, making it a particularly

attractive and problematic form of public discourse. In this vein, media hoaxing shares with its traditional precursors a deft ability to initiate public discourse with regards to both trivial and important matters, but in the examples that follow, I place added emphasis on the notion that the hoaxes are created with the express intent of being deciphered and known. As cultural theorist Richard Dyer puts it, “A hoax only really comes to fruition when it is exposed as such, often by the hoaxer him or herself, for the point of the hoax is to see whether you can pull it off and/or to demonstrate that people are easily fooled” (29). While the object of any hoax is to fool one’s target, it’s important to note that being fooled can lead to enlightenment. Thus, in the final section of this chapter, I frame media hoaxing (1) as a practice capable of highlighting social problems and issues that most citizens feel powerless to address and (2) as a mode of address designed to communicate inherent dangers embedded in the everyday consumption of news and information.

At the heart of our cultural obsession with hoaxing is a broader fascination with the trickster figure, the confidence man, the scam artist, the fraud, the screwball, the practical joker, the impostor, the prankster, the huckster, the madcap, the bullshitter—the list could go on. If the hoaxer is more often than not rendered synonymous with these and other figures, his/her work is largely deemed negative or destructive in scope, marking the hoaxer as a dangerous presence that must be treated with due caution, hostility, or irreverence. To do so, however, would be to miss an opportunity to examine the politics embedded in this specialized kind of labour and in this artful mode of public discourse. Contemporary media hoaxes form a peculiar genre because they are almost always meant to be deciphered and/or discovered. Media hoaxers like Alan Abel and Joey Skaggs weave their perfectly crafted narratives in the interests of gaining instant exposure to a mass audience. What differentiates hoax artists like Abel and Skaggs from run-of-the-mill scam artists, however, is the broader intent underlying their carefully laid deceptions: they consistently hoax news media outlets because they wish to illustrate just how poorly journalists cover the news.

Alan Abel has been described as the greatest media hoaxer of twentieth century mass media, a man who has hijacked mainstream media outlets to insert his special brand of mischievous social critique into the 24-hour news cycle. His expertly devised hoaxes have served to petition the indecency of naked animals (*SINA: Society of Indecency to Naked Animals*), to denounce the unseemliness of breastfeeding (*Citizens Against Breastfeeding*), to publicize the merits of a national fat tax (“A fat tax is a fair tax”), to popularize professionalized panhandling (*The School for Beggars*), to bring an end to bird pornography (“Stop bird porn”), and other such deviously concocted pranks. Given such outlandish and diverse subject matter, it’s nearly impossible to pinpoint Abel’s motives in perpetrating these hoaxes. How does one move from instituting a fat tax to teaching panhandling to clothing animals? Is this deception? Is this bullshit? Are these hoaxes malicious or benign? On the face of it Abel’s fabrications (or fabulations) are pure sensationalism, stories that would be right at home at the turn of the twentieth century under the encouragement of newspaper tycoons like Pulitzer and Randolph Hearst. His hoaxes have generated a great deal of international media attention, much to the chagrin of journalists who have been unwittingly taken in by Abel’s clever pranks.

What’s so interesting about Abel’s work is the unmistakable absurdist, satiric tone. With Abel, humour represents the reward of seeing the hoax through to its logical conclusion; the use of satire also protects the hoaxer from any unnecessary or unwanted backlash. As Abel puts it:

I use humour as the underlying theme in all my hoaxes. It’s really dead-pan comedy. But a serious demeanour always implies serious talk. My audiences have always been fooled until I’m ready to let them in on the satire. They may laugh a lot prior, but the joke is really on them.

Indeed Abel’s own rationale for his work as a professional media hoaxer is at once powerful and insightful. Echoing his eighteenth century counterparts, Abel’s goal is to amuse and educate. Far from materializing as a threatening or destructive presence, Abel’s work embodies, if not envisions, a

democratic sort of politics. Abel's hoaxes are meant to disrupt the lull of everyday media consumption with an intervention of sorts, one that asks citizens to be active figures in their transactions with news media: "Instead of being passive bystanders, the people who get involved [the audience/general public] become active participants. They have to decide for themselves what's going on, what's to be learned from the experience." By offering up a sensationalist tale that circulates seamlessly alongside the countless other sensationalist stories making the rounds in a given 24-hour news cycle, Abel enables audiences to evaluate and compare the integrity of these type stories, as well as the credibility of the news organizations the report on them.

Joey Skaggs adopts a similar critical stance toward media in his work as a professional media hoaxer. Skaggs explains his relationship to mainstream media in this way: "I give the media what it wants. Something sensational, sexual, ridiculous, fluffy. And they buy it." In 1976, Skaggs ran the following advertisement in the *Village Voice*:

Cathouse for Dogs

Featuring a savory selection of hot bitches. From pedigree (Fifi, the French Poodle) to mutts (Lady the Tramp). Handler and Vet on duty. Stud and photo service available. No weirdos, please. Dogs only. By appointment. Call 254-7878.

For good measure, Skaggs enlisted the help of several friends and actors to play the dog pimps of his "cathouse for dogs." In this regard, he can be likened to a playwright or filmmaker in that his hoaxes are tightly scripted affairs meant to bypass an already suspicious gatekeeping establishment--conceived, written, produced, directed, staged, and acted with locations and props and pre-packaged footage (viz. press releases and video content). The advertisement quickly drew the attention of several NYC television stations, the *Soho News*, the ASPCA, the Bureau of Animal Affairs, and the NYPC vice squad. Skaggs had created an international sensation, inciting the wrath of the ASPCA (who would go on to file a lawsuit against the hoaxer). That a tiny and inconsequential advertisement in the *Village Voice* could stir up such a media frenzy proved a turning point in Skaggs' elaboration of the media hoax. As Skaggs would have it: "I was using the media as a medium. Rather than sticking with oil paint, the media became my medium; I got involved with the phenomenon of the media and communication as my art." As far as Skaggs' art is concerned, each hoax has three parts (or acts):

- *the hook* (the juicy/irresistible aspect of a story that journalists cannot refuse to cover);
- *the line* (the ways in which various arms of the media will bend the content and meaning of the story);
- *the sinker* (the act of unearthing and discussing the serious issues embedded within the hoax).

Consider Skaggs' tactics as a means of investigating hoaxes on their own terms (hoaxing for hoaxing sake): "Hoaxing is just the easiest thing in the world to do, but hoaxing isn't the issue. The issue is disinformation. How do hoaxes happen?" As we've already seen, the mechanisms for appreciating the hook and the line of a given hoax are well documented. What's missing from these accounts is a better understanding of the third act--*the sinker*--in which news media all-too-often trivialize the hoax and its engineer. At best, the hoaxer is given a brief reprieve to explain why s/he went to such great lengths to deceive the audience; in the worst case scenario, journalists choose to play up the hoax as a brutish or vulgar deception, in what amounts to an outright dismissal of the serious import of the act. In terms of establishing a critical frame for the ethically-minded hoaxer, Skaggs has this to say: "You're already being pranked everyday [via news media]. If you think *I'm* the prankster, you are sadly mistaken. I'm just ringing the bell."

An equally combative Alan Abel vindicates his desire to jump in and create havoc across mainstream media precisely due to its traditionally ruthless behaviour: "they deserve to be pricked once in awhile."

Their pomposity and insensitivity are overwhelming. The media lies and lies and lies.” If news media are susceptible to chasing and reporting stories high on headline-grabbing sensationalism and low on credibility, it follows that consumers of news should be wary and cautious in their everyday consumption of news. According to Abel and Skaggs, news media consistently demonstrate a reckless, irresponsible relationship to disseminating news and information, pursuing stories that will satisfy editors, advertisers and readers, irrespective of the veracity or integrity of the story. One author calls this the “rise of carelessness toward reality,” a scenario he argues invokes the need to learn how to live in a “post-fact society” (Manjoo). While the initial power of the media hoax stems from its ability to capture the attention and imagination of the public (Boese 2), its true potential lies in its capacity to incite democratic possibilities and to question the health and vitality of our news media.

Figures like Abel and Skaggs “create stories that are so unusual that reporters are almost anxious to cover them.” Such is the ethical bind or contradiction at the heart of the hoaxer’s enterprise: to publish and circulate stories that are inherently false in the interests of revealing hidden truths about how news and information are gathered and disseminated. It is fair to ask whether hurting media credibility via hoaxing is a fair tradeoff for increased media literacy and transparency. In 1992, the American Journalism Review published a provocative article warning journalists about media hoaxers (Abel and Skaggs figure prominently throughout). Media hoaxers are depicted as professionals who are more than adept at “conning the press”; as such, the piece is meant to instruct journalists on “how not to get burned” by one of these con artists: “[Hoaxes are] a growing occupational hazard for harried journalists.” As far as journalists are concerned, to be burned by a hoaxer puts one’s reputation and credibility at risk. Although hoaxers such as Abel and Skaggs purport to carry out ethically and morally grounded pranks, hoaxes are never neutral and there are always consequences: journalists who miss the mark may be demoted or fired.

But before we side too closely with unsuspecting journalists, let’s briefly review the current state of journalism. For readers to appreciate both how and why hoaxing has assumed such a central place is to explore the machinations of contemporary journalism. Media theorists and scholars situate journalism as “the sense-making practice of modernity” (Hartley, *Popular Reality* 32), as well as one of the primary instruments through which culture is preserved, recorded, and revisited (Carey, “Mass Media” 20). In theory, traditional news media serve to lay the foundation upon which ordinary, everyday citizens make sense of their lives, of the communities they live in, and of the world at large. More specifically, journalism serves a crucial role in informing the public on a broad range of issues that reflect the state of contemporary society. The most emblematic term used to describe the press’s central function remains that of *watchdog*, that is, as a critical check on powerful individuals, institutions, and increasingly, corporations. When journalism fails to perform this vital democratic role, citizens are kept from knowing, understanding, or even discussing important issues in any meaningful way.

The implications are clear: if citizens are unable to distinguish between legitimate and false accounts of the news, if they fail to perceive the growing divide between what constitutes accurate information and misinformation, and lastly, if readers are ill-equipped to detect the subtlety of satirical criticism and ironic utterances embedded in media hoaxing and popular entertainment, cultivating a healthy democracy will prove to be an elusive endeavour. If news media are merely peddling various kinds of misinformation, covert propaganda, and sensationalist news items, one could argue that news organizations have already successfully compromised their own integrity as purveyors of credible, trustworthy, and vital information.

Importantly, Abel and Skaggs are not alone in their critical provocations. As we’ll see in the chapters to come, fellow media hoaxers the Yes Men describe their work as an opportunity for everyday citizens to “just start doing the same things in all kinds of different contexts, impersonating whoever holds power that needs to be criticized.” One of the most powerful outcomes of this cultural practice may indeed reside in what Lynda Walsh calls hoaxing’s “educative potential,” that is, the hoax’s ability “to open readers’ eyes to potentially dangerous assumptions they make about a particular social institution.” As Walsh puts

it, “the hoax accomplishes this [transformation] in the moment the reader perceives the gap, the lack, between what she has assumed and what the state of the art really is” (Walsh 169). It is precisely in this way that hoaxing—as well as repeated exposure to hoaxes—prepares the way for greater information and media literacy and for a greater understanding of the ways in which genres such as journalism and public relations operate and evolve.

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A Brief Overview of the Yes Men’s Hoaxing Style

Almost every Yes Men hoax begins with a fake website that reproduces the look and style of the original; examples include spitting image reproductions of The White House, Dow Chemical, *New York Times*, *New York Post*, Exxon, Environment Canada, and World Trade Organization (WTO) websites, among others. Because these websites are often mistaken for the real thing (despite the unmistakable satiric and parodic content), invitations to speak at conferences and media events are unwittingly forwarded to The Yes Men. These opportunities generally translate into outlandish performances that generate media coverage. In the absence of any media coverage, the Yes Men issue press releases to journalists and various news organizations. For example, when the group “disbanded” the WTO in May 2002 (no small feat), they sent a press release to 25,000 journalists, politicians, and news agencies worldwide, resulting in widespread reportage of the event. Of course, these efforts all lead to the final undertaking in this process—the revelation of the hoax. Returning to the WTO example, once the hoax was revealed (as it would be a few short hours after the initial press conference), the story garnered international press coverage, culminating in AP/Reuters wire stories and follow-up interviews; various media outlets then covered the story in television and radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, and so on; and finally, coverage of the hoax was remediated and re-circulated on the Internet, further amplifying the event’s impact.

If the sole outcome of these hoaxes proved news media’s quiet dismissal of what it deemed malicious pranking on the part of disgruntled activists, then the larger function of the spectacle would be inherently lost. However, because justification for these hoaxes is actively sought out by journalists and newsmakers, the Yes Men’s tactics afford them the opportunity to clarify their position and articulate the political dimensions of their work to broader audiences. Although they become the subject of greater media scrutiny, they are afforded considerable opportunities to expand the thrust of their critiques. Due to the nature of their work, these added opportunities to explain their position are of crucial importance because their critiques are not always readily intelligible to various audiences. Importantly, this entire process, the origins of which can be traced back to a fake website, spawns a web of critical commentary that gives the press an opportunity to report on serious issues, and gives readers and audiences an opportunity to reflect on issues of great civic and political importance. These tactics are crucial to manufacturing and circulating dissenting views in mainstream media. For the Yes Men, a “successful” hoax leads to expansive and sustained media coverage, and with it, broader awareness and civic engagement. As Mike suggests, “The reason we do it is so that people who read *Bazaar* magazine or *The New York Times* or *Fortune* or *Harper’s* can read about it in the mainstream press. This is how millions of people can read about it and potentially get turned on to some of [our] ideas.” Not all gossip, rumours, and urban legends have such lofty aspirations.

The Importance of the Feedback Loop

The importance of feedback in the architecture of each Yes Men prank cannot be understated. They prank not simply because they relish pulling off spectacular hoaxes, not merely because they are able to pass as representatives of corporations with whom they do not associate, not solely because the loopholes in everyday news reporting are easily bypassed. This may inform in some small part the initial thrill associated with doing this kind of niche (and for the most part tedious) work. But the Yes Men hijack mass media outlets in the interests that their story will gain a foothold with the initial audience, will gain traction with journalists unwilling to pass on a story that is perhaps too good to be true, and will continue on its own uneven trajectory as it floats across various constellations of the web. Their stunts are engineered (or manufactured) with the stated goal of reaching as large an audience as possible. The original broadcast or transmission of the hoax is less important: if the audience share of a particular hoax is less than, say, 100 people at the moment the act transpires, so be it. If the hoax is successful, it will attract broader media coverage in print, broadcast, and Internet media, bringing the prank, however briefly, into the limelight. Because the Yes Men are skilled and faithful recorders of their own work, these materials will soon after materialize on the web to a modest and at times much larger Internet audience.

For seminal media hoaxer Alan Abel, “a good hoax is one that manages to be published. A successful one not only fools the media watchdogs, but also delivers its message.” To do this, however, requires a ruse or larger deception, and this leaves the hoaxer on shaky ground with regards to the primary target (the object of derision or ridicule), the unsuspecting figures they dupe (in large part the news media apparatus that peddles the larger story), and ultimately the audience they seek to court or influence (anyone privy to the hoax). The relationships cultivated by the hoaxer are complicated, in that they demand some degree of trust on the part of those they wish to simultaneously deceive or enlighten; in most instances, the hoaxer also requires a leap of faith from those they deceive, asking for the opportunity to explain why they have gone to such great lengths to tell their story.

Once the hoax has fooled (or at the very least bypassed) media gatekeepers--and most importantly, once the prank has been purposefully revealed by the perpetrators (a Yes Men hallmark), those on the wrong end of the deception will actively seek clarification, explanation, and in certain instances, retribution for the perceived harm created by the spectacle. Some news organizations and journalists will relish the prank because the deception offers them an opportunity to pursue/investigate issues that may only rarely attract media attention, given the narrow frame with which profit-seeking news organizations now frame the current events. Others will seek to publicly reprimand and humiliate the perpetrators for their transgressions; namely, in the interests of repairing their reputation and restoring their credibility (any news organization that falls victim to a hoax can be seen to be lacking editorial oversight or perceived to be sloppy in their evaluation of facts, figures, and presenters). What’s interesting to note is how these interactions afford the hoaxer the opportunity to clarify the message and to expand the likelihood that the hoax will continue to attract media coverage. If, on the one hand, those deceived are sympathetic to the general motives informing the deception, the hoaxer should enjoy more leeway to explain the course of action, as well as the primary reasons for and objectives of the prank; if, on the other hand, those taken in by the prank are not amused, they will seek to vilify the hoaxers all the while trivializing their actions (progressive or otherwise). Importantly, the circulation of the hoax’s larger message--and its survival in the already-bloated 24-hour news cycle--hinges on a feedback loop that enables the hoaxer to state, explain, and reinforce the validity of his/her actions. More than this, if the issue at hand raises enough interest or causes enough controversy, the initial hoax may very well travel across a number of media

outlets and sites before receding into the background. Without this feedback loop, hoaxes can all but disappear from view before they are afforded even a modest audience.

What distinguishes the Yes Men's deceptions is that they do not seek to explicitly humiliate the news media they must first dupe before their story is told. Rather, they see themselves as open collaborators with these entities. Far from deceiving in the interests of hiding or concealing the real motivations behind their actions, the group expressly "creates a hook to let journalists write about issues that they care about." [According to Andy](#), the press doesn't mind being misled. "They have fun with it, and usually get a good story out of it," he said. "Most get it pretty quickly."

This is patently different than the hoaxer that wishes to embarrass or humiliate those unable to discern the hoax, and it also differs from the hoaxer wishing to conceal a fraud due to legal, social, or political reasons. I liken this to a quasi transparent branch of media hoaxing, one that carries out an elaborate deception as the means through which a story may be told. The attendant logic is as follows: hijack the media with a clever hoax, and then you are afforded a brief window of opportunity to discuss, say, social justice issues regarding the environment and corporate malfeasance. In an interesting turn, this brand of hoaxing cultivates an uneasy yet productive relationship with irony--to say one thing and mean another in this context is to prepare the way for a mode of truth-telling--a relationship I explore in the chapters to come.

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CHAPTER THREE: COMING TO A CONFERENCE NEAR YOU

The notion of exchanging ideas and fostering dialogue and debate is at the very heart of democratic ideals. Western democracies inherited these ideals from the Greeks and Romans, adapting them to their own devices and purposes. According to distinguished public sphere scholar Jürgen Habermas, the earliest of these exchanges in the Modern era took place most notably in European coffeehouses. In this setting, periodical articles not only proved to be essential to the elaboration of everyday discussion, they also formed integral parts of the broader discourses that would pervade the culture. And while some points of discussion were benign or muted, there was a real sense that the free and open exchanges fostered in these vibrant new settings were dangerous to the state and to society at large. To put it crudely, the coffeehouses were deemed to be "seedbeds of political unrest." In today's Starbucks-lite coffeehouse consumer culture, it would take a giant feat of the imagination to conjure up any visions of "political unrest" in these otherwise apolitical spaces. But this was the seventeenth century, an era of epochal transformation that would foster new paths of critical inquiry and new branches of epistemology. In an interesting passage, [Habermas unearths an edict from 1670s Britain](#) that situates just how unsavoury this culture was to the government of the time:

Men have assumed to themselves a liberty, not only in coffee-houses, but in other places and meetings, both public and private, to censure and defame the proceedings of the State, by speaking evil of things they understand not, and endeavouring to create and nourish an universal jealousy and dissatisfaction in

the minds of all His Majesties good subjects.

The State's objections to these meetings and discussions stem from larger anxieties governments were having about the freedom(s) of journalistic critique and the rise of public opinion. Despite these objections, the public sphere that bloomed during this time was generally held to be a good thing. As Steven Johnson argues, the English eighteenth-century coffeehouse is now widely recognized as a hotbed for innovation, a precursor of sorts to today's numerous interface communicative platforms. [For Johnson](#) these spaces had "unusual properties," in that "they made people think differently, because they created an environment where different kinds of thoughts could productively collide and recombine." It is precisely these collisions and recombinations, he suggests, that make innovation possible--scientific, artistic, technological, literary, and so on. For the sake of total oversimplification, the coffeehouses of the Reformation find their analogous contemporary incarnations in the form of the Internet's vast online public spheres, in what have materialized as primary sites of intellectual debate and exchange. While some have bemoaned the shrinking of the public sphere and the acute disengagement felt across the (young) electorate, public discussion and debate are still very much alive and well. It may not have the antagonistic sophistication, esteem, noblesse-oblige, or radicalism of former idealized public spheres, but Internet culture is nothing short of spectacular in the range, quality, and intensity of opinion expressed across its networks.

The Modern Conference

One forum where things like tradition, decorum, and authority are generally respected is the modern-day conference. Unlike unruly coffeehouses and free-for-all Internet comment boxes, conferences have remained relatively conservative, embracing a star-system of keynote speakers and proven provocateurs; they celebrate the coming together of minds within a given field, highlighting new developments and harnessing well established currents of thought; they bring individuals, companies, organizations--even a wide range of subcultural communities--to small towns and megacities, inviting a degree of cosmopolitanism and international exchange into the mix. While conferences rarely ever come to an end without some setbacks, complications, or minor controversies, they are regarded as international staples across disciplines, industries, and institutions.

On the face of it, conferences constitute strange and disorienting affairs. Why people willingly subject themselves to these exercises in human congregation is baffling: the generic name tags, labyrinthian venues, uncomfortable seats, poor air circulation, disingenuous people, dubious credentials, generic food, terrible coffee, and equally dismal travel destinations. They are costly to attend, with few if any subsidies available to cushion the blow. Of course, not all conferences are created equal. Certain conferences do, in theory, get it right: brilliant city destinations, free wifi, great emerging and non-traditional venues, creative lounge spaces, excellent networking events and parties, inspiring speakers and attendees, affordable rates, and so on. One of the primary motivations for attending conferences, however, is to spur "professional development" and to bring people together in the hopes of creating partnerships and building professional networks. If the broader intent is to forge community and encourage a hive-mind mentality, it follows that the contemporary conference has the potential to become a kind of love-in.

TED comes to mind.

TED is arguably the world's most well recognized and branded conference format on the web, providing free content to millions of online enthusiasts. As a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas in three primary areas of interest--Technology, Entertainment, and Design--TED has become a dominant purveyor in the circulation of ideas; it has also reinvigorated the way everyday people view conferences and has brought new vitality to how experts deliver information to audiences with strained attention spans. The delivery

of wide-ranging, insightful, and inspiring material is arguably what has earned TED such widespread admiration. TED has given experts (and its conference organizers) rock star appeal, and with this newfound cachet, the organization has built a community of faithful devotees.

YouTube is brimming with these talks, many of them brilliant, but it's not all good news in the end. The flipside of TED's success is that it has had a homogenizing effect on how ideas are delivered and what experts can and cannot say. One TED presenter, Sebastian Wernicke, even went so far as to statistically analyze 525 TED talks to reveal larger patterns in what constitutes a *perfect* conference talk: what topics, words, phrases, colours, visuals, and delivery methods are used and to what effect. What Wernicke cleverly shows is that TED users have come to revere certain things (presenters that are slightly dressed up/wear glasses) while disliking others ("Do not cite the *NYT*!"). Wernicke's meta-TED talk is at once a benign cautionary tale of what *not* to do when presenting at the conference, and also a knowing wink to the already-converted masses of why they fell in love with TED in the first place. In the worst case scenario, TED silences some of its presenters' voices, either by publicly humiliating them or by removing or withholding their talks from its website. For example, TED organizer Chris Anderson publicly humiliated an invited comedian via Twitter: "I know I shouldn't say this about one of my own speakers, but I thought Sarah Silverman was god-awful." Silverman's talk is curiously missing from the main website, as are a number of other talks that do not accurately represent the spirit or politics of the organization. Things like mischief-making, dissent, or deviance from the unwritten script aren't exactly tolerated, mimicking the implicit expectations of most professional conferences.

Even when one does attend conferences in good faith (no matter the anticipated quality of the event), meaningful intellectual exchange is never guaranteed and is at times limited. Today's mega-conferences, for example, feature hundreds of panel sessions (many of which run concurrently) and thousands of presenters. Due to the degree of overlap in many of the sessions, many of the speakers and presentations you wish to see will be scheduled at inopportune times. By the second or third day, your ability to absorb information will be severely limited due to decreased attention spans and depleted brain power. But this is an entirely natural part of the conference-going experience.

The real rub is that, true to the TED ethos, consensus and admiration all too often trump critique and dissent. There is no genuine room to challenge dogmatic views, values, or perspectives because the overarching idea is to immerse oneself seamlessly in the conference culture and to respect the host organization or association. Those who do assume combative roles in their exchanges are promptly marginalized and prove the subject of much gossip and derision (they may even in some instances inspire their own Twitter hashtag discussion). The portrait I'm painting isn't exactly a faithful depiction of conferences as they are or of conferences as I have known them. Despite the slightly embellished tone, I can still attest to the overall conservative nature of conferences. It is rare when keynote speakers of considerable fame or influence are openly critiqued, challenged, or ridiculed. As rituals with well established guidelines for professional etiquette, conferences don't encourage such oppositional stances, nor do they support these kinds of exchanges. Flaming people on the Internet is one thing; openly criticizing a vetted public figure, one hand-picked by conference organizers, is undoubtedly less common. To embarrass a keynote speaker would be to discredit the integrity and professional standing of the conference, its organizers, and the attendees. It may also be true that in certain contexts the ideas expressed within a broader community are near universally shared, making critical or dissenting remarks unlikely.

But that isn't to say that conferences don't attract their fair share of controversy.

In this chapter, I address what happens when a group of activists immerse themselves in a conference culture organized by elite interests in the sole interests of critiquing unjust and harmful corporate and government policies. If you've never attended a conference where speakers rely heavily on irony, screen

weirdly ridiculous CGI video presentations, wear flashy futuristic costumes, and say openly deplorable things, you have not witnessed a Yes Men conference presentation.

Here is your chance.

The Yes Men as the World Trade Organization

It's time to introduce the Yes Men's early beginnings as esteemed conference presenters. To date they've attended numerous international conferences, assuming the identities of some of the largest and most influential institutions on the planet: World Trade Organization (WTO), Halliburton, ExxonMobil, and Shell, to name a few. While conferences are generally conceived of as a meeting ground to push a field or body of knowledge forward, the Yes Men invoke the conference presentation as a mechanism for challenging prevalent ideas through hyperbolic modes of ridicule or via utopian statements. The general framework for each Yes Men conference presentation is to take an idea (say, free market economics) and to push that idea to its most illogical conclusions. The result is meant to seem obvious to conference attendees, pushing the audience to see the shallowness, crudity, and short-sightedness of the organization's position. The Yes Men would enter their speaking engagements thinking they would be quickly found out as the imposters they were and be swiftly removed or arrested. Much to their surprise they were neither found out nor arrested: their audiences either failed to recognize the absurdity of their position or they implicitly embraced the logic of their proposed courses of action. For the power elite, hyperbole acts on the same plane as reality. In what follows I describe how the Yes Men infiltrated these exclusive conferences, introducing the early moments that defined their media hoaxing practices and solidified their standing as the decade's most venerated media pranksters.

The story begins in Salzburg.

First Conference: Salzburg!

"We think the ethical thing to do is to represent the WTO more honestly than they represent themselves."

- [Yes Men](#)

In May 2000, the Yes Men received an unexpected invitation to participate in a conference on International Services, organized by the Center for International Legal Studies (CILS). The email was addressed to Mike Moore, Director General of the WTO, and inquired whether Moore might serve as a moderator or panelist for a session on International Trade. Unbeknownst to the conference organizers, the email would never reach Moore because the message had been sent to a fake email address (WTO@gatt.org) via a fake WTO website (www.gatt.org). This miscommunication proved the beginning of the Yes Men's forays into conference hoaxing: they would quickly learn to cultivate the value of fake websites as first points of contact between themselves and the targets they wished to critique. As it turns out, the Yes Men were mistaken for representatives of the WTO for very understandable reasons: GATT--the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade--was the international free-trade agreement negotiated in the aftermath of World War II, an endeavour that proved the single-most influential means of expanding corporate power across free and open markets. The WTO is the organization responsible for administering and enforcing this longstanding agreement. Far from being benign or neutral in its role, the WTO mandate is to ensure that free trade continues unabated. And this is precisely a major point of contention for the Yes Men because "free trade," in their view, represents the championing of corporations over people--an ideology, practice, and philosophy that works to systemically curb the rights and freedoms of the world's people:

the freedom to organize a trade union, the freedom to grow your own crops, the freedom to maintain social services or protect the environment you live in; the freedom to *eat*, the freedom to *not* eat certain things, the freedom to drink water. In one form or another, all of these rights are under attack by huge corporations working under the veil of ‘free trade,’ this mysterious right that we are told must trump all others.

In November 1999, the Yes Men began posting content to their brilliantly fake WTO website (a pitch-perfect replication of the original) and almost immediately began receiving email from prospective WTO partners, lawyers, ministry officials, and academics, all mistaking GATT for the real thing. The website went live a week prior to the now infamous Seattle WTO protests (otherwise labelled the “Battle of Seattle”) and with a stroke of luck, the parody site came to the attention of real WTO officials who kindly devoted a full press release to the Yes Men’s cause. The WTO deemed the site deplorable, accusing its creators of creating unnecessary confusion and of “undermining WTO transparency.” Not a group known for its reticence, the Yes Men not only published the press release on its website, they also sent the notice to their mailing list (comprised of 10,000 journalists). With the WTO’s help, gatt.org soon came to the attention of dozens of journalists, who went on to publish accounts of the Yes Men’s outspoken criticisms of the organization. This public relations misfire lent greater visibility to what might have otherwise remained a virtually harmless and unknown satirical website. The momentum gained from this gaffe would ultimately snowball as visitors to the site would fail to note the satirical tone of the site. As the Yes Men explain: “Anyone with half a brain who actually *read* any of the text [we] had written would immediately know it could not possibly have been written by the real WTO.” And yet Google and Yahoo search engines continued to promote gatt.org in its rankings, giving the site even greater visibility and notariety. During this period, the site would have been visited by CILS conference organizers who were looking to entice WTO Director General Mike Moore to participate on a panel on global trade. While Moore would be “unavailable” to attend, the organization would gladly send Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer, an “authorized voice” within the WTO’s public relations sector. Almost a year after their first appropriation of the WTO’s identity (October 2000), the Yes Men would find themselves in Salzburg pushing its organization’s message even further.

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“We Really Were Going To Prison!”

The Yes Men’s first attempt to publically impersonate the WTO is a hilariously brilliant affair. Dr. Bichlbauer arrives at the conference wearing a suit purchased at a thrift store (a Yes Men hallmark), half-expecting to see his name excluded from the program on account of his being found out from the very beginning. Much to his surprise, he receives a folder, a name tag, and a program--all confirming the impossible: “We really were in Salzburg, we really had been invited to speak as the WTO, and we really were scheduled to do so in just over an hour. We really were going to prison!” Adapting to the part, Bichlbauer arrived at the Crowne Plaza Salzburg with two attachés (security detail and a videographer to document any potential threats to the speaker). At the time, a group of pie-throwing social justice activists called the Biotic Baking Brigade (BBB) were making the rounds. The BBB worked with the express goal of delivering “[delicious mischief](#)” through the momentary public humiliation of leading figures responsible for enacting what they deemed disastrous economic policies and practices. By January 2001, these self-proclaimed “militant bakers” had already successfully “pied” an impressive roster of figures in the interests of critiquing their ties to systemically produced injustices: economist Milton Friedman (neoliberal economics), Monsanto CEO Robert Shapiro (genetic engineering), Microsoft founder Bill Gates (corporate monopolies), and San Francisco mayor Willie Brown (urban poverty). It was precisely this worrisome current in activist practice that enabled Bichlbauer to infiltrate the venue with his fellow Yes Men; as such, they were essentially cleared to videotape and document the proceedings for posterity

(a trick that would help them amass over the next two years enough material for their first feature documentary). Despite the clever ruse, they hadn't anticipated all of the potential conference pitfalls.

When slated to give a paper or lecture at a conference, it's customary for speakers to send the moderator a short biography to help introduce the panel. For their Salzburg presentation, the group had submitted the title of their talk well in advance--"Trade Regulation Relaxation and Concepts of Incremental Improvement: Governing Perspectives from 1970 to the Present"--but had failed to deliver an author bio for Bichlbauer. When approached by the moderator for this baseline information, Andreas was visibly thrown--especially when the moderator proved to be a law professor who'd been teaching GATT for close to twenty years! Bichlbauer quickly jotted down scant details of his personal and professional formation: Juris Doctorate from Columbia University; legal scholar and representative of the WTO since 1998. He would eventually be introduced as such: "Mr. Andreas Bichlbauer, of Vienna. Austrian by birth, American by training, and Austrian by habitation (so he has come full circle)." Andreas would quickly learn that if one is to convincingly impersonate or falsely speak on behalf of a powerful organization, it follows that he should be perfectly capable of speaking to his own experience within the organization. Once the first wave of panic had hit, a second course of action now entered the frame: to devise an exit strategy with a foolproof escape route. As it turned out, hoaxing in this platform would require additional real-world preparations, none of which were required in the initial stages of the online hoax. Having narrowly dodged a bullet, Bichlbauer then passionately launched into his lecture on systemic barriers to free trade. Here we witness one of the first instances where the Yes Men deploy hoaxing as a legitimate form of political protest.

"Trade Regulation Relaxation and Concepts of Incremental Improvement: Governing Perspectives from 1970 to the Present"

In his twenty-minute talk, Bichlbauer addresses the various barriers that hinder free trade: tariff trade barriers, non-tariff trade barriers, and systemic trade barriers. Expressing a deeply ironic sensibility through the use of theoretical jargon, Bichlbauer's discussion of tariff trade barriers speaks of the *violence* committed against the Global South (lack of union memberships, child labour laws, and worker health standards), all the while championing the need to take perceptions of violence (and human emotions) out of the equation when drafting and reinforcing "rational, economics-based" trade agreements. In other words, violence mustn't be taken into consideration--let the market decide! In addressing non-tariff trade barriers, he speaks of the need to outlaw afternoon sleep or rest periods for workers (namely: the *siesta* in Spain and the *riposo* in Italy), as they needlessly curb worker productivity and impede the "free flow of progress" and capital. Such local customs or "peculiarities" must be stamped out because sleep represents, for the WTO, a "barrier to cooperation." Finally, Bichlbauer tackles the question of systemic trade barriers by referring to the link between consumer choice and democracy; looking to do away with inefficiencies within democratic institutions, he argues, or rather, the WTO suggests that to streamline the electoral system would greatly benefit democracy and would create yet another engine of capitalism. Under VoteAuction.com, voters would be permitted to sell their votes to the highest bidder, and because a website of this kind would only require four employees to run efficiently, both market systems and democracy would be extremely well served. In painting this very crude and overwhelmingly simple argument, Bichlbauer presents the WTO's idealized version of a free, liberated, and fully functioning global marketplace. In three deft moves, the Yes Men express some upsetting ideas: violence is tolerable so long as the markets surge; local customs can be eradicated in the interests of maximizing worker productivity; and democracy, like products and services, can be sold to the highest bidder.

The presentation was meant to be so utterly absurd, so contemptible, so unprincipled that the Yes Men had anticipated any number of reactions from the audience: confrontational remarks, some form of reprimand and rebuke, a pie in the face, being removed from the stage, or earning a trip to the Salzburg

prison. At the very least, they might have elicited remarks from confused listeners, as the entire talk was peppered with ridiculous asides and non-sequiturs. One aside of note (there are several others) comes when Bichlbauer suggests that trade liberties have for over a century “helped maintain peace between the wealthy, powerful countries of Europe, [having] a salutary effect, with the sole exception of colonialism and the slave trade.” Despite shrewd and tactless comments such as these, and much to their surprise, Bichlbauer had incited none of the latter; in fact, the general thrust of the audience’s reaction seemed to be neutral, if not positive. Even one of their most controversial statements regarding *VoteAuction.com* had previously incited legal threats in the United States, FBI raids, as well as the ire of media pundits such as Rush Limbaugh and Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Two weeks prior to their talk, a graduate student named James Baumgartner had created *VoteAuction* to critique the influence of money in politics and its role in undermining democratic institutions. The California Secretary of State went so far as to call *VoteAuction* “a corruption of the voting process” and “one of the most serious political crimes in California because it strikes at the heart of our democracy” (43). International trade lawyers, it would seem, were less shocked by the material. Perhaps violence, local customs, worker rights, and democracy were acceptable pawns in the larger arena of global free trade.

Given the outcome of what they deemed a scandalous talk, Mike and Andy left the conference feeling deflated that no one had challenged the expression of harmful and downright ridiculous ideas. They had to test the waters further to gauge the audience’s real reaction. In an effort to provoke some reaction to their talk, the Yes Men followed up with a series of emails instigated by Dennis Campbell from the CILS who had in fact written to voice his concern regarding some of what Dr. Bichlbauer had said in his talk. Here’s how Campbell described it:

The essential thrust of [Bichlbauer’s] speech appeared to be that Italians have a lesser work ethic than the Dutch, that Americans would be better off auctioning their votes in the presidential election to the highest bidder and that the primary role of the WTO was to create a one-world culture.

Seeking clarification from Bichlbauer’s WTO attaché, Campbell hoped to clarify two points: first, that he had correctly interpreted the speech, and second, that what he’d heard about Bichlbauer being pied in the face on the conference grounds was correct. In response, the Yes Men noted that Bichlbauer *had* been pied by their cameraman who’d managed to infiltrate his way in as an “agent provocateur” working on behalf of disgruntled anti-globalization activists; they also expressed that the lecture in no way deviated from WTO party lines in terms of the vision and execution of the organization’s mandate, in that the talk merely presented “issue extremes” to clarify the WTO’s future direction.

Two days later, impersonating Director General Mike Moore, the Yes Men bolstered the integrity of Bichlbauer’s speech by underlining that, no matter the examples given, efficiency and economic liberalization inform the core of the WTO’s policies. Then, in an absurdist turn that recalls Jonathan Swift’s Bickerstaff hoax, Moore informs the CILS that Bichlbauer is gravely ill, having contracted a serious infection from the pie (forensic analysis having shown that it contained an active bacillus agent). Looking to instigate further response regarding the talk, the naively cast Moore inquires whether anyone at the conference might have been provoked enough by Bichlbauer to participate in any foul play. In a final stroke of absurdity, Bichlbauer is pronounced dead in their last email, in which they reveal the hoax (the troupe in attendance proving to be part of “anti-trade cabal called the Yes Men.” But not all was lost: if there is any silver lining to be found in the Yes Men’s first hoax, it may be that a few of the conference delegates took issue with Bichlbauer’s comments regarding Italians having a lesser work ethic. And yet this response is precisely what motivates and concerns the Yes Men: if the world’s elites do not take issue with the WTO’s dominant logic or ideology, we will continue to accept its policies without even the slightest hint of dissent. For the world’s populations currently under the thumb of the WTO’s practices and policies (especially those in the Global South), this failure to raise concerns and challenge business as usual will continue to exacerbate inequities across the globe. It may very well be that Bichlbauer’s speech drew the ire of CILS delegates, but they did not dare criticize him publically on account of his

professional ties to the world's most powerful trade organization. It was precisely this failure to openly critique and challenge the reprehensible views of the WTO that pushed the Yes Men to continue as mouthpieces of the organization. Here's how Mike summarizes the first round of disappointment they felt following their hyperbolic antics in Salzburg:

So far, we thought Bichlbauer would be very extreme and people would react to it and we'd get shut down... And nothing of the sort happened. So this time we just have to really push it, make it totally extreme. I mean, we keep trying to push things further to try to really clarify the positions of the WTO to make them very legible.

Interlude: *European Marketwrap*

In their follow-up attempt to clarify the WTO's position, the Yes Men would make another splash on CNBC's [*European Marketwrap*](#) program on the eve of the G8 summit in Genoa (July 19, 2000). The program framed the G8 in terms of the tense relationship between the world's most powerful leaders and the legions of protesters already on the scene in Genoa. The live broadcast featured three guests who were invited to discuss the major themes of the G8 (trade, poverty, and policy) and to offer their thoughts on the impact of social protest on decision-making practices. Of the three invited speakers was WTO spokesman Granwyth Hulatberi, an offspring of sorts of Bichlbauer. If Bichlbauer's ideas were too subtle for his Salzburg audience to grasp, Hulatberi would pull no punches. When asked what the WTO is doing to ameliorate the conditions on the ground for the poorest countries, Hulatberi argues that while increases in poverty and inequality are undeniable, his organization's vision is rooted in an epistemology that dates back to the 1770s, meaning that free trade is undoubtedly the best and most efficient means of "bettering conditions for all consumers." At this point in the interview, activist Barry Coates, then Director of the World Development Movement, cites Hulatberi's words as concrete evidence of just how out-of-touch and unresponsive the WTO has become to the world's poorest countries. Indeed Coates argues that the WTO's policies have created a global system of trade that typically rewards rich countries at the mercy of the poor, the environment, and the vulnerable, disadvantaged groups in society: "If the WTO were serious about addressing the issues of world poverty, they would do things completely differently than the way they do now."

Transforming himself into a foil for Coates' argument, Hulatberi flippantly states that the latter (as well as the thousands of G8 protesters in Genoa) "are simply too focused on reality, and on facts and figures." Instead of highlighting disparities between farmers in the Global North and South (rich countries subsidizing their workers to the tune of twenty thousand dollars per year while poor countries provide a mere two hundred dollars per year), activists and protesters should defer to the expert wisdom of institutions such as the WTO because they understand the *theoretical basis* that informs economic growth and human prosperity. Instead of reading Trotsky, Robespierre, and Abbie Hoffman, a goading Hulatberi says, protesters must turn to the likes of Adam Smith and Milton Friedman before formulating their dystopian arguments. Rather than even remotely address the systemic issues at the heart of his organization's policies, Hulatberi snidely proposes a better solution: that within a generation, the protesters' children will be reared on neoliberal economic history and philosophy and will thus entertain "an entirely different set of concerns." Of course, Hulatberi's simplistic and insulting arguments afford Coates the opportunity to articulate precisely what is wrong under the WTO's current structure: the rich

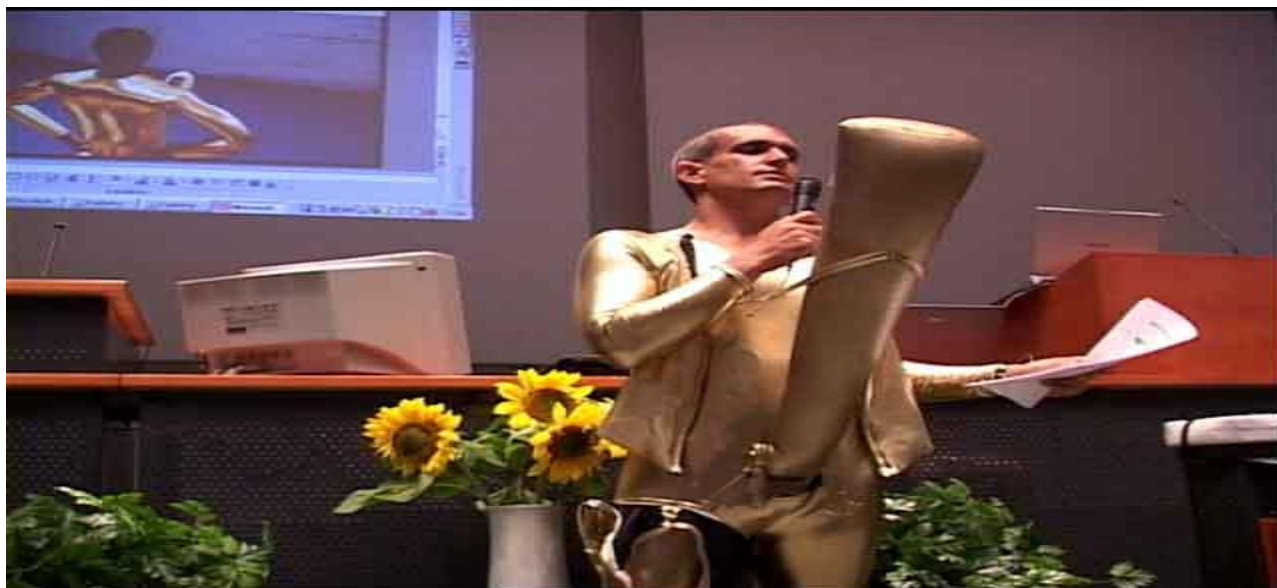
and powerful G8 countries feed on the poorest of countries that are being opened up to global trade well before they are able to compete internationally, a feat that has effectively wiped out many domestic industries by well-funded transnational corporations. And in a final rebuttal to Hultebjer's self-sustaining logic (powerful people, thinkers, and institutions all coincide with his neoliberal views), Coates argues that the WTO's deeply flawed policies are now being contested at every turn and that the protests in Genoa (and previously in Seattle) represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of popular protest against such decision-making entities.

The Yes Men's performance on *MarketWrap* was notable in that they depicted the WTO in the most ruthlessly honest way possible. In so doing, viewers were encouraged to sympathize with Coates and the anti-globalization movement next to a predominantly unsympathetic elitist who spoke with demonstrably unfounded convictions. Despite his noticeable frustration throughout the segment, Coates couldn't have dreamed up a better figure to illustrate the WTO's ideological blind spots. In offering up the image of a grossly out-of-touch and unresponsive WTO, the Yes Men are better able to critique the organization through their sly insertion of a *shill* (also referred to as a *plant* or *stooge*). Maybe the presentation of an overly earnest and truthful WTO was the best approach after all. But this time they needed something "so completely, incontrovertibly unacceptable that no one could just lap [up their ideas] without thinking" (78).

"I'm Very Excited To Be Here": Introducing The Management Leisure Suit

Introducing a renewed sense of focus to their WTO program, the Yes Men participated three weeks later in their second international conference ("Textiles for the Future"), this time in Tampere, Finland. True to the unpredictable and precarious nature of conferences, the Yes Men arrived late to their panel due to an incorrect calculation of time zone differences; what's more, their computer wouldn't properly connect to the projector, delaying matters further. Having narrowly escaped minor embarrassments on two counts, they would return to the auditorium after an impromptu coffee break to present "Towards the Globalization of Textile Trade," a paper that extends the WTO's previously stated concerns with protectionism, violence, and open markets by introducing cutting-edge labour management practices.

In what is meant to be a palpably odd introduction, "Hank Hardy Unruh" conducts an Einsteinian *thought experiment* in which he argues that *remote labour* (the practice of monitoring foreign labour forces from domestic corporate headquarters) shares some resemblances with Civil War-era slavery: if the market would have dictated the flow of progress throughout and after the American Civil War, slavery would have naturally transitioned into remote labour. Despite this historical oversight, Unruh suggests, remote labour has become a global force in the structuring of labour, and workers in places like Gabon, Rangoon, and Estonia now enjoy greater freedom and quality of life as labourers. The real secret to maximizing greater efficiencies within the global workforce is to drastically improve the rapport between corporate management and workers. What Unruh proposes is an intervention that makes all resources available to "help the market help the corporations." What he proposes is the *Management Leisure Suit* (MLS), a tool that will facilitate interactions and communications between managers and distant workers, and equally allow managers to increase their leisure activities.



It is precisely at this moment in the presentation that Unruh, helped by his WTO assistant, reveals the futuristic textile garment hidden under his traditional business suit. The prototype of the Management Leisure Suit is unmistakably outlandish--a tight-fitting, gold-coloured lycra-spandex suit--not exactly the type of garment one would expect a prominent trade expert to wear in a public forum. Within the next twenty seconds, the suit will inflate in the crotch area to reveal a bold, meter-long phallus-shaped appendage, which incites a burst of unexpected laughter from the audience. The *Employee Visualization Appendage* (or EVA) can be likened to a tactile screen that affords managers the opportunity to see their workers directly from a number of vantage points. The “instantly deployable, hip-mounted device” also provides a second timely feature: the appendage signals the manager via posterior and anterior body sensors (or electric pulses) that inform the manager of the quantity and quality of work being performed by the workers. Management can now effectively gauge worker performance by *seeing* and *feeling* their labour forces in real-time. At the same time, a CGI video tutorial is projected behind Unruh to demonstrate the suit’s functionality and potential uses. The video depicts a manager type with a nicely groomed moustache, surveying child workers from the office, a remote mountain range, and a beach. While the MLS’s first function is to reinforce the rapport between workers and management, its second role is to increase leisure time across the managerial classes, a personal “freedom” that has been decreasing since the 1970s. “Is this a science fiction scenario?” asks Unruh. “No--*everything* we’ve been talking about is possible with technologies we have available today.” Unruh and the WTO see the leisure suit as yet another timely innovation on the “highways of progress towards ever new horizons.”

At this point, the reader imagines that the Tampere audience instinctively knows it’s being had, that a group of practical jokers have infiltrated their elite conference to poke fun at the very idea of the “Textiles of the Future” (whatever that means!). Is this really what the WTO envisions as the solution to systemic management problems? Is this truly the most efficient way to regulate labour and maximize efficiencies? Do they truly wish to strip away workers’ basic human liberties and minimize human agency in the sole pursuit of increased profits? Once again (and much to their dismay) the Yes Men did not provoke a single rebuke following their talk. Either no one reacted for fear of reprisal or because they were purely uninterested in the presentation. In the worst possible scenario, attendees didn’t respond because they did

not find anything in the speech to be offensive or controversial. Perhaps the European managerial class in the textile industries were already deploying similar surveillance technologies to monitor the workers; and perhaps ideas about leisure do not hold the same promise or allure they would for a North American audience. The only real feedback that Unruh received was from a few delegates who were appreciably mystified by the appendage; one woman in attendance expressed no concerns regarding the *content* of the speech, but was vocal that the depiction of men--and only men--as managers was both inaccurate and offensive. For Andy and Mike, the idea that the top 0.1 percent of the most educated people in the entire world (in a country like Finland) will not challenge you for saying some of the most atrocious things is appalling. If these people are willing to give the Yes Men a pass, it begs the question: “What can’t corporations get away with?”

In an interesting turn of events, the incident earned modest coverage once a reporter took Unruh’s photo and wrote an article about the Textile conference. The story, featuring a side profile image of Unruh sporting the golden phallus leisure suit, would make the front page of the *Aamulehti* (a newspaper that attracts 140,000 readers daily). Although the story did little to critique the ideas proposed by the WTO, Mike and Andy found comfort in seeing Unruh serve as the embarrassingly ridiculous face of the WTO in an image that would travel far and wide. The critique embedded in their work may not have registered with the elite audience they meant to interpellate, but the image communicates quite clearly that the WTO is made to *look* ridiculous. All the same, this wouldn’t prove a victory for the Yes Men in that they had failed once again to entice their audience to think critically about WTO policy.



2nd Interlude: “We Had Finally Done It”

What they had effectively shown is how to inject a desirable degree of drama, entertainment, and spectacle into a tired conference format that encouraged straight talk and the proven monotony of text-

based Powerpoint presentations. In a final plea to human dignity, empathy, and outrage, the Yes Men arranged to appear jointly as the WTO and McDonald's before a New York university classroom. Unwilling to accept the notion that all audiences will uncritically embrace the WTO's ideas, Mike and Andy devised their most outlandish position yet. By completely pushing market logic to unthinkable extremes, they would propose a scenario whereby McDonald's (assisted by the WTO) would gain from a new practice of "enlightened profit seeking": recycling food waste and repackaging "post-consumer waste" as hamburgers to be sold in Third World countries. This Swiftian proposal was framed in the interests of simultaneously stamping out widespread starvation and doing away with unnecessary market protectionism. Under this formulation, the market wins and the people will not go hungry. What's better is that "the lifespan of a typical burger" can be extended up to ten times, meaning that the poor will essentially be able to eat their own shit numerous times and McDonald's can profit multiple times from a single food item.

At this point, the Yes Men had succeeded where they'd previously failed: the audience's ire and disgust were instantly palpable and a number of students began to challenge and berate the speakers for their inhumanity, their cultural insensitivity, their spineless economic opportunism, and their sickening vision of globalization. As the hissing and booing persisted, Mike and Andy were relieved. That afternoon they learned that their lectures had been on point all along in terms of expressing unethical, immoral, and outrageous ideas; suddenly they had confronted a different kind of audience--an intelligent one. In witnessing a loud and unanimous rejection of their proposed WTO-McDonald's partnership, the Yes Men were forced to consider a final and drastic course of action. The following month they were slated to present a talk to the Sydney Accountants' Association in Australia. This would be the final WTO identity correction for two reasons: first, having spent the better part of eighteen months impersonating the organization, the Yes Men saw fit to move on to other worthy targets; second, the WTO had long since posted a large warning on their website regarding the fake gatt.org (which incidentally drew even greater attention to the Yes Men's pranks). Rather than repeat their already reprehensible McDonald's presentation, they would opt for a new tack: "we settled on a new idea that was so simple, so direct and to-the-point that we couldn't resist." In May 2002, they would unofficially disband the WTO.

Shutting It Down

We were used to being funny, abject, and meddlesome; 'systematic' and 'constructive' were just not in our vocabulary (152).

In a special luncheon organized by the Sydney Accountants' Association, public relations officer Kinnithrung Sprat assumes the onerous task of imparting the news that, as of September 2002, the World Trade Organization "in its present form will cease to exist." The decision to dissolve the WTO is rooted in the notion that the organization had long since ceased to function in its original image. To illustrate this point, Sprat cites the following facts and figures as evidence of the WTO'S failures:

- 1.6 billion people are economically worse off today than they were fifteen years ago;

- The gap between rich and poor has doubled in the last forty years;
- The world's richest fifth have 80% of the world's income and the poorest fifth have 1%;
- The gap between executive and worker salaries has never been bigger.

Sprat reveals that the WTO has played an instrumental role in exacerbating these larger inequities by creating and enforcing trade agreements that work to the almost exclusive benefit of dominant G8 countries. He continues his speech with some telling examples: the UN has estimated that poor countries lose about US\$2 billion per day due to unjust trade rules, many instituted by the WTO; "Import duties on sugar, for example, are 151% in the US, 176% in Western Europe, 278% in Japan. In Uganda the rate is 25%, and they are being asked to lower it more." Trading rules benefit wealthier countries for a variety of reasons, but one significant area of concern (outside of the fact that hegemonic, influential countries receive preferential treatment) is that the least developed countries (LDC) do not have adequate representation in Geneva due to the exorbitant costs. Add to this the notion that transnational corporations today continue to exploit economic loopholes and evade state regulatory and legal apparatuses and one sees how these inequities persist.

To counter these alarming systemic imbalances, the Yes Men propose that the dissolution of the WTO--and its transformation into the Trade Regulation Organization (TRO)--would welcome a new era in which human interests trump business as usual in the global economy. This proposed organization will draw from the United Nations Charter of Human Rights as the basis upon which all trade negotiations are made. With this startling announcement, the WTO announces its shortcomings in an attempt to build a stronger framework for social justice and human rights.

In their first performances as the WTO, the Yes Men drew on hyperbole and satire to incite people to question globalization and capitalism through an examination of unthinkable WTO policies. This, of course, did little to provoke reflection or critique on the part of their elite audiences. In this final instance of *correcting* the WTO's identity, the Yes Men flesh out a utopian narrative that posits that the organization's dissolution can have a profound impact on the way global trade is conducted in the future. Instead of seeing the rich get richer, a new system of global trade regulation enacted upon human rights principles could mean a re-centering of priorities and a shift toward more equitable trade. The major difference in the execution of this hoax next to its predecessors is its emphasis on sincerity and utopian politics.

It is estimated that the Yes Men sent a press release announcing the WTO's dissolution to 25,000 journalists, an act that would for a short time stimulate debate about the broader function, performance, and value of the organization. One Canadian Parliamentarian even went so far as to address the WTO's demise in the House of Commons, speculating on the future impact it might have on agriculture, lumber, and other ongoing trade disputes. To its credit, the WTO responded to the hoax with a good-humoured deflection, effectively neutralizing any future communications on the part of both activists and journalists: "While we can appreciate [the Yes Men's] sense of humour, we would not wish for reputable news organizations like yours to be counted among those duped." It is debatable what impact this final WTO hoax might have had on public perception regarding the organization, but in terms of articulating a critical stance toward the world's most powerful trade organization, the Yes Men here prove themselves to be sophisticated and fearless opponents of systemic injustices. Their work not only correctly identifies what

precisely is wrong with the current model, they also present a better alternative to the current state of affairs. Rather than merely critiquing the organization and participating in a hollow form of political finger-wagging, the Yes Men propose a different outlook and a different way of doing things. That they are often able to present their ideas drawing from a broad range of approaches--hyperbolic stage antics, hilarious ironic posturing, serious polemical critique, and sincere political will--reveals the complexity of tools and tactics available to contemporary hoaxers wishing to bring about positive social change. This critical outlook is one that will resurface in a number of hoaxes in this book. If hoaxes are meant to twist and bend and manipulate truth in the service of the hoaxer, we are now better able to see how this process can contribute to formulating new ideas that promote new utopian ideals about the world we live in.

Same Emphasis, New Target: “We would become the government”

In the summer of 2006, the Yes Men would turn their attention to a distressing urban redevelopment project being ushered in by the city of New Orleans and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The Lafitte Housing Project, one of downtown New Orleans oldest housing developments, survived Hurricane Katrina intact but was then slated to be torn down. When the greater New Orleans community was given the green light to return home after Katrina, Lafitte residents--as well as residents from three other community projects--had been locked out by HUD, effectively barring them from entering their homes. During this time, the federal government had enacted policies to dismantle public housing in favour of privatization and so-called “mixed-income neighbourhoods.” In the aftermath of Katrina, the town’s mayor, Ray Nagin, had this to say about the economic restructuring of the city: “I believe in a market-driven process--economics, capitalism is [sic] gonna to take over and the marketplace is poised to respond.”

Because the federal government was failing to intervene in the interests of New Orleans residents, the Yes Men decided to present at another conference, this time on behalf of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). *This time they would become the government.* They would attend the Gulf Coast Reconstruction Conference, an event that took place on the first year anniversary of Katrina. In attendance were the estimated thousand contractors who were slated to rebuild New Orleans, as well as some key stakeholders in the New Orleans and Louisiana community.

In the early stages of the hoax, the Yes Men appeared to represent Alphonso Jackson, the acting Secretary of HUD, who had accepted to speak at the conference. Mike and Andy were invited to this conference because they had posed as [HUD-affiliated PR professionals from Hill & Knowlton](#). In representing Secretary Jackson, they told conference organizers they wished to make a major announcement at the summit. Jackson’s participation in the event would mean even greater visibility across mainstream media (CNN would live-stream his talk) and would generate interest on the part of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin. It goes without saying that Jackson would withdraw at the last minute, only to send his assistant deputy secretary René Oswin to deliver his speech. Whereas HUD had already set in motion a plan to work with large private developers to tear down much needed public housing, its vision of urban reconstruction would be radically re-imagined under the Yes Men’s careful eye. To do this would mean having to seamlessly bend the truth to expose the destructive underpinnings of HUD’s urban development policies. In a moment of delicious irony, mayor Ray Nagin, seeking to do away with widespread misconceptions about the rebuilding process, [tells this story](#) before Oswin’s speech:

This reminds me of a story I once heard where Truth and Lie went swimming one day in Lake Pontchartrain. They decided to go skinny dipping so they laid their clothes on the seawall

steps. Truth was having a good time and when he turned his head and swam out a bit, Lie jumped out the water, put Truth's clothes on, and took off running down Elysian Fields Avenue. When Truth realized what was happening, he jumped out of the water and started chasing the Lie. So in reality, what was happening was naked Truth was running after a well dressed Lie. When Truth caught up to the well dressed Lie, he undressed him, and exposed the Lie for what it truly was. I will do some verbal undressing tonight.

Based on this excerpt alone, one has to imagine that last-minute replacement René Oswin must have felt as though Nagin had been putting him on; that he and the conference organizers, the real HUD, and CNN had all learned of the deception before his arrival and were merely taking this last moment to call him out for the impostor he was. Andy really would get *pied*, only this time in front of a national audience on live television! But he wouldn't be found out until after he'd presented Secretary Jackson's impassioned speech. In what follows, Oswin deploys well dressed lies in the interests of uncovering naked truth.

In a move not unlike their decision to dissolve the WTO, the Yes Men refrain from doing satire and instead focus on the utopian prospects of presenting brighter solutions and alternatives on behalf of silenced and disenfranchised groups. From the outset, the tone is positive and infectious: "Everything is going to change about the way we work, and the change is going to start here today in New Orleans." Oswin announces a sea change in HUD's organizational makeup: admitting to their continued failure to live up to their charter (to ensure that affordable housing be made available to those in need), HUD frames New Orleans as an opportunity to renew these broader commitments. Their first initiative will be to allow families in housing projects like Lafitte to return to their homes. The second pledge is to commit to a contracting budget of \$1.8 billion to ensure the reconstruction is set swiftly in motion; the third commitment is to finance the rebuilding of the protective wetlands. In two related announcements, HUD also stated that after much deliberation, Wal-Mart would withdraw its stores from low-income housing to "help nurture local businesses to replace them"; major economic players like Exxon and Shell had earmarked \$8.6 billion "to finance wetlands rebuilding from \$60 billion in profits this year."

In a major policy reversal, HUD would--for the duration of Oswin's speech--cast itself in a progressive light. Rather than tear down 5,000 serviceable units of public housing, HUD would allow families to return to their homes and would provide a framework for re-investing in local businesses and the environment. According to the Yes Men, this is what happens when government decides to do the right thing. Sadly, HUD hadn't taken any such steps in the articulation of its policies. In the year since Katrina, angry disputes flared between HUD and public housing residents; the former seeing the buildings as "crime-infested eyesores" while the latter arguing that New Orleans is already "far too short on housing to demolish anything." But for contractors in the audience, HUD's new policy directives were at once powerful and much needed; many welcomed the reopening of public housing for disenfranchised families and several supported wetlands restoration.

"You Just Pulled Off a Heck of a Hoax"

In the spirit of all Yes Men hoaxes, the deception must at some point be made public. This time, however, the group wouldn't get to participate in the revelation of its own hoax. Instead, one enterprising journalist discovered the hoax after having consulted HUD, the Governor, and the Mayor's Office, all of whom had no previous knowledge of the stated policy changes or of Oswin's affiliation with HUD. The bemused journalist went so far as to complement them, suggesting they'd "just pulled off a heck of a hoax." In the fallout from the hoax, the Yes Men were predictably rebuked in the press, their actions deemed "cruel, disgusting," sick, and twisted, in that they had given false hope to the very communities who were so eager to return to their homes. To better highlight the irony of the situation, Oswin had invited contractors, delegates, and news media to attend a fake ribbon-cutting ceremony at the boarded

Lafitte Housing Project. The goal was to draw attention to the plight of the community and to reorient discussions about urban redevelopment in New Orleans to include public housing. In response to why the Yes Men chose to carry out the hoax, Andy had this to say: “This is actually truth-telling where normally there would only be lies.”

For those they had punked, the Yes Men were the real culprits in exacerbating the pain and suffering of these families; for the Yes Men, however, both the federal government and the city of New Orleans were failing its citizens by not making public housing available to the people most greatly affected by Katrina. René Oswin’s speech comprises the intermingling of certain truths and lies, a rhetorical position that enables the speaker to expose the disparity between the way things actually are and the way things could be. In presenting a speech rich in irony and sincerity, one that wilfully distorts the real positions espoused by key players in New Orleans’ reconstruction, the Yes Men frame their rejection of neoliberal values through a utopian lens. The goal was to shame HUD and to announce proposals that would benefit citizens and residents of New Orleans. That none of these proposals would be adopted is perhaps the real hoax.

ExxonMobil in Alberta

The following year, the Yes Men would set their sights on another widely criticized target: the oil industry. In June 2007, Mike and Andy were invited to attend GO-Expo (Gas and Oil Exposition) in Calgary, Alberta. The annual conference attracts five hundred exhibitors and more than 20,000 industry professionals, making it one of the biggest expos of its kind. Conference delegates and attendees meet to discuss things like traditional oilfield equipment, oil sands technology and services, automation, data, and software solutions, among other things. The opportunity to speak at this conference was too good to pass up. Andy went so far as to label it the [Holy Grail of conferences](#) because the audience was precisely the kind of group the Yes Men wished to reform: “These people are wrecking the Earth and they’re quite conscious of it.”

Posing yet again as a big PR firm, the Yes Men offered GO-Expo a keynote speaker they couldn’t resist: former ExxonMobil CEO Lee Raymond. The White House adviser was slated to announce the findings of a study he’d chaired on joint US-Canada energy policy, commissioned by the Department of Energy. Repeating the same tactic they’d used to fool conference organizers in New Orleans, Raymond would withdraw at the very last minute, sending a replacement in his wake. But this time the audience would inspire the Yes Men to revert to its earlier over-the-top antics, those they had introduced and perfected during their time as the WTO. As we’ve already seen, however, these tactics never quite produced the desired result: to shock the audience out of its laissez-faire handling of corporate affairs and to incite them to reevaluate their business-as-usual mentality. Like many environmental activists, the Yes Men espoused the need to make big oil companies accountable for the environmental destruction and degradation they have caused; they continue to express concern over disastrous oil extraction projects such as the Alberta Tar Sands (the world’s greatest source of oil-related pollution); and finally, they marvel at the failure of governments and corporations to meaningfully intervene in the arena of climate change. These concerns clearly informed the creation of their keynote presentation, but rather than deliver the speech in a “realistic” tone, they opted for another Swiftian proposal. In dramatizing the consequences of the world’s deepening dependence on oil, the Yes Men walk us through Big Oil’s (imagined) next moves as they relate to profit-making initiatives in a time of looming environmental disaster and widespread human calamity. In what one journalist called a modest [“flesh-to-fuel proposal.”](#) the Yes Men extend market logic from the perspective of an oil company looking to capitalize in a world with depleted petroleum reserves. Understanding that these natural resources are finite, they develop a contingency plan to simultaneously secure and bolster their profit margins. Due to the projected catastrophic human losses caused by climate change, oil companies like Exxon are unveiling new technology solutions that will

ensure ongoing fuel reserves in times of great peril and uncertainty.

“I Think I’d Like To Be a Candle”

In their second documentary, the Yes Men interview an industry lobbyist who makes a curious statement—that although big oil companies had yet to find the miracle fuel to replace petroleum, they would eventually get there. Enter *Vivoleum*. In their wickedly satirical GO-Expo speech (delivered by Raymond assistant “Shepard Wolff”), the Yes Men announced a new pilot project to offset future problems precipitated by climate change. They called it *Vivoleum*, a new biofuel to be made from the victims of climate change. During their presentation, they circulated candles to the audience in the hopes of holding an informal vigil for a former Exxon employee. They then proceeded to screen a short tribute video featuring the recently deceased Reggie Watts, a terminally ill Exxon janitor who volunteered to be turned into fuel. In the larger Watts narrative, he was said to have died from cleaning a toxic spill caused by Exxon. The video features the happy-go-lucky Watts discussing his time at Exxon while his managers and co-workers praise him for his generosity and good sense of humour. During this time, over two hundred candles were lit to commemorate his passing. For those who were still unclear as to what was happening, the video ends with Reggie stating, “I think I’d like to be a candle,” at which point confused audience members and conference organizers began to piece things together. The candles took Watts’ shape and were made with small samples of human hair (taken from a barber shop). And because the candles were meant to mimic the burning of human flesh and hair, they even went so far as to infuse the candles with a terrible smell. Based on the audience’s reaction, it would seem that *Vivoleum*, the human flesh-derived fuel source, was a disgusting proposition. As Wolff suggested to the audience, “In the worst case scenario, the oil industry could keep fuel flowing by transforming the billions of people who die into oil.”

To the audience, the idea of capitalizing on calamities seemed cruel and unthinkable. And yet big oil companies continue to play a significant part in the acceleration of climate change and in the destruction of ecological environments. At the time of writing, it is estimated that over [150,000 people already die](#) from climate-change related effects every year. While it would be utterly misguided to accuse Big Oil of initiating *Vivoleum*-like initiatives, the Yes Men indirectly stress the massive ecological, environmental, and human calamities that are being exacerbated by current oil extraction projects across the globe. The notion that the group would target one of the largest industry gatherings speaks to their broader dissatisfaction with the ways these companies go about their business. In dramatizing a scenario as inhumane as *Vivoleum* biofuel, Mike and Andy ask those assembled, as well as those who would read about the hoax in the weeks to come, to reevaluate oil companies’ environmental records, actions, and policies because they continue to do great harm. Left unchecked, who knows what scenarios the future may hold.

Halliburton Presents the Survivaball: “Ensuring Human Continuity for Generations to Come”

In Tampere, the Yes Men unveiled the Management Leisure Suit as a tool to improve worker efficiency and to maximize upper management’s opportunities to experience leisure. A few years later in Amelia Island, Florida, the group would introduce its second major innovation: an advanced new technology designed to protect corporate managers from the perilous dangers associated with climate change. “This technology,” they argued, “is the only rational response to abrupt climate change.” They would call it *Survivaball*. Given the sweeping changes in the world’s weather systems and the increased unpredictability of previously stable weather patterns, climate change has attracted a great deal of discussion from politicians and policymakers the world over. In a recent speech, U.S. President Barack [Obama outlined the troubling future impacts](#) climate change could introduce: “more severe storms, more famine

and floods, new waves of refugees, coastlines that vanish, oceans that rise. This is the future we must avert. This is the global threat of our time.” Climate change is already having disastrous consequences on numerous species, habitats, and places; for example, in the Arctic, polar bears, whales, pacific salmon, seals, wolves, and foxes are increasingly at risk; urban centres will see an increase in heat waves and volatile weather patterns; rural areas will be vulnerable to storms, earthquakes, and flooding; and human calamities caused by climate change will continue to rise.

“Worries about climate change? Don’t sweat it.”

Given the undeniable destructive trail of environmental disasters of the past decade, as well as the sombre predictions of unavoidable ecological catastrophes, it would seem entirely sensible and profitable for corporations to invest in climate change-related contingency plans. The 2012 Climate Change Summit in Doha, Qatar proved yet another failure in the world community’s commitment to [redress these issues](#): no new agreements to limit greenhouse-gas emissions were struck, and stakeholders failed to deliver much needed funds to help poor countries offset their rising emissions. When the world’s leading countries are perpetually stalling in the ratification of binding agreements to curb carbon emissions, it follows that other avenues or alternatives are left open to explore. When the Yes Men pose as [Halliburton](#), one of the world’s largest and most profitable corporations, they explore solutions to these looming catastrophes not by consulting non-existent United Nations accords or federal legislation, but by [looking to their best engineers](#) to produce timely, profitable, and “beautiful” alternatives. Their answer: a huge inflatable orb that will include “sophisticated communications systems, nutrient gathering capacities, onboard medical facilities, and a daunting defense infrastructure.” The Survivaball, they emphatically put it, is “essentially a gated community for one.”

The general idea is that the corporate mission to maximize profits at whatever cost--and in whatever environment--will continue unabated “even when most human life is rendered impossible by catastrophes or consequent epidemics and armed conflicts.” Readers are perhaps already wondering if the Survivaball is an operational system, or whether corporations like Halliburton are really exploring technological contingencies such as these. The answer is a guarded yes. Technologies of this kind were already on display at the 2006 GO-Expo the Yes Men attended, but the Survivaball modestly shifts the emphasis of these disaster-ready tools by extending the logic of neoliberal, transnational capitalism: disasters can be profitable and these are precisely the tools that will ensure continued success in the marketplace. Make no mistake, however: these technologies are specifically tailored to both the managerial classes and the ultra wealthy. When the Yes Men unveil the Survivaball to insurance industry experts at the *Catastrophic Loss* conference (held at the Ritz-Carlton in Amelia Island), they make their pitch to a sympathetic audience. The responsive audience asked how well the Survivaballs would fare against terrorism, whether the robust and unwieldy suits might be too cumbersome, and whether the unit’s cost would be too prohibitive. Clearly, they had struck a chord with the audience (they even managed to suit up two delegates during the presentation), but no one voiced concerns about the exclusivity of such a device, nor did anyone challenge the broader vision and course of action as being too drastic or short-sighted. The Survivaball proved to be the ultimate solution to climate change; only in this version of Darwinism, survival is limited to those with the funds and resources to buy such a luxury item. Mike and Andy somberly observed that “instead of freaking out, they just took our business cards.”

Haliburton, it would seem, had solved global warming.

Of course the irony is that this emergency, life-sustaining, device isn’t needed. What is needed is for the rich and poor countries of the Global North and South to author, ratify, and implement binding agreements in accord with the 1992 Kyoto Protocol to stabilize the atmospheric concentration of carbon

emissions. To do so would be to minimize the future impacts of climate change across the globe and to direct world partners on a new path toward mending an ever-worsening environment. Such political will, however, has been impossible to summon across the international community, particularly in countries like the United States and Canada. The Survivaball has since come to represent a brutal metaphor for the ways in which powerful nations and corporations have shirked their responsibilities to redress environmental wrongs. If the Survivaball does in fact turn out to hold legitimate weight as a necessity for human life in the future, it will have materialized due to the laissez-faire politics of the world's most powerful entities.

It has also come to represent a hilariously playful way for environmental activists to steer discussion away from trivial matters and toward serious discussions of climate change policy. The Survivaball would make another noted appearance in NYC in 2009 in a brilliant act of civil disobedience. In the lead-up to the 2009 Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, the Yes Men suited up twenty-one environmental activists on the shores of the river. The activists were slated to transport themselves across the river to the United Nations where world leaders were slated to discuss the Copenhagen Summit. Within minutes, they attracted attention from NYPD boats for generating a suspicious looking spectacle. Having cleverly prepared an entire media apparatus around the stunt, the Yes Men took the opportunity to clarify why such a spectacle was needed: [Here's Andy](#):

It's a scenic, mediagenic way to call attention to what our leaders need to do in the run-up to Copenhagen. The U.S. is far behind everybody else in the world. We need to get our act together and actually institute civilized limits on carbon emissions the way the rest of the world has done. And these balls are part of the effort to draw attention to that.

In an equally brilliant stunt, a team of Survivaball-ers would chase after Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter to ensure he would lobby so that all of his constituents would have access to Survivaballs in the build-up toward greater and greater environmental disturbances. Would world leaders embrace a meaningful global agreement or would they merely defer to corporations to build contingency solutions for the rich? Such is the dilemma this hoax presents.

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In this chapter, I've introduced the Yes Men's early beginnings as media activists who were unexpectedly immersed in the otherwise polite, reverent, and subdued world of elite conferences. By hoaxing powerful institutions like the WTO, ExxonMobil, and Haliburton, Mike and Andy found an unconventional method to critique, satirize, and reform the very groups they were impersonating. The fact that they were able to carry out these uproarious pranks at conferences--an utterly strange and seemingly random undertaking--made their work that much more appealing because of the novelty of the act. Conferences do not tend to promote irreverent discourse nor do they attract utopian satirists and parodists. With these pranks, the group crafted an unmistakable persona and cultivated a refreshing critical stance toward powerful actors engaged in deeply problematic policy decisions and practices. Anti-globalization activists had long protested the injustices exacerbated by multinational corporations, but rarely did these groups convey their critiques using misrepresentation, hyperbole, satire, and mock sincerity. After the Yes Men, conferences, press releases, and public announcements would never be the same, especially for activists. Passing as the very target you wish to critique isn't a new phenomenon, but these conference hoaxes represent a bold innovation in the realm of contemporary activism. In offering to wilfully correct the identities of perceived wrongdoers, the Yes Men present two competing visions of things to come: a dystopian future in which corporations and the free market are given free reign to shape the world according to their own tenets (a scenario that would greatly exacerbate many of the problems described above), or a utopian future that depicts the world's most powerful institutions shaping policies, laws, and practices in accordance with social justice and human rights principles. While the Yes Men argue

for the latter, the former scenario has continued to gain traction under the continued hegemony of global capitalism. In the following chapter, I describe how the Yes Men exploit the Internet to bring their utopian vision into greater focus.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE YES MEN ON THE WEB

[“Two guys with cheap suits and fake websites.”](#)

The Internet of 1999 is a different animal than the one we know today. In a time before RSS and peer-to-peer file sharing--before ubiquitous cat videos, Facebook timelines, and Reddit forums-- writers of the period were posing simpler questions about the web. Angus Kennedy, author of *The Rough Guide to the Internet* (1999) (a leading Internet guidebook of the period), frames his book around these core questions (borrowing wholesale from the book’s copy):

- Okay, what’s this Internet good for?
- Is there a lot of really weird stuff on the Net?
- But isn’t it yet another male-dominated bastion?
- What’s electronic mail, again?
- So, is this the Information Superhighway?

It’s always fun to revisit the bold pronouncements, concerns, and larger questions expressed about a new medium in the early stages of its development. Note the guide’s emphasis on establishing the Internet’s broader role/function, its capacity to house “a lot of really weird stuff,” and its perceived maintenance of gender divides. Also of note is the notion that to participate meaningfully on the web requires one to master things like electronic mail (e-mail), IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and Usenet boards (early web discussion forums). If you don’t currently have a handle on these terms, chances are you weren’t an active presence in the early days of the World Wide Web. If you weren’t, you would have missed out on things like dial-up connections, Altavista and Hotbot (dominant search engines), RealPlayer (online mp3 player), and Quake (massively popular online video game), as well as an endless array of spam and Internet viruses. Of course, the Internet was already a burgeoning cyberspace that spawned an endless array of thriving communities. The early, highly innovative and experimental years of Internet culture would lay the very foundation upon which the current architecture of the web is currently built. For those of us feeling a bit smug based on how primitive this world now seems when compared to advanced twenty-first century technology and computing, it’s important to remind ourselves that the technological achievements of this period will seem just as archaic to our future selves as do things like instant messaging and email. Importantly, none of these changes happen in a vacuum, and many of the groundbreaking innovations currently sweeping the web would not have been possible without these technological precursors. Of course, similar debates regarding the next steps for web and digital culture are unfolding in the ongoing battles over mobile media, cloud computing, big data, and the next iterations of web culture.

GWBush.com

In 1999, however, the web was still very much in a constant state of flux, not yet succumbing to the top-heavy restructuring imagined by corporate commercial interests. As such, those with a basic grasp of coding and software writing skills were in a unique position to make provocative statements in the simple act of creating and hosting a website. Granted, the openly navigable spaces of the web could be used to host porn sites, chat groups, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and walled gardens. But they could also be used as primary vehicles for pranking sites of power and influence. One of the most talked-about instances of this brand of pranking would materialize in April 1999. Just as (then) Texas Governor and Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush announced his intentions to run for the country's highest office, a group of activists operating under the banner of @RTMark (i.e., the Yes Men) were creating a website on Bush's behalf--without his campaign team's authorized consent. The website, GWBush.com, was meant to serve as a one-stop clearinghouse for information on Bush's presidential run; it also had the broader task of masquerading as a site that solicited user feedback in the interests of mining public opinion, an initiative undertaken by his "Presidential Exploratory Committee." Complete with tongue-in-cheek literature on how to participate in the electoral process, weigh in on the dangers of looming drug wars, contextualize issues like free trade and globalization, and contribute feedback to Bush's "campaign with compassion," the uncannily similar and official-looking site offered prospective voters key insights into the Governor's broader election platform. Whereas the use of websites during election cycles was fairly common by this point, the proliferation of satire and parody in the online realm of politics and governance was altogether rare, if non-existent.

Already in 1999, activist groups saw some alarming holes in the Texas Governor's bid for the presidency. It is precisely at this juncture that the web begins to emerge as a vehicle for online pranking and general mischief making. Right around this time, it became fashionable to buy up domain names in the interests of turning a future profit. While a select group were making a handsome sum by flipping domain names (mostly to multinational corporations willing to foot the bill), not all interested parties were doing so for purely financial incentives, as was the case with Zack Exley. Exley had had the foresight to register GWBush.com, a domain he generously entrusted to the group of culture jammers and anti-corporate activists at @TMark (the first incarnation of the Yes Men). As they put it, the website they created explained in "honest terms" the real reasons Governor Bush was running for office: "to help the rich at the expense of the poor and the environment." More than this, the website clarified instances where his record as Governor contradicted the position he maintained in his public appearances.

The GWBush.com website is a stunning case study in terms of framing web-based publicity and activist-inspired interventions. To ensure even modest visibility for their site, the activists would have to rely on some perfect combination of luck, chance, or serendipity: users would have had to randomly--and mistakenly--type the fake site's URL (instead of the real GeorgeWBush.com). Given the poor and unpredictable nature of the era's Internet search engines, the likelihood of even finding the satirical website was limited. In fact, the site received little to no traffic in its first two months. The real boon would come at the beginning of June when the website was discovered by the Bush campaign: they quickly proceeded to issue a cease-and-desist letter for alleged copyright infringement and they also filed a complaint with the Federal Elections Commission. Legal interventions of this kind operate primarily as scare tactics meant to incite intimidation on the part of the pranksters, but before the weight of these counter-tactics could materialize, @RTMark were handed a brilliant and unexpected offering from no other than Bush himself. When asked to comment on the parody website during a televised press conference, Bush infamously declared that "there ought to be limits on freedom [of speech]." Within the next news cycle, the story had gained an international audience and Bush was left back-peddling trying to qualify his remarks. As one PR expert noted of Bush's gaffe, "The more you come at a problem from an authoritarian standpoint, the bigger the problem becomes." Adding injury to insult, hundreds of thousands of visitors now freely visited a site that may very well have gone unnoticed, allowing the weight of @RTMark's critique to truly hit its target. But the story doesn't end there, either: in a move designed to

pre-emptively silence any future negative commentary, the Bush campaign would later purchase over 60 domain names, including such gems as bushbites.com and bushsux.com. When coupled with Bush's remarks regarding limits to political speech and freedom of expression, the Bush campaign was perceived to be less than democratic in its approach to dissenting perspectives.

For the mass audience that visited the fake website, Bush proved a wonderful target for the satirists. Immediately following Bush's untimely statement, the website was updated with a new pronouncement regarding the governor's ever-evolving stance as "the only candidate with the courage to take on excessive freedom on the Internet." The site is pitch-perfect on two counts: in its replication of the original Bush website and in its imitation of Bush's folksy rhetoric. Indeed, GWBush.com illustrates the power of parody at a moment when such hoaxing practices were confined mostly to print, radio, and television. The pleasure derived from reading the site comes from bringing parody, satire, and political critique to the online realm and having George W. Bush as the focal point for the spectacle. For example: here's how @RTMark's Bush frames his sensitivity toward multinational corporations in one of the site's clever/ironic press releases:

The ultimate aim of the program, Bush said, is to help corporations achieve their long-term goals. 'Corporations have spent the last century and a half trying to obtain all the legal rights of people,' Bush said. 'They're now technically persons, but they're not really human. We owe it to them--and to our species--to help them finish their quest.'

In these and other articles on the website, the satirists playfully juxtapose Bush's humanizing of corporations with his reference to everyday citizens as "American human people," which has the distinct effect of siding the presidential candidate with corporations and of distancing him from the "human people" he may or may not adequately understand. The result is a hilarious sendup of the Ivy-League/Establishment Bush's perceived folksiness and down-to-earth populism, as well as a firm jab at his nepotism and his neoliberal agenda. It would take little effort on the part of readers to deduce the expressly critical nature of the fake Bush website, as it

- invokes Bush's "limited liability" doctrine that aims to "grant corporations full human status, thus making possible, for the first time ever, 'responsible corporate citizenship'"
- questions his alleged cocaine and drug use (while pointing to his harsh record of incarcerating individuals for "non-violent drug offenses")
- pierces the veil of populist engagement through "grass-roots" efforts to poll the American human people"

In the years following his departure from the Oval Office, Bush's legacy has been held in ill repute. . A 2009 article in *The Economist* offers a blistering critique of the former president's shortcomings, citing that few people would mourn his departure. In it, Bush is cited as one of the least popular and most divisive presidents in American history, one who "presided over the most catastrophic collapse in America's reputation since the second world war." To be sure, Bush was never beyond reproach and was often the target of harsh criticism and parodic critique. He was even known to inspire a whole lexicon of words and phrases, in what are most commonly called "Bushisms," that is, "grammatically atrocious bastardization[s] of the English language as delivered by our 43rd President" (Urban Dictionary). Consider the following three statements as representative examples (Crispin Miller 2002):

- "Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?" —Florence, S.C., Jan. 11, 2000

- “Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.” —Washington, D.C., Aug. 5, 2004
- “We are resolved to rout out terror wherever it exists to save the world from freedom!” —Atlanta, Georgia, January 31, 2002

Because Bush proved to be endlessly quotable for comedians and other critics looking to use his unorthodox and at times illogical rhetoric as fodder for comic derision, he gained near-constant exposure in popular entertainment media (one need only revisit [Will Ferrell’s recurring Bush caricature on Saturday Night Live](#) in which the latter comes across as one of the dimmest half-wits in political history). And because Bush was a constant satiric target and a figure both maligned and ridiculed throughout his presidency, one must question the efficacy of satire in @RTMark’s clever Internet hoax. What aspects of the hoax warrant special attention? What elements of the prank ultimately fall short of building a generative platform for political discussion?

On the face of it, observers may very well have asked what exactly the hoaxers hoped to achieve with this stunt. Had they created the site to answer their own whims of publishing a good piece of satire? Were they carrying out an experiment about how the web might be used to mock or ridicule public figures? Was this an inside joke engineered to be shared and appreciated amongst a select group of people? Were they hoping to gain some notoriety or fame from the spoof? I would argue that questions of this nature can help explain the complex motivations underpinning hoaxes; more than this, they can also help illuminate the broader function of hoaxing within a given culture at a given moment in time. To reiterate an earlier point, there was no guarantee that the site would ever be discovered and it was even less probable that the site would attract any media attention at all. It wouldn’t be unthinkable to imagine the work being relegated to an underground audience of activists, reduced to a notable example that would perhaps serve as a clever template for future actions. But the inverse happened and in the process media hoaxing of this kind would prove a key element in the future articulation of both public and political discourse--especially for the Yes Men.

I begin this chapter with the GWBush.com controversy for a number of reasons: (1) it is the *first* Yes Men hoax to go mainstream; (2) it reaffirms the basic mechanics that make web/media hoaxing possible; (3) it presents a scenario in which a powerful figure responds foolishly to a stunt engineered to make him look foolish; (4) it forges a political conversation that would have less likely taken place across mainstream news outlets were it not for a clever, media-friendly prank/spoof. In what follows, I trace the Yes Men’s trajectory as innovators of Internet hoaxing, sampling from a range of hoaxes that were either designed exclusively for the web, or were made possible by the advent of sophisticated forms of Internet mimicry. The Yes Men would truly bring media hoaxing to an international audience by bridging Internet parody and live television performance in a stunt meant to criticize Dow Chemical.

Dow Chemical vs. The People of Bhopal

It was 1984 and the world was witnessing the worst industrial accident in human history. Shortly after midnight in the central Indian city of Bhopal, a toxic gas leak emerged from a compromised tank at the American-owned Union Carbide Pesticide Plant. Methyl isocyanate gas (MIC) had escaped when a valve in the plant’s underground storage tank broke under pressure. The leak is said to have produced a cloud of lethal gas that enveloped the city and surrounding areas, a region that was once populated by more than 900,000 people (many of whom lived in slums). According to both [Union Carbide and the state government of Madhya Pradesh](#), approximately 3,800 people died and several thousand others have

experienced permanent and partial disabilities. [In the days that followed](#), an estimated 50,000 people were treated for blindness, kidney and liver failure, and a host of other side-effects. It is estimated that an additional 20,000 people have died in the wake of the accident.

Given the magnitude of the tragedy, the incident set off a long and protracted series of court battles, culminating in a final settlement of \$470 million, a sum many deemed to be woefully inadequate for the injustices incurred. To offset the modest sum awarded by the court, the Supreme Court of India would approve a compensation plan to pay [\\$350 million to the remaining 570,000 victims](#) of the disaster--regrettably, it would take *twenty years* for the plan to materialize. What's more, it would take twenty-five years for the first criminal convictions associated with the accident to take wing. Eight former employees were found guilty of negligence, with each defendant sentenced to two years in prison and fined \$2,100 (or 100,000 rupees). In response to the court's decision, Satinath Sarangi, an advocate for the victims, "characterized the verdict as 'the world's worst industrial disaster reduced to a traffic accident'" ([Polgreen](#)). Adding insult to injury, the plant site is still home to 425 tons of hazardous waste that has yet to be cleared, with all culpable parties deferring responsibility on the matter. Based on what many have called the unjust outcomes attached to the accident and the ensuing litigation, it is no wonder that activists have framed the Bhopal tragedy as an emblematic site of struggle for social justice issues. With years of activist struggle having already highlighted ongoing injustices, the Yes Men brought the plight of the Bhopal community to a mass television and Internet audience. Drawing from the same techniques used in their Bush hoax, the group would refine their web-based approach even further in what has proven their most well known media hoax.

"Dow Accepts Full Responsibility"

On December 3, 2004 the Yes Men generated enormous controversy with an appearance on *BBC World*, in which Andy Bichlbaum posed as a representative of Dow Chemical on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. Masquerading as a legitimate mouthpiece of the corporation, Jude Finisterra (Bichlbaum) used the BBC platform--broadcasting to a television audience of three hundred million--to force accountability on the part of his target. Upon being asked if Dow would finally "accept responsibility for what happened," Finisterra had this to say:

Today is a great day for all of us at Dow, and I think for millions of people around the world as well. It's been twenty years since the disaster and today I'm very, very happy to announce that for the first time, Dow is accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal catastrophe.

During the interview, Finisterra made a number of provocative statements on the part of his employer: Dow would finally accept full responsibility for the disaster, liquidate its \$12 billion holdings in Union Carbide to fully compensate the Bhopal victims, fully remediate the still toxic plant site, publish the unreleased studies performed by Union Carbide regarding the released chemicals, fund research to ensure that Dow products are held to the highest safety standards, and push for the extradition of former CEO Warren Anderson. Finisterra announces a radical new direction for the corporation on this landmark anniversary to correct what Bhopalis deemed the reprehensible behaviour of a major multinational corporation willfully shirking its responsibilities to Bhopal victims. The implications of this announcement are enormous: not only will Dow finally make amends to the people of Bhopal, they will also perform a historic action that will set a new precedent for how corporations engage corporate social responsibility models. As Finisterra explains:

This is no small matter. This is the first time in history that a publicly held company of anything near the size of Dow has performed an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it's the right thing to do. And our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, but I think that if they're anything like me,

they will be ecstatic to be part of such a historic occasion of doing right by those we've wronged.

For anyone tuned in to *BBC World* that afternoon, Finisterra's announcement would have functioned as pure wish fulfilment for most observers of the twenty-first century corporation, particularly for Bhopali victims who had waited twenty years for an announcement of this kind.

The Long Game: Some Hoaxes Take Years to Materialize

To explain why Dow would emerge as a Yes Men target in this instance requires some backstory. Dow purchased Union Carbide in 1999 to the tune of \$11.6 billion; when Union Carbide became a subsidiary in the larger Dow family, Bhopal stakeholders assumed that Dow would rightly assume responsibility where the former hadn't. Dow had after all quickly settled its new subsidiary's outstanding liabilities and lawsuits in the United States. Much to their dismay, however, Dow continued Union Carbide's laissez-faire policy in India, as evidenced in a 2002 company memo: "What we cannot and will not do...is accept responsibility for the Bhopal accident."

Exactly two years prior to the BBC hoax, Mike and Andy sent out a press release to thousands of people from their fake Dow-Chemical.com website, in which Dow explained why they refused to take responsibility. The announcement crassly explains that the Bhopali people are not shareholders of the publicly owned corporation, and as such, Dow's *only* legal obligations are to its real shareholders. While no journalists were fooled by the hoax, the stunt did afford journalists the opportunity to write about Bhopal; even the *New York Times* covered the anniversary, the first time in years. In retaliation, Dow swiftly shut down the website and would later claim the domain as its rightful property. As determined as ever, the Yes Men rebuilt the website, only this time under a new banner: DowEthics.com. The website is a slick imitation of the real Dow site, only this incarnation features ironic stories of Dow's culpability in damaging the environment, stifling free speech, and remaining inflexible on Bhopal. The group also carefully pierce through the veil of Dow's greenwashing campaigns and PR-speak, interpreting its new "Responsible Care" initiative as a public commitment "aiming for zero responsibility." The most wickedly outlandish statement appears on the homepage, in which the Yes Men credit Dow with the birth of the modern environmental movement by bringing DDT to market: "[Rachel Carson's] 1962 book *Silent Spring*, about the side-effects of DDT, a Dow product, led to the birth of many of today's environmental action groups." While the irony and satire are easily deciphered, the site would eventually draw the attention of one unwitting journalist who hadn't properly vetted DowEthics or its creators.

In fact, the group would wait another two years before the website fulfilled its purpose. In the week leading up to the twentieth anniversary, a BBC researcher discovers the site and promptly invites Dow to appear live to discuss the tragedy. Much to the researcher's surprise, an otherwise categorically dismissive Dow accepts--a stroke of good luck for both parties. And with this, the group are given the green light to speak on Dow's behalf. But Andy and Mike have two primary concerns: first, they are concerned that the stunt will create false hope for a people that has already suffered greatly; and second, they worry the stunt will create unwanted backlash for the BBC, a news organization they respect (particularly for their Bhopal coverage). The real issue, however, was the likelihood that Dow was not going to issue a statement on the anniversary of the disaster; to rectify the matter, they decided to force Dow to respond. [As Mike explains](#), "we wanted to make sure they had to say that they weren't going to help the victims."

Thus the Bhopal hoax asks us to imagine how an ethical company might have acted in the face of human suffering by liquidating its assets in one of its many corporate holdings, and how this landmark moment might have also signaled a progressive shift in future corporate responsibility practices and protocols. As the onslaught of media coverage would soon after clarify, such ethical decisions were not being

contemplated by Dow. The company would later go on to deny the report. To further elaborate Dow's inflexible position toward Bhopal, the Yes Men would issue an accompanying statement on behalf of Dow in its own post-hoax press release. In it, the Yes Men systematically deny all of Finisterra's claims ("Dow shareholders will see NO losses; Dow will NOT remediate the Bhopal plant site"), laying bare the real company's continued laissez-faire handling of the disaster. While the spectacle produced by the hoax had the potential to force Dow's hand in making good on years of corporate negligence, it ultimately created the conditions necessary for news media to report on an issue that may have otherwise received very little press coverage. [As Andy notes](#),

...for a little while we felt pretty bad about [raising false hope], until we actually met some of the people from Bhopal, who told us that they were overjoyed and that the false hope wasn't a really big deal for them, compared with the five hundred articles in the US press that resulted from the event.

The Yes Men may have been guilty of raising false hopes for a few hours, but they did so in an attempt to illuminate the unrealized hopes of a people that had waited in vain for twenty years due to corporate negligence. In what might have otherwise been reduced to a soundbite recording of a Dow spokesman refusing to offer any form of compensation to the victims of Bhopal, the BBC hoax would guarantee a prolonged discussion of the issue that would reach an enormous audience. And here is precisely where hoaxes of this kind prove to be incredibly powerful. Once the hoax is revealed, hoaxers are given even more leverage to discuss the motivations behind their work, as they become the focus of an elaborate media spectacle. In this instance, the artificially-created spectacle produces a wealth of critical commentary in the press--some constructive, some misguided--but the bulk of the work is largely meant to re-emphasize a longstanding critique of Dow, circulate alternative perspectives in mainstream media (catastrophes of this nature must be properly dealt with), and to challenge news media to hold society's dominant institutions to task. Here the Yes Men put forward a corrective form of satire, a form of identity correction that is meant to rehabilitate its target through heightened or sustained media scrutiny. "I wouldn't say it's a hoax," says Andy. "It's an honest representation of what Dow should be doing."

Once again, the catalyst in initiating this chaos in the public sphere is very simple and straightforward in its ubiquity: a website.

Environment Canada

Internet-based hoaxes can be fairly straightforward affairs: in its simplest iteration, a passable hoax may only require a fake website and an accompanying press release. Some web hoaxes, however, embrace complexity in the creation of labyrinthian spectacles. Such hoaxes take months to plan and execute; they also take time to unravel. It is in this spirit that the Yes Men designed its most elaborate spectacle to-date at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. As with any of their hoaxes, the group chose a deserving target to critique--this time, the Government of Canada. While Canada consistently ranks as one of the [world's best places in which to work and live](#), its reputation on the world stage has suffered greatly of late due in large part to its laissez-faire record on environmental policy. Canada was targeted in Copenhagen for two primary reasons: it is the "only country in the world to have abandoned the Kyoto Protocol's emissions and climate debt targets" and it's home to "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions [\[the Alberta tar sands\]](#)." Hoaxing Canada brought international attention to the Harper government's dismal record on climate change action when new policies were being actively negotiated at the Summit. [As one astute blogger notes](#), the hoax came as "Stephen Harper's government was privately circulating a plan to permit a 165 percent *increase* in emissions from Alberta's huge, dirty oil sands project." To redress this sorry state of affairs, the Yes Men presented a progressive vision on the part of Environment Canada. Here's how they spun this complicated web.

The multilayered hoax began early Monday morning with a flurry of fake press releases and statements issued via a fake Environment Canada website (www.ec.gc.ca). The group sent a series of press releases to various media outlets, staged live announcements from a fake government spokesperson, and followed up these actions by disseminating fake responses to the spectacle from the Canadian government. The spectacle was first set in motion when a fake Environment Canada website announced it was reversing the ministry's position on climate change: "Environment Minister Jim Prentice" was pleased to announce that the government would enact strict new emissions-reductions guidelines for Canada as well as financing for vulnerable countries beginning in 2010. More specifically, the government announced a forty percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 (from 1990 levels), in what amounted to a drastic shift in its climate change policy. Prentice argued the following: "Canada is taking the long view on the world economy. Nobody benefits from a world in peril. Contributing to the development of other nations and taking full responsibilities for our emissions is simple Canadian good sense."

To mount even greater pressure, the group soon after confirmed the ministry's position via a meticulously staged event featuring a government spokesperson broadcasting from an uncanny replica of the UN conference stage. Within an hour, Canada was already being warmly congratulated by Ugandan delegates for its newly-initiated action plan (another staged event). Interestingly, all of this activity had failed to solicit any authentic responses from the Canadian government for the entirety of the morning. The real controversy would begin when a third (fake) Environment Canada press release surfaced, this time denouncing the hoax as a "moral misfire" on the part of the perpetrators. Once again, the group would sufficiently expand the architecture of the hoax to artificially create a controversy that no journalist could refuse to cover.

In an interesting turn of events, the government's real reactions greatly amplified the story's already spectacular arc. Dimitri Soudas, a spokesperson for the Prime Minister's Office, publicly (and falsely) accused climate change activist Stephen Guibeault and his organization Equiterre for what amounted to "childish pranks"; later that afternoon, the Canadian press broadcasted the heated hallway exchange between Soudas and Guilbeault, adding fuel to the growing controversy. Even Liberal opposition leader Michael Ignatieff took part indirectly, calling for Soudas' resignation over the incident. Within twenty-four hours, the Yes Men had manufactured a full-blown media spectacle that greatly embarrassed the Harper government in Copenhagen and across Canada.

By projecting a progressive position on behalf of Environment Canada, the Yes Men effectively forced the Canadian government's hand: the ministry would either confirm or adapt the group's utopian proposition by creating an amendment to its existing climate change policy, or it would merely deny the statements and continue unabated on its current trajectory. Activist groups have likened this tactic to putting their target in a "decision dilemma." Once the targeted group has been cornered, they are forced to make a decision. [According to one seasoned activist duo](#), the attendant logic is that "if you design your action well, you can force your target into a situation where they have to respond, but have no good options--where they're damned if they do, damned if they don't." This principle informs many of the Yes Men's major hoaxes; what remains to be seen is how effective the principle is in practice. The tactic wasn't effective in terms of changing Dow's perception of its role in Bhopal, but they did make their unflattering position known to a global audience. In this instance, the Yes Men's spectacle did little to stir the Harper government to change its climate policy, but the stunt both confirmed and amplified the Canadian government's history of inaction on the issue, bringing discussions of climate change to the forefront of public discourse in Canada for a short time. Indeed, the most compelling aspect of the hoax is that it incited a number of journalists to comment on the Canadian government's critically underreported climate change policies. As the summit was heavily blogged by journalists, the story appeared in several outlets, each pointing to the government's regressive position: "Environment Canada hit" (*Globe and Mail*), "Copenhagen spoof shames Canada!" (*Guardian*), "Hoax slices through Canadian spin on

warming!” (*Toronto Star*). The labyrinthian character of the hoax undoubtedly assisted in the creation of the spectacle, as journalists struggled to piece together various strands of the uneven story. For instance, CBC journalist Kady O’Malley’s [step-by-step coverage](#) mirrored other journalists’ daylong speculations as to who precisely perpetrated the hoax.

The government’s refusal to bring its climate change policy in line with those of the international community would ultimately damage Canada’s reputation before a global audience: in a telling bit of negative public relations, Canada would earn the [“Colossal Fossil”](#) prize, awarded to the nation that presented the biggest obstacle to climate negotiations in Copenhagen. Sadly, this was not a hoax. Not to be outdone, Canada would win the award again in 2011 for its role in Durban.

Hoaxes can at times unwittingly spawn other hoaxes. Because hoaxes create unpredictable outcomes, one final element of the story also worked to compromise the Canadian government’s international reputation. In the aftermath, the government quietly went about shutting down the two fake Environment Canada websites but as Canadian Law professor [Michael Geist has shown](#), they carried out the action without a court order. Instead, “officials used both the persuasive power of an official government request combined with inaccurate claims that the sites were engaged in phishing.” Simply put, phishing is a criminally fraudulent process of attempting to acquire sensitive information via computer networks by posing as a trusted source. Phishing websites often take the form of popular banks or online auction sites that hope to pry personal and/or financial information from unsuspecting visitors.

Due to sustained pressure from Canadian officials, a responsive German-based Internet provider would earnestly block the host IP address, simultaneously shutting down an additional 4,500 websites. Adding another layer of complexity to an already disastrous situation, the government’s attempt to stifle dissent on the Internet created another opportunity for journalists to take issue with the fledgling Harper government. In a yet another fascinating turn, a hoax that hinges on the power of the web to create a compelling ruse draws us into a larger conversation about censorship on the Internet. As Geist notes, the government had several other formal avenues through which to address the issue (a court order, copyright/intellectual property infringement), but chose instead to substitute “one hoax for another” in its false claim of a phishing scam. The result: the Canadian government “undermined the trust in a global system designed to guard against identity theft.” Thus, far from merely naturalizing or idealizing a given social system, web hoaxes of this kind can initiate “[a potent breach, break, or fracture](#) in our spectacular mediascape that occasions a shift in our concepts of politics and truth.” They have the power to initiate important dialogue within even the most elite groups (the G8 at Copenhagen), but things like progress or change are never guaranteed and rarely achieved.

Building Something Out of Nothing: Yes Men at the World Economic Forum

Unlike the majority of their pranks, the Yes Men do create hoaxes that are designed exclusively for, and limited to, the web. Faithful to the singular vision and execution of their first GWBush.com hoax, the group would roll out another timely hoax in January 2010--this time criticizing the World Economic Forum (WEF) in the lead-up to its 40th anniversary meeting in Davos. The WEF proved a viable target for the Yes Men due to its continued failure to address global poverty. In a press release issued by the group, Yes Men collaborator and filmmaker Beth Portello outlined the WEF’s most harmful shortcomings:

What you won’t hear [at the WEF] in Davos is anything about the structural factors at the root of global poverty. Poverty is created: it’s the byproduct of centuries of exploitation of human and natural resources maintained into modern times by unfair trade, tax and land policies, and odious debt.

She accuses the WEF of performing a deceptive form of masquerade: each year, the world's most influential leaders use engaging, compassionate rhetoric to describe the challenges of addressing global poverty, but this [“litany of meaningless pledges”](#) consistently falls short in bringing about meaningful changes to the structures Portello describes. It is no wonder that the organization has been described as an [“elitist forum for circumventing democratic politics](#), and for encouraging non-transparent, secretive decision-making.” To date, the WEF has been criticized by the international community [on two fronts](#): those who question the organization's methods of operation, its mission, and its membership (existential level), and those who criticize the Forum for failing to execute its mandate and for not adequately addressing the world's most pressing problems (instrumental level). As we'll see, the Yes Men integrate these two areas of critique in the orchestration of its hoax. To do so, the group would revisit its proven practice of creating fake websites and of wedding fictional and factual information.

In this iteration, the fake WEF leveraged the web to mark its 40th anniversary, presenting a bold new vision for “eradicating poverty by the simplest, most obvious means possible.” Rather than infiltrate the event as conference speakers, Mike and Andy would join forces with thirty-four Yes Men collaborators, a number of anti-poverty film directors and producers, Hollywood voice actors, and [one disgruntled member of the World Economic Forum](#).

Once again, the Yes Men created an intriguing website format that would not, at first glance, raise any immediate suspicion outside of the provocative statements that grace its pages. The site even went so far as to house a page alerting interested parties to be on the lookout for [“fraudulent e-mail messages”](#) by WEF impostors. These phishing attempts, we learn, are designed to lure people into transferring funds for WEF membership or Forum registration fees. In what seems to be a minor and insignificant addition to the fake WEF site, the “Fictitious Forum E-mail” page actually informs the reader about current phishing scams on the web, but it also snidely displays that all legitimate communications be sent via the [we-forum.org](#) website. Indeed, a page of this kind serves to throw off even the most suspicious of readers, but it is also meant to improve the Yes Men's chances at receiving WEF-related communications that can be used at a later date (i.e., incriminating emails and/or invitations for conference speaking engagements). Through its clever design and brilliant imitation of the WEF parent site, the [fake website expresses larger concerns](#) regarding “the failures of a system that has been more intent on using poor countries as supply-houses for raw materials than in bringing them out of poverty.”

“We can no longer endanger the world for the benefit of the few” ([WEF](#))

The comprehensive website (<http://www.we-forum.org/>) features a series of urgent statements on the part of the WEF's most prominent political figures. To build anticipation for this historic event, the WEF circulated several policy statements by key conference guests, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, CEO Patricia Woertz of Archer Daniels Midland, among other noted political and business leaders. WEF Founder and Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab sets the tone with this urgent statement:

We have to look at this year's meeting in the context of what's happening in the world. We just killed the Copenhagen [Climate Change] Summit, we crashed many economies in 2009. Clearly the present system of rampant capitalism is not worthy of salvaging. This is the reason why our Annual Meeting this year is tailored around the need to end poverty once and for all.

For an esteemed scholar that champions the work of [government, business, and civil society](#) in establishing a much needed relationship between economic development and social progress, Schwab's frank rhetoric has the strange effect of simultaneously raising suspicion and inspiring hope. In a public relations universe marked by tightly controlled speechwriters and handlers, it is increasingly rare for

public figures to speak with such candour and honesty. Even if Schwab's directives for the Meeting were to emphasize the need to end poverty, the language used would be decidedly less emphatic. For Schwab to denounce "rampant capitalism" as not worthy of salvaging would be to put him at odds not only with his own previous statements regarding world trade but also with his peers and colleagues at the WEF. Stating that the WEF and its world partners were instrumental in crashing many economies also comes across as deeply unrealistic. But individuals and institutions are privy to change their positions from time to time (especially at historic junctures), casting some initial doubt over the credibility of Schwab's words.

Perhaps he was experiencing a moment of heightened consciousness.

Consider Schwab's companion statement regarding the then devastating earthquake in Haiti: "In light of the recent tragedy in Haiti, which was already on the brink due to free-market policies, it is clear that taking a new tack to end poverty is morally necessary." Consistent with the heavy-handed tone attributed to Schwab, the majority of the website's content expands on two central themes: the failures of free-market enterprise to remedy global poverty and the moral obligation of world leaders to meaningfully intervene on this matter. The Yes Men would bring Schwab's vision to fruition through the sophisticated rollout of its WEF website, but like most Yes Men hoaxes, it would capture the essential in a press release.

"World Leaders Pledge Strategy To End Poverty Now"

In its utopian press release, the WEF announced that the organization, in association with some of the most influential world leaders, would pledge to develop "a cogent and actionable plan to end global poverty" by the end of its annual meeting. These pre-conference policy statements took the novel form of pre-recorded videos, with each respective statement addressing a key issue pertaining to poverty. For example, a newly devised *Human Rights Initiative* outlines a global guarantee of food, drinking water, shelter, healthcare, and education--basic human rights that must be ensured for all; a *Local Governance Initiative* calls for an end to private monopoly ownership and intellectual property, and the integration of local community ownership structures (no less than 51%) over natural resources; the *Debt Relief Initiative* announces the immediate cancellation of international debt to developing countries, as well as remuneration for historical and ecological debts. Together the seven combined initiatives represent a cogent and compelling vision of how to collectively bring an end to poverty.

Harnessing the power of political spectacle and popular will, the WEF would convey the full weight of these commitments through its most prominent partners. The deeper irony, of course, is that none of the statements come directly from the mouths of the figures depicted. Using a tactic introduced in Woody Allen's 1966 film, *What's Up, Tiger Lily*--and perfected almost a decade later in the Situationist International's *La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* (1973)--each video is carefully dubbed to give the viewer the impression that they are witnessing an authentic statement. For example, in a one-on-one interview with the CBC News anchor Peter Mansbridge, Prime Minister Harper admits to his government's short-sightedness in a number of areas: federal support for the Alberta Tar Sands project, failure to invest in renewable energies and green technology, and a lack of leadership on climate-related legislation. In his reevaluation of the government's current directives, Harper sees little choice but to follow public opinion in Canada: "Nobody wants [an environmental] catastrophe. Canadians don't want that reputation." For Canadians who have long criticized Harper on these (and other) fronts, the video is bittersweet: Harper's announcement signals a desired set of progressive changes, but any astute observer would instantly identify the voice as not belonging to the prime minister. Thus, the video appeals to two sets of publics--knowing Canadians who are asked to weigh in on Harper's environmental record, and unsuspecting viewers who may not detect the ruse but can support the politician's admission to failure

and his desire to change things for the better.

Harper's admission functions as a visual icebreaker. Even Queen Elizabeth would participate in a critical reevaluation of Britain's hand in cementing these problems by way of its ongoing colonial presence within new structures of neoliberalism. The Queen's pre-taped message--a formal address to Members of British Parliament--outlines the similarities between European powers' colonial policies and those of global trade. Queen Elizabeth is thus presented as having had an epiphany (or a crisis of conscience) and as feeling compelled to overturn the history of injustices she implicitly describes: "Now is the time to rebuild." French President Nicolas Sarkozy addresses the plight of the estimated eighteen million people that die of poverty each year; a decidedly forlorn former U.S. President Bill Clinton reflects on his administration's hand in Haiti's poverty, stressing the need to redress "exploitive economic policies" that continue to disenfranchise the country's poor. Together, these admissions of wrongdoing serve the broader function of airing historical grievances against the world's "leading lights," the very figures responsible for steering economic policies in its current path. For some, the videos offer a form of living testimony, a series of statements engineered to produce a cathartic impact. In dramatizing confessions of political wrongdoing and pledges to *finally*--once and for all--eradicate poverty across the globe, these statements produce a measure of goodwill among viewers. For a moment, it seemed like the global elite were finally going to do the right thing.

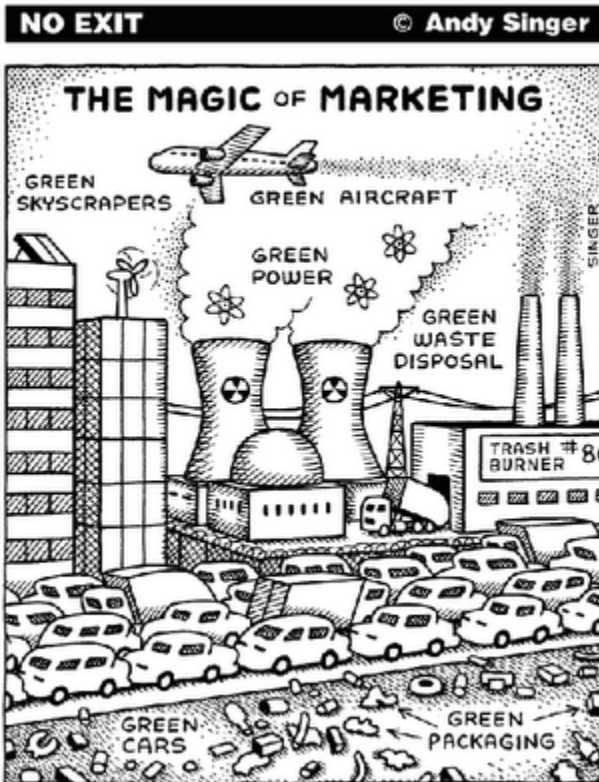
The real WEF response to the hoax, however, was both curt and muted, materializing in this [statement by organization spokesman Adrian Monck](#): "the only defense to satire is common sense!" This is a fascinating statement because Monck's overriding logic is that the WEF (including its economic partners) would *never* make such outlandish statements. For anyone following the WEF's forty-year trajectory as an organization, the vision projected in the hoax is the stuff of fiction. Anyone duped by the hoax must be lacking common sense. And yet the satire itself appeals to common sense in the sole interests of presenting a tangible solution to ending poverty. Instead of following this common sense/utopian trajectory, the organization would devote the bulk of its summit to address a core issue of concern: restoring the breakdown in public trust in banks, governments, and corporations. When bankers, CEOs, and politicians weren't actively trying to mend their tattered public image, they spent the remainder of their closed-door meetings [failing to reach consensus on the best way forward](#) to regulate markets and banks. Common sense, it seems, doesn't always prevail.

And hoaxes don't always achieve their ends. The Yes Men's efforts required a great deal of resources, collaborators, and labour power to pull off. However brilliant or sophisticated, this web-only stunt did not gain a lot of traction in mainstream media, generating very little attention in the run-up to the Davos summit. Even I was hard pressed to track down press junkets and write-ups of the hoax--and I was intently looking for them. If the group was unable to drum up interest on the part of journalists and bloggers, it begs the question of whether activist web-only hoaxes effectively limit their reach into deeper pockets of public discourse. Was the strategy poorly conceived? Was the topic of global poverty too untouchable for journalists to integrate into its agenda-setting narratives? Might they have garnered greater attention if they'd impersonated a high level figure at the conference? Answers to these questions are difficult to formulate due to the uneven outcomes of hoaxing and in part to the unpredictable rhythms of the 24-hour news cycle. Hoaxes can find their way into the news at any given moment (slow news days have little bearing on whether journalists are duped by a given prank), but they must come with an insatiable hook and a sensational arc. The story's credibility must also remain intact long enough for the story to make it into the front pages of newspapers and websites. Perhaps the WEF hoax merely missed its mark.

Chevron (Thinks We're Stupid): Anatomy of a Greenwashing Campaign

When the Yes Men pranked Dow Chemical, they offered a brilliant display of satiric irony to tackle the relatively well-known practice of greenwashing, or environmental public relations (PR). In the top right corner of its infamous DowEthics.com website, the Yes Men present a quiz of sorts, asking visitors if they are aware that “Dow is responsible for the birth of the modern environmental movement.” The joke (and the subsequent horror) of the statement is that Dow’s research, patents, and mass commercial products are all directly implicated in the environmental crises of the twenty-first century, and that products like DDT can be seen as occupying a privileged place in the larger scheme of environmental degradation. Indeed it is mildly ironic to think that a product like DDT could have had such an impact as to sway one writer (Anne Carson) to write a bestselling book (*Silent Spring*), that would then inspire the birth of many environmental groups and social movements (including the creation of Earth Day in 1970). Ironic, perhaps, because this wave of activism would also inspire a counter-mobilization from the likes of Dow to leverage the work of public relations firms to secure public opinion in its favour. Corporate PR firms created and honed the very techniques needed to tame and dismantle the activist movements they themselves helped spawn. [As Stauber and Rampton remark](#), *greenwashing* refers to a “pejorative now commonly used to describe the ways that polluters employ deceptive PR to falsely paint themselves an environmentally responsible public image, while covering up their abuses of the biosphere and public health.” The polluters in question are largely comprised of companies engaged in the extraction of natural resources, the cultivation of crops, the production of chemicals and other hazardous materials, the fabrication of industrial machinery, and so on.

These entities keep talented PR firms on the payroll to produce and disseminate a body of literature that will simultaneously deceive and lend credibility to the companies in question. The attendant logic is that the manipulation of public opinion via sleek publicity and social media campaigns is far more desirable to a company struggling with an environmental gaffe. Rather than having to change the core systemic structures that lead to environmental degradation--and by extension, to contend with false press and/or a drop in public opinion polls--the company need only hire perception managers who will divert the attention away from calamities and toward the dynamic (albeit empty) solutions proposed in, say, a well-crafted 30-second spot on YouTube. The give-and-take between on-the-ground activists and the companies they critique has created a polarizing culture in which well-intentioned activists seem extreme in their tireless diatribes, and unresponsive corporations seem out-of-step with the changing temper of the times. In *The Green Marketing Manifesto* (2007), John Grant writes that what’s needed is for corporations to move beyond the “process of making normal stuff seem green [i.e., *greenwashing*]” and to bolster and popularize green alternatives (i.e., making them normal and acceptable). For the world’s top grossing corporations, however, nothing of the sort has materialized. There may be no foreseeable way out of this modern predicament at the moment, but the interventions contra greenwashing tactics continue, as a recent Yes Men collaboration with the Rainforest Action Network and Amazon Watch makes clear. In the chapter’s final section, I discuss how Chevron, a multinational energy company and one of the largest corporations in the world, engaged in its most recent greenwashing campaign, only to be thoroughly outed and mocked across the web.



We Agree: The Multi-Million Dollar Pitch

Chevron inaugurates its campaign with a rhetorical concession; it goes something like this: Chevron is often cast as a multinational corporation with a proven/extensive record of neglecting environmental laws, violating safety standards, trivializing human rights and labour issues, dismissing tax and subsidy claims, and ignoring government contract and royalty payments... *But* the public may be surprised to learn that they actually care about the same things and that this campaign will make those connections explicit. Perhaps non-profit research centres compiling substantial corporate rap sheets on corporations such as Chevron have overlooked its progressive character. Former Chevron vice president for environmental affairs, Lloyd Elkins, describes the company's approach to environmental issues as "aggressive and far-sighted. In our view, just complying with the law is not sufficient." As he puts it, "We are committed to looking ahead, anticipating change and developing innovative solutions to environmental concerns." One of the great ironies of Elkins' statement regarding the company's aggressive stance is that they have a long history of being the very perpetrators guilty of exacerbating "environmental concerns." With tongue planted firmly in cheek, one could say that without Chevron's ruthless participation in the destruction of environmental standards and safeguards, there would be no need for the company to develop "innovative solutions" with regards to the environment.

This is the same company accused of human rights abuses in Ecuador, Kazakhstan, Burma, Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon. This is also the same company that is embroiled in the world's largest environmental lawsuit--facing \$27 billion in potential damages--for its massive two decade-long toxic dumping initiative in Ecuador. During this time, Chevron is said to have dumped more than 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater into the Ecuadorian Amazon, leaving the local population to suffer a wave of cancerous diseases, miscarriages, and birth defects. As NYT reporters Simon Romero and Clifford Krauss observe, legal actions of this kind are a direct product of the times: "Chevron faces claims for an era when

oil companies were less purposeful about protecting the environment than they are today. It also faces potentially huge damages in a country where American corporations once wielded strong influence but are now treated with discourtesy, if not contempt.” Given the current climate, two dominant courses of action seem warranted: (1) Chevron can continue on its current trajectory (business as usual) and utilize its resources and talent to create a powerful campaign that will redirect public backlash in the service of reviving goodwill, or (2) it can begin a process of transformation that applies the rhetoric of its mandate (“to conduct our business in a socially responsible and ethical manner”) in a sustained fashion. As the following case study demonstrates, Chevron wasn’t contemplating the latter; rather, it allocated a reported \$80 million to its now disastrous *We Agree* campaign.

At this point in the story, it’s useful to review the original Chevron campaign.

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“You might be surprised to see what we can agree on. By liking a statement below, you’re showing Chevron, your friends and others that you agree.”

So begins Chevron’s 2012 *We Agree* publicity campaign. Upon first entering the website, visitors are asked to participate in a social media campaign designed to strip away the possible misconception that big oil companies and the general public share little to no common ground. The headlining text remarks that visitors may be pleasantly surprised to learn just how much common ground exists between the two sides. And in a clever (and gimmicky) marketing ploy, Chevron suggests that in liking their pre-approved advertising statements, Internet users can publicly express their solidarity with the company. The homepage is populated with a diverse group of airbrushed faces: everyday women, children, and men. They are presented as belonging to an international community of global citizens concerned with pressing questions regarding the ways in which oil companies both act and function. “The World Needs More Than Oil,” one advertisement reads. “We Need To Start Building Again,” a second ad states. Yet another proclaims that “Oil Companies Should Support the Communities They’re A Part Of.” Admittedly, there isn’t much depth or substance to these statements, but they are vague enough to incite just about anyone to like them. Does the world need more than oil? Yes! Do we need to start building again? Absolutely! Should oil companies support the communities they do business in? No question! As with most high profile advertising campaigns, there’s an interesting rhetorical trick at work in these ads; while I may *agree* with these sentiments, it is entirely likely that I still won’t agree with Chevron’s broader actions and practices across the world. Consider the following: “Protecting the Planet Is Everyone’s Job.” Do I agree that all citizens bear some responsibility in ensuring the protection of the environment for generations to come? Yes. I believe everyone is capable of performing small actions that contribute to caring for the planet’s already fragile global ecosystem. Do I believe that some actors bear far greater responsibilities for assuming this task? Without a doubt. But by framing this seemingly benign statement as a call to equally share and distribute duties and responsibilities regarding the protection of the planet, Chevron is seeking to mask its involvement as one of the world’s greatest polluters of the environment. If protecting the planet is everyone’s job, then Chevron’s (rhetorical) stake in assuming these duties is dramatically lessened. So what’s really going on here?

On the face of it, the desired result of the *We Agree* campaign is to foster goodwill between Big Oil and the society at large through a cleverly crafted greenwashing campaign. And even following the media debacle that would materialize on the heels of the Yes Men hoax, there is reason to suggest that this tactic did not prove a complete disaster. At the time of writing, Chevron has solicited almost 467,000 likes on its website, suggesting that the campaign has attracted some positive feedback from the site’s visitors. Much to their credit, Chevron’s handlers created a well integrated campaign, complete with literature on

global issues, energy sources, and “human energy” stories. They explain useful pieces of information, such as how energy supply and demand works, how to use energy wisely, and how to develop alternative and renewable energy. For those surprised or lured by the company’s supposed transformation, the campaign offered sufficient information to explore how the company functions at present and what it proposes as its vision for the future.

In the world of publicity, however, the image as well as the rhetoric rarely match the record. It is precisely for this reason that the Yes Men (and its environmentalist collaborators) chose to openly criticize the campaign by way of satire and parody. As the final still of the *Funny or Die!* video encapsulates, those critiquing Chevron were calling out the one aspect of the campaign they could no longer stomach-- *bullshit*. Given the broad range of tactics deployed in this particular hoax by activists and everyday Internet users, it’s important to highlight how quickly the practices of greenwashing can inspire the wrath (and satiric wit) of disapproving onlookers. We learn that individuals and activist groups are weary of corporate PR activities, especially when they co-opt average-looking citizens to do their bidding. Rather than change the nature of the conversation to their favour, these greenwashing entities generate unwanted momentary backlash. Far from bolstering their image, these tactics reveal the shallowness of their reforms and the failures of their imagination to divest the very funds used to propagandize and mislead into policies that would promote equitable conditions and improved systemic structures.

And now for the backlash.

Like most Yes Men hoaxes, this story has many twists and turns. It should be noted from the outset that what makes this hoax special, unique, and peculiar is that the fake advertisement campaign would appear *before* the real one. Call it pre-emptive parody or aggressive media hoaxing. The hoax would have never materialized had Chevron not attempted to hire street artists to wheat paste their posters before the launch (an industry practice pejoratively called “guerilla marketing”). As it would happen, they selected artists with an environmental bent who quickly entrusted the files and materials to a group of activists looking to re-orient the campaign’s emphasis in a more truthful fashion. Thus, just as Chevron was about to roll out its multi-million dollar campaign, a counter-publicity campaign was pre-emptively launched by the Yes Men and a throng of activists, including the Rainforest Action Network and Amazon Watch. The day began with the Yes Men launching their own fake *We Agree* website, complete with four “improved” advertisements and a press release explaining the company’s bold new direction: “We’re telling truths no one usually tells. We’re changing the way the whole industry speaks.” The fake website would closely mirror the parent site, offering no discernible differences between the two, save the explicitly truthful and political tone of the advertisements. For unsuspecting onlookers, the slick website, press releases, and advertisements would be enough to convince the first wave of visitors that the launch was legitimate and was part of the corporation’s newly aggressive stance toward corporate social responsibility. Visitors to the site would first bear witness to the following statement: “For decades, oil companies like ours have worked in disadvantaged areas, influencing policy in order to do there what we can’t do at home. It’s time this changed.” In a bold step, Chevron alludes to wrongdoing and takes full responsibility for its past mistakes. While such transparency may have seemed too good to be true, the vague and indirect nature of the statement makes the gesture at least somewhat plausible. Adding fuel to the fire, the bold truths alluded to in the press release were reinforced through the depiction of four bold ads, each with their own taglines:

- Oil Companies Should Clean Up Their Messes
- Oil Companies Should Fix The Problems They Create
- Oil Companies Should Put Safety First
- It’s Time Oil Companies Stop Endangering Lives

Again, given the sophistication of the website and the seamless integration of Chevron-like rhetoric and imagery, even the stronger sentiments expressed in the taglines might also seem plausible enough to pass as faithful pronouncements on the part of the oil giant. As Steven Mufson of the *Washington Post* observed, “the parodies feature [images of] a Cofan tribal elder from Ecuador; a worker wearing a hard hat and a mask and standing knee deep in a dirty-looking river with oily containers; and a sad-looking child in front of a rusting barrel.” To add to the legitimacy and authenticity of the images, each statement was accompanied by signatures of the company’s top executives, as well as the campaign’s seal of approval--a big *We Agree* stamp in red ink. As with any good hoax, unsuspecting critics and journalists were quickly taken in by the prank. Noting the too-good-to-be-true tone of the Chevron announcement, one journalist reflects on his failure to catch the hoax from the outset: “In retrospect, it does seem ridiculous that any oil company would take such aggressive responsibility for oil spills, poor industry safety, and exploitation of foreign resources.” Having already attracted early media attention from *Ad Age*, *Fast Company*, and *The Consumerist*, the Yes Men would follow up its website launch with a second press release, this time decrying the hoax on Chevron’s behalf:

This hoax is part of an ongoing effort to blame Chevron for 18 billion gallons of toxic waste dumped in the Amazon during drilling operations,” said Rhonda Zygoeki, Chevron vice president of Policy, Government and Public Affairs. “This blame game continues despite Chevron’s long-standing agreement with the Ecuadorian government which very obviously puts the issue behind us.

Of course, the false statement attributed to Chevron would make the rounds well before Chevron could even deny the existence of the fake site. They were able to not only advance the story past hesitant gatekeepers, but also to frame the denouncement with an allusion to the company’s controversies in the Amazon. This double tactic of impersonating and hoaxing Chevron worked to advance the Yes Men’s critique in two swift moves, while forcing Chevron’s hand to respond to its claims regarding corporate malfeasance. Chevron’s anti-climactic response to the hoax would add very little excitement to the controversy, but it provided a brief glimpse into its PR strategy:

“Chevron does not take this attack lightly. We invest extremely heavily in our campaigns, and we take them extremely seriously. Such actions can never be tolerated.” Unwilling to encourage the hoaxers, the cleverly coached press release does not include any information regarding its own previous misgivings; rather, it lays the blame squarely on the shoulders of the perpetrators, deeming such actions intolerable. Thus what ensued in the day’s media reports was a kind of back-and-forth between activists and corporate PR personnel, the former side arguing that Chevron was prioritizing high-priced glossy advertisements over positive operational reforms, with the latter side expressing the basic need to find common ground with everyday people.

The controversy wouldn’t end there either. In the days that followed, the Yes Men courted public opinion through a unique social media campaign that asked the broader Internet community to produce its own versions of the *We Agree* campaign. The first to make a splash was a video by the popular comedy website, *Funny or Die!* To date the video, entitled “Chevron Thinks We’re Stupid,” has reached *Immortal* status on the site, amassing over 125,000 views and inspiring a number of remixes and adaptations. In the original ad, a teacher (Iris) is asked to contribute her thoughts on renewable energy. Her comments are then juxtaposed with those of one of Chevron’s Environmental Operations Managers (Steve). The split-screen responses are meant to dramatize Iris’ dissatisfaction with the lack of renewable energy options and to bolster Steve’s position that Chevron is investing millions of dollars to bring these options to market in an affordable fashion. The sense of urgency that Iris feels (“We have got to get on this now!”) is only further reinforced when Steve echoes her refrain. The result: the advertisement depicts a concerned citizen demanding better performance from big energy and oil companies and presents an empathetic and responsive Chevron already forging ahead with solutions and alternatives.

The *Funny or Die!* segment reproduces a shot-for-shot parody of Chevron's original spot. In this offering, the producers immediately pierce through the artifice of Chevron's slickly produced version. From the outset, Iris' parodic counterpart admits two things: that she is an actress pretending to be a teacher and that her employers told her to use the phrase "renewable energy"; Steve, on the other hand, states that he, too, has been asked to sport a beard, wear a denim shirt, and to say "renewable energy." As he puts it, his employer is putting him up to these superficial tasks on the off-chance that these details--the beard, the denim, the trendy phrase--"will fool people into thinking that Chevron gives a frog's fat ass about the environment. Chevron is spending tens of millions of dollars on this ad campaign 'cause it's easier than just making changes." And in a final burst of crude satiric genius, both Iris and Steve join in in an outlandish chorus: "Chevron must think you people are fucking idiots!" In this example, both Iris and Steve are wide-eyed observers of Chevron's greenwashing tactics and refuse to play along. Instead, they call Chevron out for their spineless attempt to distort public opinion, encouraging viewers to do the same. The fact that both the teacher and the Environmental Operations Manager are expressing similar discontent toward Chevron suggests just how unsavoury these tactics can be.

The second wave of materials to catch the popular imagination consisted of amateur, user-generated content based on the original Chevron campaign. To assist in the creation of these ads, the Yes Men made templates and graphics available to download and remix, making the DIY initiative an attractive one-off for people looking to communicate their general dislike of the company. Many of the remixed images depict fictional characters from popular culture, from *The Simpsons'* always despotic Mister Burns pronouncing "This is America: Justice should favour the rich" to Jim Carey's truth-telling lawyer from *Liar Liar* stating "We lie and we don't care. We love money. Fuck the world." Other advertisements took a more direct approach, casting the oil company as a truly tyrannical presence operating within a disturbing utilitarian mindset: "We'll do it with minimal casualties to the Indigenous. It'll be humane. More or less." Similar advertisements dramatize larger intimidation tactics at work ("Fear will keep the local systems in line: Fear of this oil company"). Admittedly, these critiques seem more less benign when compared to the following statement: "Killing the Indigenous looks bad, but one thing shareholders hate more than bad press is a bad quarterly statement."



As these examples suggest, the contributors behind these makeshift, DIY remixes moved fluidly between satiric, ironic, and gravely serious modes of expression, drawing on the imagery of popular culture and the language of corporate business culture. Each ad represents a near-perfect imitation of the original form--large bold lettering, corporate signatures, the *We Agree* seal of approval--giving the campaign an undeniable meme quality that would attract hundreds of imitators. Together, these exercises in culture jamming shed new light on the potential social dimensions of hoaxing. Hoaxes often materialize due to the efforts of a single person or group, but the pranks rarely move beyond the immediate purview of the hoaxers themselves. When the Yes Men solicited Internet users to contribute their versions of the Chevron campaign, they effectively invited all participants to be in on the hoax. Even more people contributed to the contest once the hoax was revealed which suggests that those who agreed with Yes Men's tactics wanted to display their solidarity with the group by participating in the Chevron shakedown. The bulk of these parodies were housed on the same fake Chevron website, lending real visibility to both the Yes Men materials and the user-generated content. Thus in this second iteration the hoax was re-engineered to build a social media campaign that invited people to support the ethical underpinnings of the hoax, as well to communicate a much broader dissatisfaction with big oil companies. If a sizeable number of people care enough to contribute their own subversive advertisements to the fake *We Agree* campaign, we begin to see the power of the (collective) hoax on full display.

Thus, it is understandable to see how both sides of this greater divide should reach an impasse. Big oil companies like Chevron are well aware of their detractors' activities. The current impasse might be described in these simple terms: activists are calling for major reforms in the ways multinational corporations do business and corporations are loath to concede to any demands for reform if they work against their bottom line. The *We Agree* debacle presents an interesting set of questions surrounding

these kinds of strained relations. If both sides continue unabated in their ways, there is very little room for productive dialogue and little to no room for future trust and collaboration. Here's Dave Samson, General Manager of Public Affairs for Chevron, reacting to the Yes Men hoax: "Most businesses know they will always have their critics, but I think many companies would choose to engage with people who see benefit in having a meaningful dialogue versus those who simply resort to worn-out rhetoric and stunts." Here Samson refers to the goodwill that his employer brings to the table with *We Agree*, an advertising campaign he says was meant to promote "meaningful dialogue"; more than this, Samson adds that resorting to "worn-out rhetoric and stunts" only serves to trivialize this initiative while detracting from the real conversation they wish to have.

For Chevron spokeswoman Morgan Crinklaw, "Yesterday's stunt shows that there are groups out there that are not interested in moving forward responsibly together." As we have already seen, the Yes Men see Chevron operating in poor faith, spending dozens of millions of dollars to distract the public from the global horrors it has created. Here, then, is the rub: the Yes Men's critique may very well be accurate, warranted, and right on the money, but it is worth asking whether interventions of this kind--engineered to publicly humiliate and embarrass the company--produce a desirable effect. Are the Yes Men educating onlookers vis-a-vis the horrors of Ecuador? Are they inspiring observers to become engaged environmental activists? Are they producing more discriminating and skeptical consumers of media? Or are they emboldening Big Oil to continue on its current trajectory, without any recourse to remedying environmental problems of the coming decades. In other words, this growing divide raises the much larger question of whether pranks of this kind create an even greater divide between activists and corporations, deepening the mistrust both feel toward the other. If corporations are legitimately attempting to make the changes they publicize, don't hoaxes and pranks merely undercut the company's desire to do well by those they have previously harmed?

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the ways in which the Internet initiates and facilitates new strategies for hoaxing. The Yes Men have proven themselves to be experts in this domain, harnessing the power of the web in highly inventive ways to criticize powerful targets and to generate much needed discussion on topics ranging from political governance to corporate responsibility. Hoaxes can be limited exclusively to the web, but the majority of these pranks use the Internet as the entry point into mainstream media--television, newspapers, radio, and various online platforms. In each instance of web-based hoaxing, we witness the simplicity of seamlessly crafting imitation websites and the complexity of generating labyrinthian spectacles. The ethical inclinations of the group appear clear-cut, but the tactics deployed often produce contradictory outcomes. While sympathetic viewers might relish the public shaming of a much maligned corporation or public institution, stunts of this kind may have the adverse effect of pushing these interests toward lesser and lesser compliance to the ethical ideals proposed. What is clear is that anyone with a computer and a modem connection can participate in the creation of hoaxes and pranks. The question remains as to whether interventions of this kind are having the desired effect of its chief protagonists. To complicate this picture even further, I turn to the Yes Men's fascinating work in the realm of newsmaking, or what I call *fake news*.

CHAPTER FIVE: “THINKING OF HEADLINES WE’D LIKE TO SEE”: THE YES MEN IN THE NEWS

Some of the craziest ideas take shape in cafes and bars, in the caffeinated rush of the morning and in the alcohol-fueled haze of the late evening. What began as a late night discussion between two friends looking to creatively protest the ongoing Iraq War would soon evolve into a massive group collaboration that would spawn two ambitious fake newspapers, dozens of news articles and reports, and a renewed sense of how contemporary activists engage matters of social justice, politics, and public opinion. On the heels of Barack Obama’s historic presidential election win in 2008, the Yes Men delivered an artfully nuanced parody of America’s newspaper of record--*The New York Times* (NYT). On November 12, 2008, an estimated 1.2 million copies of the NYT “special edition” was delivered to urban dwellers in major American cities. The special issue’s headline boldly proclaimed the end of an era: “Iraq War Ends: Troops to Return Immediately.” Less than a year later the group would publish and distribute 1 million copies of its second fake newspaper, this time a 32-page parody of the *New York Post* (NYP) announcing that the health, livelihood, and security of New Yorkers were at risk due to “human-created” climate change. The populist, attention-grabbing headlines “We’re Screwed” and “Clear & Present Disaster” set the tone for the parody, warning readers of impending heat waves, coastal flooding, droughts, and power shortages. Importantly, however, the newspaper would also publicize many of the troubling, under-reported findings drawn from a recent report conducted by climate change experts (a document that was commissioned by NYC Mayor Bloomberg’s office).

Both hoaxes provide yet another unique frame for discussing the Yes Men’s broad and innovative activist work, but also for thinking about the role news parody plays in contemporary life. There is nothing particularly new or exciting about parodying a newspaper--there is a long and rich history of news parody spanning centuries and continents--but the two examples that form the kernel of this chapter have had the distinct ability to elevate the genre to new heights, adding much needed flair, humour, and sincerity to conversations and debates that simply weren’t occupying much of a place in the public sphere. What’s most telling of these hoaxes is the intention expressed by those involved. [For Steve Lambert](#) (one of the chief architects behind the fake NYT), the real impetus for the project was to use journalism as a vehicle to express new possibilities for the form (news) and for the world at large: “We wanted to experience what it would look like, and feel like, to read headlines we really want to read. It’s about what’s possible, if we think big and act collectively.” This chapter places the fake *New York Times* and *New York Post* front-and-centre to demonstrate how parody and satire are taken up to express a brand of utopian politics--and critical humour--that rarely finds its way into print or Internet journalism.

When/How News Hoaxes Materialize

Thus far, the hoaxes I’ve described rely almost exclusively on major news media platforms to bring strange, outlandish, and hilarious stories to a broader audience. When news media perform their work admirably by first vetting their sources and verifying their facts, the number of hoaxes to bypass the gatekeeping establishment is significantly lessened. When journalists and editors move too quickly to push a story forward--most often for fear of losing a potentially juicy news exclusive--hoaxes are given the opportunity to circulate more widely. The relationship between hoaxers and journalists is complex

and thereby worthy of discussion. For the hoaxer to cement her standing, she must first establish herself as a credible and trustworthy figure. If the hoaxer is incapable of presenting the journalist with a tightly woven, believable story, the hoax will never take wing as front-page news. Journalists, then, represent a first line of defence between the hoaxer and the audience she wishes to reach. Journalists and editors are most often responsible for foiling a hoaxer's desired course of action. When a hoaxer does succeed in fooling a journalist or news organization, the stakes of the ruse come into sharper relief: not only is the public at risk of being on the receiving end of malicious or harmful information, but both the journalist and the news source risk damaging their credibility for allowing such a hoax to pass as legitimate news. The Bhopal spectacle was noteworthy because, like most hoaxes, it highlighted a breach in the editorial practice of vetting credentialed experts. That a group of media- and technology-savvy activists was able to easily bypass a well respected gatekeeping establishment raises some concerns regarding the organization's integrity. In the aftermath, the BBC was forced to apologize to Dow Chemical, a source of much embarrassment to both Dow and the BBC. If the BBC had properly vetted its so-called credentialed expert (Jude Finisterra) before the interview, the Yes Men's hoax would have never materialized.

Given that not all hoaxes seek to enlighten their audiences with visions of a progressive future, this chapter explores questions surrounding the health and performance of contemporary news media. I'll offer a brief overview of both the real and perceived shortcomings of the journalistic establishment, before moving to a broader discussion of the Yes Men's most notable interventions--standing in as would-be journalists operating under the respective banners of the *NYT* and the *NYP*. In presenting these two case studies, I discuss how the Yes Men bypass the gatekeeping establishment entirely in the act of creating their own newspapers, a strategy that complicates and celebrates what it means to struggle over the representation of pressing issues, affected communities, and key societal challenges across various arms of the news media. In presenting the Yes Men as both *newsmakers* and media hoaxers working intently to "create headlines we'd like to see," I suggest that pranks of this kind challenge readers even further to reconsider the competing roles of hoaxing and journalism in contemporary culture.

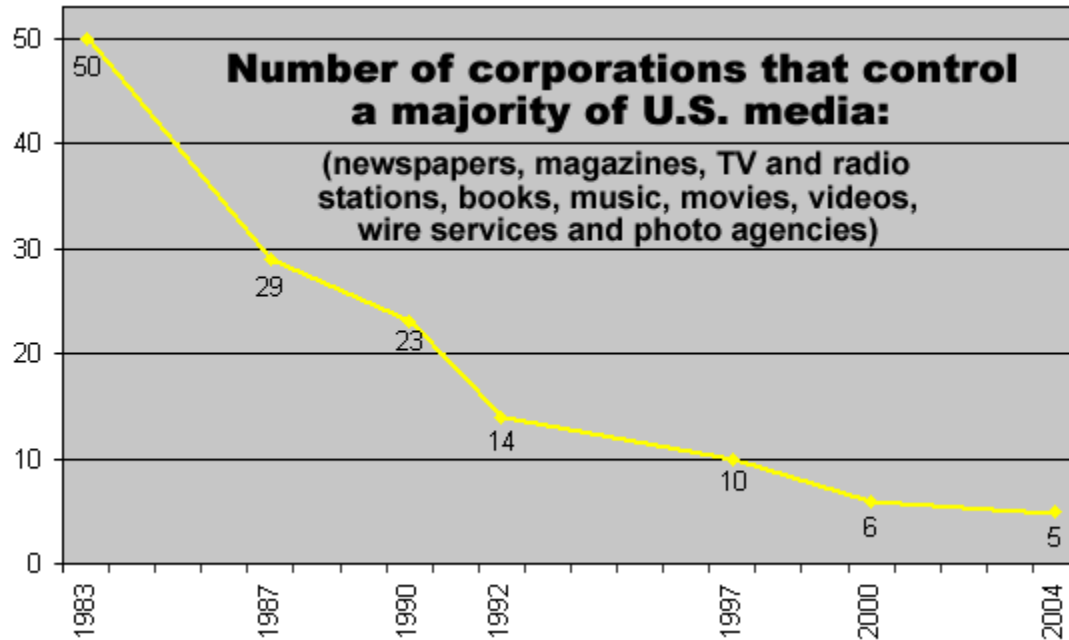
Re-Imagining Establishment Journalism

While many of the hoaxes described in this book have afforded the Yes Men the opportunity to publicize timely issues across a number of media outlets, such actions are not easily replicated. It would be almost unthinkable now for the group to pose as the World Trade Organization or to usurp George W. Bush's identity via a fake website; those hoaxes belong to a specific time and context that made such pranks possible. Hoaxes of this kind are not easily replicated because they are dependent upon abstract notions like chance, luck, and timing--not to mention more tangible aspects like funding, resources, collaborators, will, and know-how. For these reasons they've constantly shifted tactics in the creation of their activist projects, as evidenced by their notable turn toward news parody. Again, the notion of parodying the news is far from innovative--especially in the 2000s, an era that witnessed a great resurgence of political satire from the likes of Michael Moore, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Sasha Baron Cohen, and *The Onion*--but the tactic offered the perfect idiom in which to express past disappointments and future aspirations. More than this, critiquing the news via television, documentary, print, and the web has also proven an important vehicle in galvanizing niche audiences and publics around a broad range of issues through humour and laughter. Satirists are not merely drawing attention to flaws and blind spots in everyday news media, they are also subtly and at times explicitly outlining what responsible journalism might look like. To understand why satirists have taken to parodying the news as a primary vehicle for illuminating grave issues and problems, some discussion of the failures of contemporary journalism is needed.

Journalism in Crisis

[Neil Postman famously observed](#) that prior to the telegraph “information could be moved only as fast as a train could travel--about thirty-five miles per hour.” The rise of the telegraph signalled a radical shift in the ways in which information travelled: no longer constrained by the tyranny of distance, information could now free itself of the rigid constraints of time and space. The telegraph initiated a series of technological solutions to ever-present time lags that enabled us to move information in the shortest possible period of time; importantly, it would also irrefutably confirm the culture’s standing as one of information overabundance. In today’s age of Big Data and information overload (what philosopher Paul Virilio has called a culture of [“over-information”](#)), it is unimaginable for most to think of digital information as being restricted to thirty-five miles per hour. There are, of course, many regions the world over that do not yet have broadband infrastructure; there are entire pockets of networked broadband users who regularly fall prey to unwarranted throttling on the part of Internet service providers; for users falling under these banners, Postman’s comments still hold some resonance. For an emerging majority of users, however, information moves seamlessly across our lifestreams. We get our news from Twitter, Facebook, mobile apps, microblogging websites, and at times, from actual news websites. These aggregated news platforms deliver information to any number of tethered or mobile devices. But, as Postman observed of the telegraph, changes of this kind introduced the idea of “context-free information,” that is, the notion of turning information into a commodity, “a ‘thing’ that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning.” One brief look into the systemic structures of global news media and we are afforded an alarming view into the implications of this cultural shift.

Contemporary scholars situate journalism as “the sense-making practice of modernity” (Hartley, [Popular Reality](#) 32), as well as “one of the primary instruments through which the culture is preserved and recorded and, therefore, available to be reconsulted” (Carey, [“Mass Media”](#) 20). Following Hartley and Carey’s observations, traditional news can be seen to lay the foundation upon which ordinary, everyday people make sense of their lives, of the communities they live in, and of the world at large. When it functions in its most heightened capacity, journalism serves a crucial function in the preservation and deepening of democratic institutions by informing the public on a broad range of issues that reflect the state of contemporary society. Despite its central importance in democratic life, journalism is said to be in a state of perpetual crisis, undergoing dramatic changes during what has been labeled a period of “epochal transformation” ([Allan 208](#)). Scholars and journalists alike often cite the unprecedented concentration of media ownership as having had the greatest negative impact on contemporary journalism. With the rise of corporate media and the unprecedented expansion of cross-media ownership, Western democracies have seen a disturbing shift in the news media landscape, most notably in the quality and breadth of everyday reportage. Over the past thirty years, [Ben Bagdikian](#) has charted these marked changes in ownership structures amongst the world’s most dominant corporations: in 1983, he listed fifty; twenty-nine in 1987; twenty-three in 1990; ten in 1997; six in 2000; and five in 2004. As Bagdikian observes, these five corporations “own most of the newspapers, magazines, book publishers, motion picture studios, and radio and television stations in the US media,” giving each conglomerate “the characteristics of a cartel.”



The New Media Monopoly ([Media Reform Information Center](#))

Here's a snapshot of how synergy and conglomeration are changing the face of journalism: newsrooms have been gutted; investigative journalism has become a misnomer; international news has dwindled; hard news has morphed into soft news, or infotainment; the mainstream press has turned from being a government watchdog to a government lapdog; mass media no longer serve the public interest (they serve the corporate interest).

As journalism scholars are quick to note, the story of contemporary journalism cannot be told without reference to the political economy of the media, that is, the study of the various policies, structures, and institutions that shape existing media systems (McChesney, [Political Economy](#) 12). Because major media corporations respond almost exclusively to the bottom line, journalism (one of the most expensive sites of cultural production) has been on the receiving end of some drastic changes. As Danny Schechter notes in [The Death of Media](#) (2005), the structures that organize the production and dissemination of news content (those that “insure and advance the parent company’s financial interests” [28]) are so rarely scrutinized that the structural flaws that undermine the health and vitality of the industry not only persist, but deepen.

Kovach and Rosenstiel explain that when multinational mega corporations control the realm of news and information, they ultimately threaten “the survival of the press as an independent institution as journalism becomes a subsidiary inside large corporations more fundamentally grounded in other business purposes” (30). Far from fulfilling the promise of its democratic potential, journalism under this model is subservient to the needs of commercial interests. Journalism, in other words, is regarded as but one more business venture in a sea of other corporate activity; a commodity in a sea of commodities. Even a cursory structural analysis of contemporary mass media would confirm that the crucial transaction in journalism is the sale of audiences and readerships to advertisers ([Chomsky and Herman 1988](#)). Once advertising “passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services,” writes Raymond Williams, it slowly ingratiated itself within the interconnected realms of the social, the personal, and the political ([“Advertising” 421](#)), the effects of which both journalists and citizens are still coming to terms with. The commodification of news, dramatized through a clash of capitalist and journalistic imperatives, has profoundly compromised the citizenry’s ability to make “educated political choices that can improve our own quality of life and the greater social good” ([Jackson 150](#)). As Pamela Taylor Jackson observes,

journalism's significance in what she calls "the nonmarket social order" (149)--those pockets of democratic life that resist capitalism's co-optations--has all but dwindled in the face of constant financial pressures exerted via corporate ownership structures. It is unsurprising, then, that talk of market structure or the economic imperatives behind mass media is rarely addressed in the press; even when these concerns do enter the frame of discussion, the issues may get attention, but a broader examination of corporate interests is non-existent ([Schechter 27-28](#)).

Market forces have exerted a tremendous influence on the ways in which news is shaped, constructed, and disseminated, while technology has played an important role in increasing the degree of control exerted over various forms of speech, journalistic or other. Indeed, one of the major flaws in the corporate model of journalism that is so pervasive today is tied to the limits placed on free speech. To cite a commonplace example, journalists and editors alike are put in the precarious position of having to censor information that is deemed offensive to advertisers (the parent corporation and its multiple holdings). As various arms of the news media become properties of multinational conglomerates where profit motives inform the decision-making practices of business executives and CEOs, pressure to subdue and/or censor stories that comment critically on advertisers has increased ([Bagdikian 246](#)). In an extreme example, Hirst and Harrison describe "the craven way both News Corp and Google have capitulated to demands for content restrictions in order to operate in China," an act that ultimately shows that "freedom of expression is a principle that can be traded away if there is enough incentive" ([288](#)). Or, as A. J. Liebling aptly puts it, "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" (qtd. in [Powe, Jr. 200](#)). Thus, journalism's broader democratic project of information dissemination is increasingly compromised when the profit motive guides the media corporation's decisions.

Taming the Watchdogs

Even when news departments have not been reduced or constrained by the business of making news, there has been a noticeable shift in the way news is handled. For example, much has been made of news media's cheerleading of the Iraq War and its instrumental role in shaping public discourse. In "[Taming the Watchdogs of Media Concentration](#)," Sean Condon writes: "When Australia's Rupert Murdoch threw his support behind the Iraq War, so did the 175 media outlets he owns as part of News Corp." Condon notes a similar pattern in the Canadian media system: "When Canada's CanWest Global Communications justified the Afghanistan invasion, so did its eleven daily newspapers and 16 television stations. As these examples suggest, the corporate news media is far removed from casting a critical eye on government and its policies. At its worst, news media reproduce the official discourses of the government. Recall comedian Stephen Colbert's scathing critique of the so-called democratic project of journalism at the White House Correspondent's Dinner in 2006:

But listen, let's review the rules [of journalism]. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions, he's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. *Make, announce, type*. Put them through a spell check and go home. (emphasis added, [qtd. in Holt 35](#))

As Colbert would have it, news media engage in what can be called a journalism of transcription--"Make, announce, type"--a form of journalistic practice that gathers information uncritically from its source and transmits that information with very little regard for the intended audience. Whatever the reality of the situation (I imagine it to be somewhere between an idealist theory of watchdog journalism and Colbert's incisive satire), Colbert's critique of the Washington press corps is a virtual pulling back of the curtain on journalism's systemic failures.

And herein lies the greatest single problem: journalists and the news media apparatus are performing poorly, which has inadvertently given license to other figures and groups to assume its role. Here's [how Andy summarizes the issue](#), speaking in part to address why the Yes Men turned to news parody as a viable extension of their hoaxing, pranking ways:

[Journalists are] doing a terrible job. And it's not necessarily the journalists' fault, though by and large they could be doing a better job, it's the structure they're a part of. It's increasingly getting streamlined and made a part of the market economy, where profit is the only value that matters. So [news]papers are closing, and journalists are being laid off, bloggers are replacing journalists because they're willing to do it for free. It's really catastrophic. When you have comedy shows providing news for people, it's a really bad situation.

To be sure, the constant flow of disreputable news passing as legitimate news has contributed to growing dissatisfaction with traditional news outlets; public trust in news media is reaching new lows and the credibility of newsmakers has also been severely compromised. As a recent [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press study](#) concludes: "The American public continues to fault news organizations for a number of perceived failures, with solid majorities criticizing them for political bias, inaccuracy and failing to acknowledge mistakes." These findings are significant because they are situated within a twenty-two year timeline (1985-2007), suggesting that dissatisfaction with news media has increased over time. Importantly, however, the study also reveals that "public support for the news media's role as political watchdog has endured."

While media scholars, political economists, journalists, and social critics routinely weigh in on the shortcomings of contemporary journalism, it is also worth noting that political satirists have increasingly played a vital role in shaping sustained critiques of news media. As keen observers of the failures of news media, political satirists have distinguished themselves in the first decade of this century as frontrunners in the circulation and popularization of this brand of media criticism. More than simply asserting itself as a ridiculing and militant presence in the field of popular culture, political satire has emerged as a viable form of critique in the otherwise stuffy and elitist realm of politics. Offering much needed media criticism through an array of devices, cultural forms and practices, political satirists have led the way in forging an ongoing reappraisal of the function and performance of journalism at the present moment; in their work, they have also placed considerable emphasis on re-inscribing the relationship between journalism and democracy.

New Alternatives and Possibilities: The Yes Men's Fake News

In 2007, Mike and Andy were [invited to appear on the Bill Moyers Journal](#) on PBS. The seasoned pranksters made full use of the televised appearance, posing as representatives of Triglyceride Investments, a private equity fund poised to combine the assets of all hedge funds on Wall Street to bring all American media outlets "under a single canopy of ownership." If Bagdikian's mapping of the Big Five media corporations in the world hadn't already raised enough concern on the part of observers, the possibility of increasing media ownership down to a single all-encompassing entity would surely do the trick. As they would argue, the presence of a single holding company for the country's mass media (radio, television, cable, newspapers, Internet) would increase the bottom line tenfold and would catapult Wall Street to unparalleled heights in terms of its ability to "run the country." When asked if they believe a silver lining is to be found in media conglomeration, Mike answers in earnest: "This is not just a silver lining. The coat is reversible. It's literally going to be a silver jacket." The Yes Men devote the remainder of the short segment to convincing Moyers that their financial maneuvering will not only create better entertainment with more channels and more diverse programming--they also boast that the move will improve society, even with NPR and PBS included in its IPO! Of course, they don't offer concrete

examples of how society will be better served (Andy makes a hilarious analogy to bruised apples turning into brandy and Mike invokes the image of a reversible jacket), but they do speak directly to how the market and corporate stakeholders will triumph.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of the segment is that Moyers was in on the joke from the outset, using the scenario as a lesson on how to spot a hoax and how to assess the inherent dangers of increased media ownership; it would also provide a clever segue to describe the Yes Men's work and the culture of hoaxing around them. In this context, they are clearly making use of artifice to tell the story of both how and why they hoax. In the newspaper hoaxes described in this chapter, they take this notion of artifice and explode it, bringing a whole spectrum of news and events to light that seldom see the light of day. Whereas *The Onion* and *The Daily Show* often deliver stories using eviscerating humour and irreverence to brazenly criticize their targets, Yes Men parodies blend an interesting mix of desperation, irony, and sincerity in their adaptation of *fake news*. In what follows, I describe the Yes Men's fakery as a welcome intervention in the realm of journalism and current affairs, one that signals new possibilities for the form and the culture at large.

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New York Times “Special Edition”: “All the News We Hope to Print”

On November 12, 2008, thousands of volunteers gathered nationwide in the early morning hours to distribute free copies of a *NYT* special issue (SI). The front page headline boldly announced a decisive end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an unfathomable policy change seemingly drafted and ratified overnight. Unsuspecting urban dwellers were handed a 12-page newspaper that also featured stories on the implementation of a maximum wage law (i.e., salary caps for C.E.O.s), the closing of Guantánamo Bay and other detention camps, the inauguration of a United Nations-sanctioned weapons ban, the passing of the National Health Insurance Act, and a soon-to-be passed bill that would eliminate tuition fees at public universities. Given the miraculous character of the articles, many were left to wonder: What shift in planetary alignments could have been responsible for such unanticipated good news? What groundbreaking changes in political, corporate, lobbyist, and grassroots culture would one have to had to miss (or ignore) for news of this kind to actually materialize?

Was it all just a dream?

For readers initially seduced by the paper's uncanny resemblance to the real *NYT*, they would have to decipher the tell-tale clues embedded within. A discerning reader might notice the transformation of its iconic masthead, from “All the News That's Fit to Print” to “All the News We Hope to Print” (the subtle masthead change setting the tone for the paper's utopian vision). Post-dated, July 4, 2009 (almost nine months in the future), the newspaper provides yet another subtle clue for the reader to feel in on the joke. As special edition writer and chief collaborator Steve Lambert put it, the Fourth of July reference serves as a clear marker of their work's aspirational politics: “It was a subtle way of wrapping ourselves in the flag, saying we're not against the United States, and we want it to be better. I think it worked to defuse some potential criticism.” If these clues went unnoticed, the weather forecast invites even more playful reader skepticism: “Today, clouds part, more sunshine, recent gloom passes. Tonight, strong leftward winds. Tomorrow, a new day. Weather map throughout.” Finally, New York readers privy to receiving the fake paper were said to have been immediately suspicious upon receiving a free *NYT*; if that wasn't enough, the newspapers were handed out by earnest and enthusiastic volunteers, a trait that many joked betrayed any affiliation to the real *NYT*.

Once all suspicion of the hoax has been cast aside, the reader can pay closer attention to nuance. In a compelling editorial note, editors of the SI expressed an optimistic agenda for the future: “We can begin

to make the news in this paper the news in every paper.” For citizens accustomed to reading about war, famine, civil unrest, environmental disaster, political corruption, and global economic crises--ever-present problems often presented without solutions--the paper strikes a sincere (if absurdist) note, reporting stories in a register rarely deployed in journalistic coverage. [In a post-hoax interview on CNN](#), the “liberal comedy group” labelled the intervention a glimpse into what life in America might look like under President-elect Barack Obama’s administration. When asked why they created the hoax, Andy replied using the most concise language possible:

We wanted to do it. There is a tremendous desire to see change happen, obviously. The election proves that and this was about how much change we really want and making people realize that the only way we will have actually change is if we continue to give Obama the mandate and the pressure and the support that he needs to accomplish the change that we elected him to do.

One cannot discount that Obama’s vision for change was at the very core of his electoral campaign (“Change We Can Believe In”), a message that resonated with the American public in the wake of an eight-year-long Republican mandate under George W. Bush. Although the news in the paper is “false,” the hoax is informed by a simple yet powerful logic: if everyday citizens were to hold both elected officials and news media accountable, the fruits of the paper’s various stories might actually come to bear.

“The goal that we talked about was that we wanted people for fifteen seconds to believe that the war might have ended and some of these things could have happened. Just to feel it.” In recounting what they’d hoped to achieve with the hoax, Lambert [speaks of the desire to suspend reader disbelief](#) just enough for the audience to imagine certain projects coming to fruition--some real (ending the Iraq War), some imagined (introducing universal health care). What Lambert is describing is a project that momentarily refuses the despair and disappointment of the present and replaces them with a sense of renewed optimism and hope. These ideals are grounded by a very real sense of the challenges and barriers that prevent these initiatives from ever seeing the light of day; nonetheless, the act of creating this newspaper (and its accompanying website) rescues these ideas from obscurity and places them back into the realm of the possible. By providing numerous signposts throughout the paper, the Yes Men offer the reader a chance to be in on the joke, an inclusive gesture that invites everyone to participate in (or at the very least imagine) the future-directed politics of the project. Like its companion fake *NYP* (discussed below), this was a hoax meant to be deciphered in the interests of reanimating discussion, debate, and struggle over the unwritten future.

A Word About Fantasy and Utopia

The fake *NYT* presents a robust, ambitious project: to construct fantastic situations and to paint idealistic representations of society and culture. To do this, the satirist must first juxtapose the normal (everyday) and the absurd (utopian), an exercise that is meant to make the disconnect between current living conditions and future possibilities readily apparent. When the reader confronts stories like “Gitmo, Other Centers Closed” or “United Nations Unanimously Passes Weapons Ban,” she sees the disparity between the fateful present and the unwritten future: at the time of writing, the infamous Guantánamo Bay prison (or “Gitmo”) is still very much in operation, with no foreseeable plans to close the facility; the U.N. has yet to pass an international weapons ban ratified by “192 member states,” but small-scale initiatives have begun to appear on the international stage. Here we are presented with news stories that make explicit the difference between how things are and how they might or ought to be.

The very act of publishing these stories represents what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the dramatization of “extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea” ([Problems 114](#)). In presenting these fantastic and idealistic representations of society, however

extraordinary, the fake *NYT* engages directly in the provocation and testing of philosophical ideas, with the larger intention of presenting alternative modes of governance, leadership, and ways of living. In “Corporate Personhood Gets Real,” we learn that legislation will soon abolish the notion of “limited liability” for corporations, making shareholders liable for the crimes their corporations commit; in “All Public Universities To Be Free,” Congress is poised to pass a bill that would eliminate tuition fees at public universities, an initiative meant to improve access to education in the country; finally, in “Nation Sets Its Sights on Building Sane Economy,” the passing of the S.A.N.E. Act effectively caps C.E.O. salaries, breaks up financial conglomerates, stabilizes mortgages, and invests in public housing, in a bill that constitutes a significant sea change in the country’s financial makeup. Importantly, the interplay between fantasy and reality serves a crucial satirical function: to re-imagine contemporary issues and debates and to frame them constructively, so as to lay the groundwork for revisionary, even revolutionary, projects.

The centrality of fantasy to the utopian politics of this project are instantly palpable in the special edition’s centerpiece, “Iraq War Ends: Troops to Return Immediately.” The lead story announces the complete withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from the region (including Afghanistan), citing that the United Nations will hereafter perform all peacekeeping duties and provide infrastructural aid and assistance. Putting an end to what he deemed “the most unfortunate adventure in modern American history,” (fake) Department of Defense spokesperson Kevin Sites would put a human(itarian) face on the Iraq War: “Today, we can finally enjoy peace--not the peace of the brave, perhaps, but at least peace.” Of course, such pronouncements would generate mixed reactions on Wall Street, in the defense industry (e.g., Lockheed Martin--the world’s largest defense contractor), and within the ranks of the American military, but as an accompanying article reveals, the U.S.’s withdrawal from the Middle East would precipitate a wave of pledges to uphold peace in conflict-ridden areas across the globe (“After Withdrawal Peace”). Following the U.S.’s lead, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Columbia, the Kashmir, Somalia, Chad, and Belgium all pledged to uphold peace in their respective countries. With this example, satire is used to depict a utopian scenario: the end of the Iraq War, the rebuilding of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ratification of international peace accords.

It should be noted that the fake *NYT* depicts the end of an unpopular war at a time when the war was receding in the background of international public discourse, particularly in American news media. Especially in the wake of the global economic crisis, the Yes Men’s hoax brought the ongoing war back to the forefront of discussion. Far from simply critiquing various actors (government, news media) for failing to resolve the crisis, “Iraq War Ends” rejects the notion that a swift withdrawal from Iraq is untenable by openly framing the possibility on the front page, and punctuating it in the *NYT*’s iconic Cheltenham font. Here the explicit irony of the scene--the Iraq War was clearly *not* over--serves as an expression of the ironist’s “resistance to a single fixed point of view” ([Colebrooke 80](#)); in fact, the Yes Men’s larger dissatisfaction with the war (then in its eighth year) is manifest in its dramatic refusal to submit to this ongoing reality. The fake *NYT* puts a decisive end date to the war, offering the reader a new means of understanding the issue, while introducing an alternative worldview--life after war. To gauge what the Yes Men are really up to, consider literary scholar Wayne Booth’s metaphor of two uneven buildings (each building representing a different perspective) wherein the group invites the audience to move to the more elevated (and superior) plane above, in this case, presenting the audience with a worldview that welcomes both the end of war and the beginning of peace. It’s from this privileged, heightened vantage point that readers can begin to imagine the world differently, both in its current state and in a greatly improved future incarnation. One of the most promising aspects of hoaxing a newspaper is that you cultivate this shift in perspective through a wide variety of access points: the newspaper itself explores numerous facets of contemporary life and culture, a strategy designed to increase the likelihood that readers will respond to at least some aspect of the hoax. To do this, the special issue engages in a direct critique of the *NYT*, draws on clever advertisement parodies, embraces online interfacing, and makes its pitch for citizen journalism. Let’s briefly discuss these tactics at work.

Why Hijack the *NYT*?

Rather than reproduce the *NYT*'s traditional methods of recording reality, the Yes Men choose the *NYT* template to radically re-imagine the future of journalism. The Yes Men's *NYT* demonstrates that to subvert established journalistic codes and conventions is to simultaneously criticize and reform how journalism currently operates. Nowhere is this undertaking more explicit than in its *Corrections* section, in which the editors

- freely admit errors in misrepresenting the interests of minorities and progressives (groups the organization has traditionally referred to as "special interests");
- apologize for framing their reportage of the environment from a business perspective;
- admit their failure to decline offers of advertising money from the very corporations they are meant to report on;
- apologize "for underreporting the effects and dangers of media consolidation, perhaps due to [its] own efforts at media consolidation."

As the surrogate *NYT* editors put it: "The Times owns almost two dozen regional newspapers, a number of television and radio stations, and partial shares in the Red Sox and the Discovery Channel." In an interesting subversion of a longstanding editorial convention (the *Corrections* page), the Yes Men use hyperbole and overstatement to draw attention to some of the *NYT*'s inconsistencies, omissions, and failures. In its reflection on "Special Interests," the editors apologize for framing socially progressive groups as forever "pandering" to politicians, and for giving "the impression that the interests of corporations are more important than those of citizens." The editors also draw attention to the paper's flawed coverage of the environment (its practice of "belittling the efforts of activists and local government"), only to announce a new weekly "Environment section" that will place regulation and policy at the centre of future discussion and debate. While corrections are generally reserved for incorrect statements, dates, and timelines--not to mention inaccurate places, names, and image captions--this *Corrections* section sheds a spotlight on hidden breaches in the newspaper's editorial practices.

On a related note, *Corrections* also announces the wholesale removal of its "Automobiles" section, in a move meant to underline its awareness of "the effect of automobiles on the global climate crisis." Furthermore, in removing this section the *NYT* openly rejects its previous standing as an organization that presents "well-integrated print and online advertising opportunities" that "meet advertisers' demands." Another noteworthy "correction" relates to the newspaper's ties to advertising and corporate ownership. In a frank admission, the editors concede that "running ads from Exxon-Mobil while reporting on climate change, for example, or from weapons manufacturers while reporting on the Iraq War--represents an obvious conflict of interest." In the interests of avoiding conflict of interest charges in the future, the paper commits either to move to a subsidies/subscription model or to cease operations as a publicly traded company. To ensure that the paper's independence and integrity remain intact, *NYT* would also announce that it will "voluntarily trust-bust itself," demonstrating in the process that the "paper of record should be held to an even higher standard than the rest of the publishing industry." Such efforts will be made to contribute further to "the independence of American journalism," a notion that has all but eroded under the influence of growing media consolidation. If you make it to the bottom of the page, you can't help but marvel at how well the group distill the *NYT*'s editorial blind spots and contradictions.

What's important to note here is that satire need not always be funny. As satire scholars have argued, "While laughter is certainly an important outcome if satire is to have its full effect ... [it's not] a necessary component or distinguishing feature of satire" (13). On a basic level, the satire presented here draws heavily upon the trope of *antiphrasis* or semantic inversion, that is, of using "a word or phrase to

convey an idea opposite to its real significance” (Hutcheon, [Irony’s Edge](#) 59). The Yes Men’s corrections of *NYT* editorial and business practices do not come close to accurately reflecting the organization’s ideology; in fact, the majority of the corrections use irony in the interests of conveying a worldview quite opposite to the one currently espoused by the newspaper. And while the satire is muted in tone (humour and laughter do not figure prominently in this example), its critique registers loudly. Given the paper’s current financial and ideological makeup, the Yes Men suggest, *NYT* would do well to reform and/or rehabilitate its ways. These ironic redescriptions of the organization lay bare its day-to-day inconsistencies, encapsulating what practices merit revision and what future avenues may be explored. Thus the Yes Men’s corrections serve as a powerful critique of *NYT*’s existing editorial policies: they perform a diagnostic critique of the organization’s journalistic practices but, most notably, they put forward progressive solutions to help eradicate these problems.

How would their other targets fare? Let’s briefly move from news parody to advertising parody.

Culture Jamming Advertising in the *NYT*

Google the term *culture jamming* and your search will produce thousands of photoshopped or manipulated images--all bearing a distinctive style and signature. The first page of image results might yield any of the following eye-catching reconfigurations of famous icons: Enjoy Coca-Cola becomes *Enjoy Capitalism*; Burger King morphs into *Murder King*; Esso transformed into *E\$\$\$O*; Walmart rebranded as *China Direct*. Culture jamming refers to a type of pranking that is tied to a broader anti-capitalist social movement that works to subvert dominant forms of media representation. Branding is at the centre of this project and activists and pranksters have actively sought to re-engineer these signs and symbols to pierce through the veil of their tightly-woven myths about the triumphs of global capitalism. Culture jamming projects include the act or practice of

- subtly or radically altering advertisements ([Adbusters Magazine](#))
- modifying, subverting, “liberating” billboards ([Billboard Liberation Front](#), [Ron English](#))
- dubbing popular films with political dialogue (Situationists)
- re-contextualizing public spaces with comics-style speech bubbles ([The Bubble Project](#))
- repackaging and politicizing toys (Barbie Liberation Organization) or popular music by redistributing altered compact discs in retail stores ([Banksy](#))
- performing on behalf of corporations (Yes Men) or performing interventions within corporate structures and settings ([Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping](#))

Though there are thousands of examples to draw from, I limit our discussion to the altered advertisements in the fake *NYT* as an entry point for thinking about the range of critical comment used in this hoax. In creating these ad parodies, we witness a Yes Men favourite returning to the fold: the multinational corporation. In total, the special edition features ten advertisements from Monsanto, Exxon, McDonald’s, General Motors, and HSBC, among others, all of which feature critical commentary on either the role of advertising in news media or the actions/misdeeds of the twenty-first-century corporation. Given the advertisements’ notable standing alongside the newspaper articles, we are afforded the opportunity to perceive anew the central place advertising assumes in print and online journalism. Because the ads are knowing parodies of well-known corporations, these subversions raise the reader’s awareness of just how ubiquitous advertising is and reveals just how ingratiated advertisers are in the economic structures that make news publications possible.

For readers of the real *NYT* who have become desensitized to newspaper advertisements (or for online readers who bypass ads via browser plugins like AdBlock), the special edition provides a rare opportunity to reflect on the role advertising plays in everyday news reportage, even in the *NYT*. Take the following

Exxon advertisement:

We at Exxon are committed to meeting the new Congressional guidelines for socially, economically, & environmentally responsible energy. That's why we applaud the end of the war in Iraq. The invasion of Iraq was supposed to mean access to oil without the costly interference of national sovereignty, and lower prices at the pump for you and your family. Projections and reality differed, but now we've learned: *PEACE can also be lucrative.*

The advertisement's copy presents a new, socially, economically, and environmentally responsible company that sees a legitimate business opportunity in pursuing ethically-sound practices in its energy production. As the reader learns, Exxon is "turning over a new leaf" for two reasons: first, (newly-implemented) Congressional guidelines have mandated that companies adopt a Fair Trade business model, and second, the company sees a lucrative future in this paradigm shift--"Peace. An idea the world can profit from." In an interesting display of intratextuality (or internal citation), Exxon's approval of the end of the war corresponds directly to the paper's lead story, thus reinforcing the urgency and seriousness of the issue. The fake ad also frames Exxon in a positive light, demonstrating how a multinational corporation could act ethically and still operate as a highly profitable commercial enterprise. In a single stroke, the ad re-imagines how a corporation might do business differently and it also recasts notions of what kinds of advertisements might appear in the pages of today's advertising-dependent newspapers. In a similar move, a full-page KBR advertisement accomplishes a similar feat: by framing the "solutions company" as a progressive stakeholder in the reconstruction of Iraq and by presenting peace as a lucrative and worthwhile undertaking, the ad sheds light on the positive interventions that are possible under new governmental and corporate leadership. As a company that applauds the end of the Iraq War and respects newly initiated government policy changes, KBR makes the following pledge: "If you make it law, we'll make it work." Not unlike the Exxon ad, the KBR piece envisions a more ethical, equitable, and profitable future under government regulation. Irrespective of the veracity of the claims put forward in the ads (this is advertising, after all!), these appropriations of the company logos, names, and philosophies present us with an alternative account of how things are with how they could be in the realm of advertising under new editorial direction and under new government leadership.

It is significant to note that the advertisements' focus is not fixed exclusively on the corporation as a target of critique--a hallmark of culture jamming more broadly. The Yes Men also appropriate the HSBC logo/trademark ("The world's local bank") to temper the reader's expectations of the incoming Obama administration. The ad consists of three successive images of a smiling, confident-looking Obama, the White House tucked away in the background. For each image, a caption: the first, "Epoch-making"; the second, "Pivotal"; the third, "Squandered." With an incoming president making his historic mark in Washington, one imagines a leading international bank like HSBC creating a flattering advertisement that would generate favourable associations between the corporation and the president. Instead, the parody presents Obama's victory as a pivotal moment in American history that could easily be squandered. As the copy reads, the advertisement is meant to encourage the reader to hold elected officials accountable during their tenure in office: "The more we look at the world, the more we understand that some things really matter. Not only our choice of President, but how we make sure that he, like all our elected officials, does what we elected him to do. It's not over yet."

Here the Yes Men use HSBC as a mouthpiece for inspiring widespread civic accountability. For Obama's presidency not to be squandered, citizens must now be entrusted to hold their elected officials in check; the voice of reason, in this scenario, however, comes from an unlikely source--HSBC--making the advertisement all the more memorable. The logic underpinning this parody suggests that if a corporation is willing to assume the role of instilling notions of civic responsibility in its clients, perhaps the future imagined in the newspaper *can* become a reality. In many ways, "It's not over yet" bespeaks the fake *NYT*'s broader call for civic action, as well as for governmental and corporate responsibility. Although

the other advertising examples are equally appealing in their undermining of other corporate actors, these fake ads reinforce a number of key points that relate back directly to the newspaper's overall critique. First, recognizing the central importance of advertising revenue to the production of news, these pieces do not seek to outlaw advertisers/advertisements, so much as they wish to reframe the way they contribute positively to the news. Second, corporations are not inherently demonized for previous misdeeds, but rather championed as new bastions of progressive thought and action. Finally, they establish a direct link between citizens, corporations, and government, placing the onus on each respective actor to uphold its responsibilities for the public good.

Now that we have a general sense of the imagined reader, we can address questions surrounding the audience and its broader role in the *NYT* hoax.

Expanding the Audience: From Print to Internet Hoax

However successful the print edition of the fake *NYT* may have been in re-imagining the current socio-political climate in the United States in 2008, its online counterpart would prove just as important in the broader circulation of the work. If the print newspaper constituted a brilliant and uncanny imitation of the original, so too was the website a tantalizing replica of nytimes.com. At first blush, anyone visiting the site could easily mistake the fake for the original. To readers of this book it is now unsurprising that a group so adept at using media and technology should once again return to the fake website format to further its ends. Newspapers are an amazing resource and they still retain an important, albeit diminished, standing in the early twenty-first century; that said, as any subway or public transportation commuter will tell you, they are easily abandoned, discarded, or in the best instances, recycled. The digital offers print's numerous possibilities--access, sharing, archiving, and community--adding to them in a format that has cross-generational appeal. For example, for citizens not living in the major American cities in which the print edition was distributed (myself included), a free PDF download of the special issue was made available on a fake *NYT* website (nytimes-se.com), enabling an even larger readership to read and respond to the hoax. Making the fake newspaper available in both print and digital formats allows for the expansion of the hoax's audience, all the while facilitating a larger international dialogue on issues of civic, social, and political significance.

On the face of it, these commonplace gestures seem pretty banal. There's no real flair or gimmick involved, just a conscientious desire to spread the hoax as widely as possible. But there's more to the integration of these features. For visitors to the site, each story solicits comments from the reader, a feature that is only enabled selectively (if indiscriminately) at the real *NYT* site. Far from merely addressing an urban American audience, reader comments posted to the site originate from several countries: Germany, China, Turkey, Algeria, Netherlands, Great Britain, Greece, Mexico, Brazil, Lebanon, Russia, and Canada, among others. Despite its ubiquitous presence in today's web culture, the importance of this simple architectural feature should not be understated. Each commenter is required to provide a name, an email address, and (an optional) website address, demanding some form of accountability or integrity from the user. Given the large number of respondents to the site (each article soliciting anywhere from fifteen to two-hundred-and-eighty comments), these administrative requests seem to have presented little-to-no barriers to reader participation. In fact, this simple but effective feature is noteworthy, in that readers often linked to personal and political blogs, civic and activist organizations, and embedded links to other news websites, creating an informal clearinghouse of sorts for both interested parties and uninitiated newcomers. For readers content to simply re-circulate the original articles, the site also allows for the easy sharing of content across social networking and social bookmarking sites like Digg, Delicious, and Facebook. If the newspaper and online editions fail to capture the attention of certain constituents or demographics, the easy distribution of content across these fluid points of media access and consumption helped expand the group's potential audience. In this respect, the "news" is better able

to penetrate expansive online networks, making it possible to promote further dialogue in a number of different forums and communities.

Citizen Journalism

Perhaps the feature that best distinguishes the fake website from the original is the addition of a call-for-writers section on the homepage, entitled “Write for the *Times*.” The initial prompt reads: “Got an article from the near future? Send it to us, and we’ll publish it.” Following the newspaper’s “Editorial Guidelines,” i.e., to “keep it real,” describe “who, what, how,” and write with sincerity and humour, the reader is given the opportunity to submit articles for/about the future. Although it’s impossible to gauge what the outcome of this tactic might be, the power of suggestion is enough to establish the overall thrust of their *NYT* project. In its clearest manifestation, the special edition turns the potentially passive reader into a writer actively engaging future possibilities; in its more pragmatic, utilitarian incarnation, the act of framing readers as potential writers is once again indicative of the project’s overarching vision of re-imagining what is possible within the realm of journalism—even within the ranks of one of the country’s most lauded and venerable institutions. It may be unthinkable for the *NYT* to solicit its readership’s help in its coverage of current affairs, but the notion of turning everyday citizens into journalists is one that has been increasingly welcomed in recent years. Exploring the potential of citizen journalism shouldn’t be shrugged off as a flight of fancy either; the group has since indicated a willingness to turn the site into [“a user-contributed future news site.”](#) Indeed, by investing in its readership’s ability to produce news for/about the future, the Yes Men invite the reader to have a real stake in journalistic integrity by encouraging their civic participation. The architecture of the fake *NYT* website expands the terrain of civic engagement outlined in the newspaper edition and introduces productive aspects missing from the real *NYT* site. In mapping these simple features, the project takes on an added dimension that highlights how news organizations can simultaneously improve the dynamic between readers and journalists and instill in readers the sense that their input (however defined) is valuable to the vitality of the community.

“What If...”: The Fake NYT Video News Releases

The present discussion would be incomplete without some reference to the website’s *Video* section, an important extension and amplification of the original newspaper. As most news organizations now incorporate multimedia platforms in the dissemination of content, the section is far from groundbreaking or innovative; in fact, the section is host to only two videos. The reason this section merits inclusion here is due to the nature of the videos themselves--the first is a video news release (VNR) whose online presence coincided with the publication and distribution of the newspaper; the second (also a VNR) provides additional footage of reader reactions to the newspaper from the day of its release. Although the use of VNRs is ubiquitous in the fields of public relations, advertising, and journalism, the project’s inclusion of the practice provides an interesting counterpoint to the deceptive VNRs described above. The propaganda and disinformation funded by corporations and government are here replaced by a civic-minded, community-oriented initiative. In the first video, the camera pans across various city dwellers reading the special edition (faces expressing shock, elation, happiness, disbelief), the voice-over setting the scene: “Early this morning, commuters nationwide were delighted to find out that while they were sleeping the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had come to an end.” The video then reports the size and scope of the project (1.2 million copies, thousands of volunteers), simultaneously streaming footage of the physical newspapers being printed, packaged, and transported to various locations. Here the video truly conveys the enormity of the project, the camera panning to a number of different volunteers and access points where the papers were distributed. For the uninitiated, the VNR also provides a breakdown of the newspaper’s key stories, editorials, and advertisements. Interspersed between these announcements are reader reactions to the paper, the most poignant of which surfaces halfway through the two-minute

segment:

I don't know, it's like a dream. You know you talk about it, everybody's talking about it, it's like "This war needs to end!" and here [gestures to the paper] "The war is over!" It's like Oh, my God, I can't believe it! [gesturing to others] The war is over! Wow, unbelievable! Oh, my God, I don't know what to say, I'm trembling.

The young man's reaction is rendered all the more powerful because his contented disbelief turns to word-of-mouth proclamations where he starts telling passersby that the war is over. Lest we forget this is a hoax! The VNR makes a point of capturing these immediate responses not just to demonstrate how well they document the project, but also to provide an extreme example of what happens when someone is *not* in on the joke. These unrehearsed and spontaneous responses to the newspaper provide powerful moments that capture the feelings of a people.

But the *NYT* does not escape criticism entirely in the VNRs. The video's New York footage captures a staged exchange between a journalist/videographer and a *NYT* staffer outside its Manhattan headquarters. As the flustered staffer puts it, "I don't understand what statement [the hoaxers are] trying to make. We've been all over the Bush administration since Day One. We set the standard for coverage of the Iraq War." As the camera captures his bewildered expression, we hear a female bystander outside the frame ask, "Like Judith Miller?" The reference to Judith Miller raises the ire of the staffer because of her fictitious and misleading *NYT* exclusives about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Miller made a compelling case for America to go to war, and the military intelligence she received was both erroneous and ethically dubious. For some, her story became a "cautionary tale about the culture of American journalism" ("[Source of the Trouble](#)"). What is clear from the VNRs is that although the news' positive character is well-received by readers on the street, what remains to be seen is what kind impact the hoax will have on the *NYT* itself. To be sure, the brief mention of Judith Miller reminds the audience that the *NYT* is far from producing the news imagined in the special edition and in some cases, its reportage runs counter to the spirit of its parodic counterpart. The disparity between the real and the imagined, however, is easily trumped in the VNR, as the good news carries with it an infectious strain amongst those who are confronted with, and comforted by, the news. Finally, the Yes Men's VNR ultimately persuades us that the form can be put to good use; rather than deploy video news releases to deceive or misinform the public, these texts can circulate with a civic agenda still firmly intact. In the end, we are left only to ponder a question posed by the VNR's final (female) respondent: "What if...?"

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A Hoax With a Twist: The New York Post "Special Edition"

In late July 2009, the University of Maryland's Programme on International Policy Attitudes published a global poll that found that 73% of the world's population wanted their respective governments to put action on climate change at the top of the political agenda. Even in China, now the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide, 94% of the poll's respondents showed overwhelming support for government action. Of the 18,578 people surveyed in nineteen countries, only respondents in the U.S., Iraq, and Palestine did not situate climate change as a top priority. In fact, only 44% of Americans polled agreed that the Obama administration should be charged with putting its full support behind this issue. A recent study published in the journal *Public Understanding of Science* may help explain why public opinion was so low in America at the time. Based on a survey of 1,000 Americans in 2008 and 2011 on media consumption and beliefs regarding climate change, researchers found that exposure to conservative media decreases trust in climate scientists, which in turn decreases the belief that global warming is actually happening. An inverse scenario was shown to have emerged in Australia by which Australian acceptance of the scientific

reality of human-caused global warming was reinforced upon being shown incontrovertible evidence, especially among conservatives. With conservatives tending to favour conservative media as first points of media consumption (and liberals preferring liberal media sources as theirs), issues such as climate change can be divisive and polarizing, despite surveys signalling a 97% Climate Consensus (based on over 12,000 peer-reviewed climate science papers).

And just as citizens around the world were calling for greater political engagement on this issue, action on this front was being curtailed by leading G8 countries such as Canada and the United States.

In the simplest possible terms, political will and public pressure were needed for any meaningful gains to be made.

On September 22, 2009, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon organized a global summit on climate change in New York, to be attended by nearly 100 world leaders. For Ban Ki-moon, the goal of the one-day summit was to “mobilize the political will and vision” needed to reach an ambitious agreement at the upcoming Copenhagen climate talks in December. Many saw the summit as an opportunity to build much needed political momentum in the lead-up to Copenhagen. In his plenary speech, Ban Ki-moon painted a sobering view of the stakes and consequences tied to the world community’s continued failure to reach a binding climate change accord: “Failure to reach broad agreement in Copenhagen would be morally inexcusable, economically short-sighted and politically unwise.” With 100 world leaders invited to the table in New York and 193 nations gathering in Copenhagen--all supposedly in the interests of negotiating a binding (and complex) accord--it is no wonder that climate change initiatives have been perpetually stalled on the world stage. In 2009, a growing rift between the U.S. and Europe had all but materialized, due in large part to the former’s incapacity or unwillingness to reduce carbon emissions and offer aid to developing nations. With the U.S. Senate deeply focused on health care reform, climate change legislation was effectively pushed to the sidelines.

To spur the U.S. along in forwarding its lagging climate change agenda, the Yes Men would issue its second fake newspaper in two years--a fake *New York Post* that warned of massive climate-related catastrophes. Published on the eve of the UN Summit in New York, the hoax would come at a moment when urgent action on climate change was needed, but also at a time when the topic earned very little coverage across North American news media. As such, the fake *NYP* was released to coincide with the UN Summit to create greater visibility surrounding climate change issues. For Bichlbaum, there was no better news organization to parody than the *Post*, one of the city’s most widely read and “entertainingly written newspapers.” To produce a 32-page paper announcing the dangers and consequences of looming climate change is one thing; to present these alarmist stories in a popular vernacular and in an entertaining format is quite another. In adopting the *Post*’s matter-of-fact, no-nonsense tone--and in borrowing the newspaper’s much maligned, much revered identity--the hoax enters different territory than that of their *NYT* caper. Whereas the *NYT* hoax presents a broad range of issues (presenting them in a critical-utopian register), the fake *NYP* focuses exclusively on issues surrounding climate change and the environment (stressing the critical nature and urgency of the crisis). What’s more, everything in the paper is factual. For the Yes Men, the decision was guided by a larger cultural imperative: “Climate change is the biggest threat civilization has ever faced, and it should be in the headlines of every paper, every day until we solve the problem.” My discussion of the *NYP* illustrates the strengths of this hoax, pointing once again to the power of news parody as a means of proliferating information and instigating discussion through clever intervention. Just as Ban Ki-moon would implore world leaders with the following call to action--“Now is the moment to act in common cause”--so, too, would the Yes Men use this hoax as a rallying point to bring politicians and citizens in line to tackle climate change.

As we’ve already seen through many of the examples in this book, climate change is a complex issue that impacts both the environment and the world population. Suppose, for example, that climate change (or

its corollary term, *global warming*) fails to capture the popular imagination, that no one is particularly concerned about the welfare of the environment because the information is too often conveyed in abstract terms. We lead busy lives and the degradation of Nature and the world's ecosystem remains an intangible that will be likely dealt with by smarter people in other countries who are, quite simply, more invested in the issue. It is precisely this apathetic mindset that has contributed to a laissez-faire approach to dealing with a rapidly changing global climate. Without concerned, politicized citizens, the political will needed to enact much needed laws and treaties is nowhere to be found, meaning that corporate and lobbyist interests (coal, nuclear energy) remain well attended to. To counter this widespread ignorance and/or disinterest, the fake paper aims to politicize everyday *Post* readers into a deeper engagement with climate-related issues. Over the span of thirty-two pages, the Yes Men cover a lot of ground--from the imminent rise of avoidable global weather-related catastrophes to the reinvigoration of green, environmental projects in New York. The tone is certainly alarmist in that the broader goal is to shake readers out of their lethargic complacency, but the stories are also imbued with optimism and hope, a delicate balance to strike on an issue as polarizing as this one.

[“This could be, and should be, a real New York Post”](#)

The Post provides an excellent canvas upon which to craft a political statement engineered to incite as much discussion as possible. Given the fact that the *NYP* offers almost two-thirds more content than its *NYT* precursor, the hoaxers enjoy greater leverage to tap into pre-existing reader interests: (Inter) National news, Politics, Business, Environment, Weather, Travel, Sports, Leisure, Entertainment--even Comics. And this is precisely where the fake *NYP* gets it right: to tell the story of climate change in any compelling way requires a well-rounded overview of just how many facets of everyday life could be affected by these changes. Forget about expecting readers to understand nuances related to cutting [“emissions to 17% below 2005 levels by 2020”](#) (that is, 4% below 1990 levels signaled in the Kyoto Protocol)--this language has long obfuscated our understanding of just how much world nations have exacerbated the issue. Instead, tackling the issue through the lens of everyday life--the very pockets that risk being compromised due to civic, state, and corporate inaction--presents a more visceral entry point for s(t)imulating action. For example: in demonstrating that the Pentagon acknowledges the massive infrastructural and human costs tied to climate change, by explaining the dire challenges posed to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) in keeping the subway system operational, by addressing the destructive impacts of both coal and nuclear energy on the economy and the environment, and in pointing to a potentially dramatic curtailment in the production of, say, French wines, readers get a real sense of what's at stake in terms of the issues, players, and consequences. This strategy solicits our collective/civic interest much more than the tired rhetoric of politicians and the abstract jargon of scientists.

“We’re Screwed: What You’re Not Being Told”

Let's begin with some of the predominant tactics at work. The front page headline opens with a sensationalist, attention-grabbing statement--“We’re Screwed”--the accompanying image of New York City falling prey to an apocalyptic-looking thunderstorm. Adding to intrigue, the story promises to reveal “What you’re not being told” by way of an official city report that predicts massive climate-related catastrophes. This is an enticing start, but if the headline comes across as too doom-and-gloom, the *Post* editors also include a short blurb on how New Yorkers are fighting back in the absence of any clearly defined leadership from the United Nations or world leaders. Unlike the *NYT* hoax, this special issue is exclusively focused on climate- and environment-related concerns. With the fake *NYP* the Yes Men embark on a two-pronged environmental justice campaign seeking to redress both the major and minor

barriers impeding meaningful climate change legislation and broader environmental protections:

- **Diagnostic critique:** by publishing and drawing attention to an established consensus of scientific literature, they offer a critical overview of the root causes and anticipated consequences of climate change;
- **Political empowerment and community development:** in presenting a sobering picture of things to come, the *NYP* rejects apathy and cynicism as viable responses; instead, the paper is replete with examples of engaged citizens and community groups in New York who are already working to *green* their city, all the while petitioning and lobbying government for environmental laws and policies that will shift the tide in favour of environmental reform.

Thus this hoax attempts to educate, enlighten, and inspire the missing 56% of respondents from the University of Maryland poll to participate in a broader call to action; more than this, the fake publication offers a wide range of resources, ideas, and stories to draw from in order to bring about change in communities at the local and global level. Although the *Post*'s print circulation was limited to New York, the Yes Men would once again build an accompanying website to bring these materials to a larger international audience. Importantly, much of the information provided regarding climate change is transferable and applicable to several competing contexts; in this respect, New York ends up serving as an emblematic example for how cities and nations might go about combatting the warming of the planet.

On the international stage, for example, the U.S. is depicted as having fallen far behind in terms of energy efficiency and renewable energy, not to mention the design and manufacturing of solar systems and wind turbines, a position that has been usurped by China and Germany. At the federal level, the U.S. Congress is characterized as having missed a crucial opportunity to cap greenhouse gas emissions via a slow-moving Climate bill (due in large part to its prioritization of health care reform). For those who rightly argue that health care reform should occupy a privileged position on the country's political agenda, the *NYP* optimistically highlights Congress' ability to juggle both agendas. Without a strong climate bill in place before Copenhagen, the U.S. would continue to hold up climate negotiations for the rest of the world. If world leaders are unable or unwilling to bring forward a brave vision for climate reform, the *Post* also presents a number of productive solutions that everyday citizens can perform: installing solar panels, switching to a white roof, starting a garden, drinking tap water, riding a bicycle, supporting local farmers, buying things with less packaging, using a clothesline, switching to fluorescent lights, buying a new refrigerator, recycling diligently, using power strips, and so on. At the municipal level (megacities of the world take note), the fake newspaper champions the expansion of hard-won bike lanes and pedestrian plazas as initiatives designed to promote active living and traffic decongestion. As the paper reports, "82% of New Yorkers walk, bike or use public transportation," a majority of them making use of the over two hundred miles' worth of bike paths across the five boroughs.

And if none of these stories capture the imagination of the imagined *Post*'s readership, stories of the NYPD's new hybrid cruisers, of the New York Mets and Yankees retrofitting their respective stadiums to meet optimal environmental standards, and of professional athletes going green to protect both the environment and the sports they love, may very well have greater sway. On the one hand, these "Early City Special" stories present concise assessments of how political leadership in the U.S. has reached new lows with regards to climate policy; on the other hand, much of the material conveys an optimistic tone informed by the inspiring actions of everyday citizens and communities--all in a common, relatable language that readers can readily appreciate. If the fake *NYT* presented its vision for ethical hoaxing via the use of fantasy and utopia, its offspring has since shifted the emphasis toward optimism and pragmatism, effectively demonstrating the rich variety of registers available to hoaxers hijacking this platform.

The papers do overlap, however, in important ways. The critical framework for highlighting inaction, injustice, and hypocrisy are consistent throughout. As a bona fide parody, the first critical target is the actual newspaper. Speaking to a similar desire expressed in relation to the fake *NYT*, *Andy* argues that the *NYP* proved too good a target to pass up because “they never do real reporting on climate change. We’re hoping this gives them the little kick in the ass that they need.” This aspect of the parody is explored far more subtly than in the more pointed critique of the *NYT*; for this reason, corporations and world leaders fare much worse in these pages. In “Flophenhagen,” writers express concern that rich countries like the U.S. understand both the guidelines for offsetting the continued warming of the planet and the risks associated with inaction, but that no one has risen to the occasion. If any actors have shown true diligence to act on the climate change front, the reader learns, it would certainly be the lobbyists and front groups working for polluting industries who are spreading misinformation and driving wedges between key players. One solution to bring the 192-member nations closer to an agreement in Copenhagen would be to herd the groups as you would cats. In an interesting use of analogy, the (fake) head of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Yvo de Boer has this to say: “You can take one of two approaches, you can either try and herd them from behind with a stick, which generally has them shooting off in different directions, or you can walk in front holding a tasty fish and that will get them to follow you more willingly.” This short article illuminates just how easily critique can integrate cynicism, hope, and humour.

In other instances the critique cuts much deeper, as the paper’s discussion of Deutsche Bank’s Penn Station “carbon counter.” The seven-story-high counter--which measures “greenhouse gases in our atmosphere” (at the time 3.64 trillion and counting)--is meant to visibly communicate the bank’s concerns regarding the environment. The article, however, refuses to pander to Deutsche Bank’s flagrant hypocrisy by revealing that the institution is actually one of the world’s foremost financiers of the biggest carbon-emitting industries (coal mining operations in particular). Rather than keeping an eye on the problem (as the counter so literally attests), the bank is in reality greatly contributing to the emissions it feigns wishing to curb. In an interesting turn, the Yes Men’s inclusion of this text actually inspired journalists to break the story in other publications; the same can be said of news media reports on the Mayor’s office Blue Ribbon scientific report. Elsewhere, if the coal industry hadn’t already received its fair share of criticism in the *NYP*, “The Black Arts of Coal and Crude” addresses how big energy companies have moved beyond funding think tanks, campaign contributions, lobbyist interventions, and misleading advertisements to forging letters to members of Congress on behalf of very real grassroots citizen groups. The tactic, referred to as *astroturfing*, gives the false impression that citizens are so incensed by proposed energy reforms that they are taking to the streets to make their dissenting voices heard; the problem is, of course, that the letters (claiming to speak on behalf of lower-income constituents) were little more than a clever trick played by the American Petroleum Institute to more easily persuade lawmakers not to make any changes or amendments to existing legislation (already favourable to API-affiliated companies such as Shell, BP America, General Electric, and Siemens). If Congress isn’t already out of touch with the American people, these deceptive astroturfing practices surely stray them even further from taking the temperature of America’s ever-changing stance on climate change. In alerting readers to these deceptive corporate and PR tricks, the hoax reveals some of the more real, and inherently dangerous, hoaxes circulating.

Admittedly, not all news consumers seek information that will enrich their understanding of complex issues; in fact, many wish to be entertained along the way. In what is arguably the quirkiest ad parody in the Yes Men arsenal, the paper features a travel-style advertisement for Sex™. The ad poses the following question: Why travel? (You just wanted to get laid anyway, right?). However crude, the ad presents an argument for staying home based on environmental concerns: “Cut your emissions by cutting to the chase. No exotic locales needed.” The ad’s copy suggests that Sex™ getaways can be done for little to no cost (“3 nights from \$0*”), require no additional purchases, can be redeemed anytime/anywhere, and produce no emissions (of the carbon variety).” As a “perennial favorite since the dawn of time,”

Sex™ is framed as one of the most proactive things people can do to help save the environment--provided these same people refrain from air travel and other carbon emissions-producing activities.



Readers might have also noticed a second full-page lifestyle-related advertisement, this one a celebration of another universal favourite--water. You've seen countless images like this one before: a calm body of water interrupted by a benign drop producing a gentle ripple effect. If you look closely enough, you might even notice the appearance of a faucet reflected in the water. If you've been following the visual cues carefully, you've likely drawn the preliminary conclusion that the advertisement is glamourizing tap water. The copy reads: "Literally comes right out of your faucet." In a clever attempt to re-familiarize readers with this natural resource, the ad writers revisit what makes water so great. Tap water is

- refreshing
- necessary for life
- free
- bottle-free
- sugar-free
- healthy
- very low in calories
- everywhere
- easily turned into ice
- good for washing
- not yet owned by Coca-Cola
- made by God (or not)

The ad makes an implicit plea to readers to drink tap water in lieu of paying for bottled water, a mode of consumption that has created another deep strain on finite natural resources and the environment.

As National Geographic observes, Americans consume more bottled water than any other nation in the world, discarding 29 billion water bottles every year. Add to this the troubling fact that seventeen million barrels of crude oil are used in the production of these bottles, “enough oil to keep a million cars going for twelve months.” You would have to fill a water bottle a quarter of the way to picture just how much oil is used in the production of each of these products. If readers are able to reconnect with water as a faucet-emitting resource instead of as a disposable commodity, we may be able to wean ourselves ever so slowly from our dependence on bottled water. In a final bit of eco-lifestyle politics, the canvas tote bag also receives special treatment as a tried and true carrier of books and groceries, a stylish addition to anyone’s daily urban travels. “Why don’t we hang out again? ... I know that you’ve had... other bags. But I know that once you see how I’m the strongest and the most helpful of them all, we will be together. Forever.” If we can do away with plastic water bottles, surely we can rid ourselves of “flakey plastic” bags.

Conclusion

Given the performative nature of the majority of Yes Men hoaxes, news parody would not seem a likely intervention on the group’s part. With the likes of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and *The Onion* cultivating the practice with an endless variety of wit and insight, there doesn’t seem to be much room for the Yes Men and their collaborators to introduce new tricks within this already well established repertoire. And yet as this chapter has shown, the group’s deft mix of parody, satire, sincerity, and optimism have proven important contributions to both the form and content of these critical endeavours. The parodies have now materialized as matters of public record--moments in time that speak to pressing political issues that have not yet received their due attention in and across mainstream media. The fake *NYT*, for example, was so significant an event that the Library of Congress would later ask for permission to archive its website “as a matter of significant importance to the history of the United States in the 2008 election.”

These parodies have paved the way for critical, informative, and amusing hoaxes to emerge in material and virtual realms. They present news as a best case scenario, as a journalism that critically examines problematic systemic issues and offers an optimistic, utopian response as a means of preparing the way for future social change. It is precisely when we have lost the capacity to envision a better world that we accept the world as it presently functions. When the Yes Men, their collaborators, and the readers of its newspaper hoaxes begin to re-imagine the world not as it is, but how they might like it to be, new forms and possibilities emerge. [Steve Lambert expresses the sentiment in this way](#), stating that a hoax of this kind can produce an “alternate vision of the way that the world can work, [one] that’s written in a way that people can understand.” One vital lesson to be gleaned from these hoaxes is that anyone can do this. Here’s Andy again: “We never got any training, and yet, here we are.” The group raised \$11,000 from their friends and fans to produce the fake *Times*; they would receive \$50,000 from an anonymous donor to create the fake *Post*. The former would take six months of intensive labour to complete (with tight deadlines looming around the presidential election), while the latter would take one month and prove much easier to publish. There were no lawsuits and no arrests related to either of the hoaxes. Each hoax prompted a wave of fake newspapers--a *Die Zeit* in Germany, a *Financial Times* in London, an *International Herald Tribune* in Copenhagen--signaling an exciting new wave in the currents of contemporary activism. When journalists and news media are failing to perform their watchdog role, interventions of this kind are sorely needed to provide a break in sensationalist coverage and a renewed emphasis on critical, investigative journalism. Far from merely bending news media to report on issues they care about, the Yes Men have adopted news parody as a clever tactic to create the headlines they’d like to see in the world. As the following chapter makes clear, they aren’t alone in wanting to bring change to the world.

CHAPTER SIX: MEDIA RECEPTION: THE YES MEN IN/AS THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

Media Responses to Hoaxes

Media Responses to Yes Men Hoaxes

Missing the Point? When Spectacle Trumps the Real Issues

(II) Legality of Hoaxing

Q: So if I create a fake New York Times newspaper, there's nothing illegal about it?

The Yes Men: As long as you're commenting on The New York Times. We really wanted to use it because it was the newspaper of record, and you have to announce the end of the Iraq War in The New York Times. It's the only place to do it. We printed a few corrections in there that did attack their misreporting of things in the past. So we did attack them a little tiny bit, and that was partly for legal reasons, partly because it was a good thing to do, and really, we were inviting them to come after us by not really protecting ourselves under the law. They couldn't, though, because they have a stake in the First Amendment since they're a newspaper. And if they start attacking people for free speech, it's themselves that they're attacking.

J.E. - There's a moment in The Yes Men Fix the World when a reporter confronts Andy after he's posed as a HUD official in New Orleans. Andy tells him that that your subterfuge allows for 'truth-telling where normally there would only be lies.' What's your response when journalists or people who have been taken in by one of your impersonations accuse you of unethical or harmful behavior?

M.B. - Well, we've never been accused by anyone of breaking the law, and we've never been charged with any crime. What we do isn't illegal, so that's one thing. The second thing is that it's actually highly ethical. We immediately reveal the hoax. We assume the mantle of somebody in power so that we can have the voice that they're normally given. They shouldn't be given the right to that voice just by virtue of their wealth. That these established sources, these established voices are established merely because they're from a large commercial firm is a problem. It's a problem with the way we communicate in culture, and it's the reason that we have a version of democracy that's weighted so heavily toward big business. It's not really democracy; it's oligarchy. That's the problem, and that's what we're trying to deal with.

<http://artpulsemagazine.com/occupying-corporate-hype-the-strategic-satire-of-the-yes-men>

Q: How come you guys haven't gotten arrested?

The Yes Men: Because we don't do anything illegal—I mean, at least not anything that anyone can tell us is illegal. People can say it is, but it's usually lay people or friends who say, “Oh, you're going to get arrested!” When you go into a business conference, you're not really exposing yourself to be arrested. They're not going to disrupt their own conference to arrest you, and they can't, anyway, because you're invited.

And for actions that are more like the Chevron thing, I mean, who's going to arrest us? We didn't defraud anyone. We didn't take anyone's money. There's really no risk.

When we started doing this, we thought we would get arrested the first time. Then the second time, less so, and by the third time, we knew we were not going to get arrested, probably no matter what we did. But if we had gotten arrested, it would have been great, because it just would have helped highlight the action.

http://progressive.org/the_yes_men_interview.html

Doing the Right Thing: A Note on Public Opinion

The Bhopal spectacle was noteworthy because, like most hoaxes, it highlighted a breach in the BBC's practice of vetting credentialed experts in its reportage. In the aftermath, the BBC was forced to apologize to Dow Chemical, a source of much embarrassment to both Dow and the BBC. If the BBC had properly vetted its so-called credentialed expert before the interview, The Yes Men's hoax would have never materialized. That a group of media- and technology-savvy activists were able to easily bypass a well respected gatekeeping establishment raises some concerns regarding the organization's integrity. In a revealing seven-minute-long segment, the BBC asserted that its journalists were “acting in good faith” when they invited Finisterra to be on the program; they surveyed the fake Dow website, highlighting how closely the fake resembled the original; and finally, they punctuated their apology with an admission that

they had been part of “an elaborate deception.” These actions represented the organization’s efforts to simultaneously contain and discredit the practitioners of the hoax.

Indeed, in instances where hoaxes and controversial materials circulate, traditional news media actively seek the reparation of the story through a process of normalizing the very aspects of news reportage that undermine the legitimacy of journalists and news organizations at large (Bennett et al. 1985). Under these circumstances, the press is quick to label the stories “fake” or “fraudulent” because they are neither factually accurate nor discursively legitimate. Once the reparation process is complete, the containment of the initial hoax/controversy is said to have been effectively neutralized, allowing the organization to regain its standing in the community. In the BBC interview that followed the hoax, a confrontational news anchor challenged Finisterra (Bichlbaum) for his lack of ethics, arguing that his strategy had a devastating impact on the people of Bhopal for instilling them with a sense of “false hope.” And in one final jab at the “prankster himself,” the anchor would paint Bichlbaum as a vagrant, asking the latter if he was expecting to hear from Dow’s lawyers. Together the BBC’s efforts are meant to distance the viewer from the reality of the situation--the organization failed to properly vet its news sources.

CHAPTER SEVEN: EXPANDING THE YES MEN BRAND

For [“two guys with cheap suits and fake websites.”](#) the Yes Men have earned a great deal of notoriety as artists and activists seeking to draw attention to ongoing injustices perpetrated by powerful corporations and governments--institutions that should be leading the way through ethical decision-making practices and modes of governance. In engineering the hoaxes described in this book, the Yes Men have also sought to inspire curious onlookers and audiences to take up the group’s hoaxing formula and apply it to areas of everyday life that require interventions on the part of oppressed, disenfranchised, or apathetic communities. For every site of injustice there is an opportunity to harness the Yes Men’s culture jamming methods--conference impersonations, fake websites, documentary films, and media hoaxes--in the interests of both publicizing and redressing wrongdoing.

One of the interesting ironies of the Yes Men’s decade-plus-long project is that one of their most pronounced failures has materialized in an area in which they felt might have gained the most traction: influence. The logic underpinning their actions was always meant to be straightforward. By channelling satire, hilarity, and absurdity as their dominant modes of expression, by wearing cheap-looking thrift store suits as their default style of fashion, and by resorting to ridiculous-sounding names in their clever mockery of the power elite (Hank Hardy Unruh, Erastus Hamm), the Yes Men were convinced that there was nothing about their work that couldn’t be imitated and nothing about their pranks that wouldn’t inspire (at the very least) a modest group of imitators to go out and continue the job. As Mike and Andy themselves admit, the formula they created was one that audiences and viewers readily enjoyed. The feedback they received based on their two documentaries alone was enough to suggest that the format, tone, delivery, and execution of the critiques were entertaining and inspiring. As Andy once put it,

The intent was always to do these things, that they’ll be really fun, and that we’ll enjoy ourselves doing them. But the goal is to show everybody that it’s possible to do this sort of thing. Even from before we started, that was kind of the intent. People will look at [what we’re doing] and go, ‘Oh, that’s amazing, we

could do that, too. That's so easy and fun. It looks hilarious and god, if those guys can do it, we can surely do it!' That was always the intent and never actually the result.

One of the most surprising facets of the Yes Men's work is their evolution from celebrated political activists to trainers and facilitators of activists and everyday citizens. Of late, the group's greatest desire is to empower people to replicate their signature hoaxing style in the interests of bringing social justice issues to an even larger public. As such, they have now turned to training and mentoring individuals, groups, and organizations to use Yes Men style tactics in support of a variety of causes and campaigns. Whereas Yes Men projects have consistently tackled a well defined trajectory of issues and topics--namely, globalization, the environment, and corporate capitalism--their recent collaborations with established and grassroots organizations have facilitated broader public debate on a number of other social justice issues. In this chapter, I revisit the group's early attempts to galvanize disaffected citizens into the political fold, before turning to their most recent interventions with students, activists, organizations, and filmgoers. This turn to training and mentoring sheds further light on the instruments, tools, techniques, and platforms contemporary activists are using to generate interest in the struggle to make the world a better place, but it also points to the future legacy of the group at a moment when they have enjoyed greater and greater visibility.

The Early Days: @TMark and the Limits of Online Collaboration and Community Building

@TMark (pronounced *art-mark*) is a good point of departure for thinking about how the Yes Men imagine the power and potential of web-based activism. In simple terms, @TMark is a clearinghouse of sorts for activists looking to participate in and contribute to a number of diverse projects and actions. Founded in 1996 by a network of artists and activists who found one another at the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s, @TMark emerged as an important online hub for ideas and critiques surrounding the corporate abuses of power. The general idea was that interested parties could freely participate in the creation and execution of clever, funny, and ironic pranks that would work toward creating greater visibility for a growing resistance movement against (the hegemony of) multinational corporations. @TMark's impressive project listings served as a shout out to anonymous, interested parties on the web to donate some of their time, effort, expertise, and money toward the completion of certain actions—anything from publicizing the dangers of genetically modified foods and the need to close corporate taxation loopholes to more benign actions like changing the U.S. motto from *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of many, one”) to *Quis Te Rogavit* (“Who asked you”). @TMark would go on to fund about twenty activist projects in total—among them the Barbie Liberation Organization, the Yes Men's WTO impersonations, and the hugely popular Bush campaign parody site, GWBush.com—demonstrating a keen eye for augmenting what is possible under a “corporate model” and offering new dimensions for political innovation. In an interesting political manoeuvre, @TMark legally defined itself as a “a brokerage that benefits from ‘limited liability’ just like any other corporation,” but unlike its multinational counterparts, “‘its bottom line’ is to improve culture, rather than its own pocketbook; [it seeks cultural profit, not financial.](#)” While the project's mission statement is at once insightful and noble, it remains to be seen whether the @TMark model of collaborative, DIY activism proved a success.

For our purposes here, let's connect one of the major shortcomings of the @TMark model with some of the more explicitly stated goals of the Yes Men. In a moment of candid reflection, Bichlbaum, an @TMark co-founder, expresses some disappointment about the goals he had imagined for the project:

We promoted [®TMark] as a thing that anybody could do. Anybody could participate in the system. Anybody could do subversive actions. There was nothing to it. We thought of it as promoting this sort of activism. The website had hundreds of suggestions for actions that people could do. We solicited them, people sent them in without solicitation and we posted them—any decent idea. We thought by posting them people would just do them, people would see that and go, ‘Oh, that’s an easy thing to do. Well, I’m going to go do that.’ Nothing happened. None of that ever happened.

Note the DIY character of the call-to-action, the collective vision, and the inclusive nature of the project. As far as Bichlbaum was concerned, there were no significant barriers to participation and just about anyone could do “this sort of activism.” In fact, one of the guiding motivations for creating ®TMark was the promise that it “would result in a profusion of thousands of actions all over the place,” but the message, Andy notes, was “totally lost in translation.” ®TMark’s website would receive hundreds of suggestions for actions, but interest in the projects undoubtedly waned in terms of people’s actual participation in these and other interventions. The overriding logic here is that while ®TMark seemed to have struck a chord with a small but enthusiastic online audience, it remained easier for onlookers to defer to other members of the community to bring these projects to fruition. This is not dissimilar to the words of encouragement the Yes Men receive from their admirers, goading them on to prank just about any multinational corporation with a (golden) skeleton to hide. Based on these examples, it’s fair to ask which strategies and tactics might best inspire others to participate in and contribute to both on- and offline activist projects. If it is at times difficult to enlist friends to contribute their time and energy to various everyday endeavours (moving, volunteering, petitioning), it follows that it may be even more challenging to solicit the help of strangers in the elaboration of more politicized projects. What, then, are the most effective means of galvanizing these and other social groups to participate more broadly in what are already fun, creative, and inspired causes? Admittedly, this question surrounding how best to facilitate social protest is not unique to our time. It is a question that permeates the 20th century, especially throughout the countercultural movements of the 1960s. In this respect, Saul Alinsky’s work as one of the foremost political organizers in recent American history presents an important facet of the discussion, one that anticipates the wellspring of recent activist literature on organizing, training, and mobilizing citizens toward greater action.

[In a sense, ripping off is the wrong phrase because it’s just the way the culture’s always worked, as far as I can tell: through imitation, mimicry and repetition.](#)

Rules For Radicals: A Word on Organizing Social Protest

On the rare occasion that you would like to set a protest in motion for the edification of a larger public, I would recommend you familiarize yourself with the work and thought of Saul Alinsky, considered to be one of the most controversial (and effective) political organizers of his time. [Rules for Radicals](#), arguably his most widely read book, is an activist primer that combines political philosophy, social movement theory, and organizational know-how in a text that privileges its author’s “radical pragmatism” (xxi). First published in 1971, Alinsky engages pressing questions regarding the hijacking of participatory democracy and the larger turn toward apathy and civic disengagement. To counter trends of de-personalization, apathy, and anonymity, Alinsky offers insightful observations, propositions, and concepts; he charts the mechanics of mass movements and the various cyclical stages of action and reaction in revolution (4). In *Rules*, Alinsky is expressly concerned with “how to organize for power: how to get it and use it” (10). As he argues, for communities and social groups to win power and influence they must be organized into action if they are ever to have any purchase on social change. Alinsky himself is

quick to acknowledge a larger deficit in the formation and professionalization of effective organizers. To remedy these shortcomings, Alinsky began work on the educational and pedagogical front. He describes his involvement in a special training school for organizers, what materialized as a full-time, 15-month program (63). His experiences training organizers was fraught with many challenges and disappointments: as Alinsky tells it, he had hoped to produce “highly imaginative architect[s] and engineer[s],” but was only able to train skilled plumbers, electricians, and carpenters” (65). To complete the analogy, instead of mentoring individuals capable of designing and executing new structures for new communities, he could only inspire staff capable of building and maintaining existing community structures.

Elsewhere, Alinsky would liken the selection of an organizer to the act of courting high quality athletes in, say, major league baseball. As Alinsky laments, however, high performance organizers

are very rare and tough to come by. After we go through a careful process of selection, then put them in the training, then we have a seventy percent washout after that. And of the thirty percent, I’d say 80 percent can only get up to what we would call a secondary level, the kind of organizer that develops into staff directors and project directors and so on [what Alinsky would call “a star organizer”]. (1967)

Indeed the community organizer is a rare breed, a figure charged with the great responsibility of mobilizing his/her constituents: “The organizer finds his goal in creation of power for others to use” (80). If organizers are few and far between and if communities fall prey to accepting the injustices of everyday life as natural, self-evident, and irreversible, one might pose the following question: How exactly does one go about organizing a revolt, a rebellion, a revolution? *Rules For Radicals* attempts to answer this question by providing a concise overview of the terrain: the actors involved, the underlying theories and principles that motivate human action, as well as the tools and tactics that assist in the elaboration of activist campaigns and causes. As Alinsky well understood, organizing is hard work; it is not only difficult to recruit the kinds of people, it is even more challenging to mould them into people that are capable of mobilizing communities toward bringing about change. In devising a pragmatic primer for realistic radicals, Alinsky would not only lay the groundwork for activists of the 1970s and 80s, he would also inspire and influence a generation of activists that have come to rely more heavily on electronic media and the Internet. *Rules For Radicals* is an important work that figures as a veritable precursor to timely new interventions on the part of global activists. While Alinsky was rightly concerned about an overall scarcity of brilliant tactical organizers, activists today have sparked a new wave of creative activism, admirably performing the role of organizers and agitators. More specifically, the latter can be seen as building upon Alinsky’s model of training and pedagogy in their attempts to guide a new generation of activists through the uneven terrain of contemporary culture.

Twenty-first century activist interventions such as MoveOn, Avaaz, Change.org, and resources such as *Actipedia* and *Beautiful Trouble* offer a useful set of answers to the above questions. Because these efforts have incited a renewed interest in creative activism, as well as a new way of organizing, documenting, displaying, and sharing creative actions, these new iterations of activist praxis constitute an important moment for reflecting upon new modes of civic participation and engagement. They also serve as a lightning rod for unpacking the often lazy and short-sighted pronouncements that web-, platform-, or app-based technologies are either saving us or leading us down a path toward greater apathy, disconnection, and cynicism. It is my contention that these recent activist interventions, not unlike the thousands of other experiments currently finding expression, have prompted a reexamination of the forms, styles, tools, tactics, and principles that inform the fluid points of contact between online and offline engagement. In the following pages, I’ll explore the dynamics of training and mentoring through the Yes Men’s creation of the Yes Lab.

Training and Mentoring For a Better World: The Yes Lab for Creative Activism

One of the most important shifts to emerge within contemporary activist circles is the push to train, mentor, and guide future changemakers in using an emergent repertoire of forms. I could briefly allude to Coventry University's attempt to bridge this gap through the formation of student-activists through an open course in creative activism; I could also briefly touch on the School of Creative Activism's mandate to work with professional advocacy and activist groups in the interests of enabling greater social change. I might also direct the reader to the fact that the editors and collaborators of *Beautiful Trouble*--a combination book and website project that evocatively touted itself as "a toolbox for the next revolution"--have recently launched a training program that will include partnerships with social justice organizations and groups. Their goal is to build a given group's fluency in organizing, strategy, direct action, creative communications, humour, pranks, and disruption. The training sessions are engineered to translate the book's insights into successful campaign actions and interventions.

Nowhere is this mandate more explicit than with the Yes Lab, a loosely-defined centre "devoted to helping progressive organizations and individuals carry out media-getting creative actions around well-considered [campaign] goals." Working in partnership with New York University's Hemispheric Institute and operating on a bare-bones operational budget (a \$14,000 sum raised via Kickstarter), the Yes Men's vision for training and mentoring others in their identity correction practices is now firmly underway. To date, the Yes Lab has helped facilitate more than twenty actions since October 2009--no small feat for a newly formed initiative--most of which have generated modest coverage in mainstream media outlets. Actions include a U.S. Chamber of Commerce campaign to reverse its disastrous record on climate change policies, a fake General Electric press release announcing it would donate its \$3.2 billion "tax refund" to the U.S. government, an anti-iPhone application that addresses child labour practices, factory-worker suicide, and environmental degradation, and a "self-deportation" website, and so on. In many ways, a Yes Lab collaboration is no different than a Yes Men action--the stunts are engineered to raise greater awareness surrounding a given issue and to raise that issue's public profile via mass media outlets--but the intent is to proliferate more actions than would be possible by the Yes Men alone. In a time of real political foment, the Yes Men are now training and mentoring groups to participate in the creation of media spectacles designed to highlight social justice issues and political struggles of great civic importance.

Levelling the Playing Field

There are, of course, significant challenges and barriers to doing this kind of activism. Aside from what might be deemed legitimate technical barriers to participating in these kinds of actions (creating fake websites, producing multimedia content, securing online infrastructure), the work also requires modest capital investment, considerable organization and planning, knowledge and expertise--to say nothing of the courage needed to follow through with these hoaxes. What's more, interested individuals and parties may not have the kind of social or cultural capital needed to attract a working group capable of bringing a good idea to a broader audience. Yet another hurdle worth considering is the difficulty of pairing incisive political critique and biting satire, a craft only some of the best writers and comedians ever fully master. Finally, creating a bridge between comedy and activism can prove to be a controversial undertaking, especially when organizations and groups differ in their thinking regarding the value of humour in activist interventions.

In terms of circumventing these barriers the Yes Lab has created a thorough platform for assisting groups in the conceptualization and completion of projects. In the lead up to a Yes Men collaboration, members of the Yes Lab

- Introduce the notion of "laughtivism" (i.e., developing effective, media-friendly projects);

- Brainstorm project ideas, evaluate various courses of action, and assist in choosing the best one;
- Conceptualize a chosen project fully, developing a complete action plan with timelines, deadlines, and chains of responsibility;
- Map out teams and determine staffing needs;
- Train groups to properly negotiate media coverage.

With institutional support from New York University's Hemispheric Institute (Hemi), the Yes Lab currently enjoys the physical space and resources needed to conduct these workshop-based training sessions, preparing activists, students, and organizations to tackle work at the conceptual, technical, programmatic, and philosophical level. The Yes Lab's association with Hemi has not only facilitated access to physical resources, it has also made possible future collaborations amongst New York-based artists, activists, students, and organizations.

Importantly, the Yes Men's shift toward a community-centered model has not been restricted to the day-to-day operations at Hemi and is being fostered in other milieus. I myself have participated in several Yes Men do-it-yourself- themed and workshop-based lectures. The idea behind the lectures is for the Yes Men to briefly discuss their work, explain the tactics, tools, and principles that underpin their actions, and have the audience/general public brainstorm future actions (one lecture was aptly billed as a "How-to Hoax Clinic"). Another workshop was structured to assist graduate students in the elaboration of a Greenpeace campaign critiquing the Alberta Tar Sands. Within a week of another Yes Men workshop, youth vote mobs spread virally across Canada. As the Yes Lab's Mary Notari suggests, the entire rationale for the project "is to make what the Yes Men do accessible to all," and based on the actions discussed below, there is good reason to believe this experiment is fulfilling its preliminary mandate.

For groups lacking the resources to participate in these and other training and mentoring programs offered via the School of Creative Activism or Beautiful Trouble, the Yes Lab has produced free-to-download Action Toolkits that provide clear and concise guidelines for initiating creative actions, such as how to

- Brainstorm ideas effectively;
- Write press releases;
- Attract media attention;
- Collaborate using online software;
- Organize the division of labour;
- Maintain enthusiasm for the cause.

The guiding imperative behind the Yes Lab's work is to create moments and opportunities for budding and established activists to garner broader attention across news media platforms that may be reluctant to report on social justice issues. In this respect, the Yes Lab's stated goals underpin deeper motives and ambitions: to affect public debate, push for legislation, ["or embarrass an evildoer."](#) These changes in the broader arena of activist practice teach us that social change hinges on a constellation of factors, not least of which includes community organizing, training, teaching and pedagogy, creativity, and know-how--features that are often trivialized in mainstream accounts of social movements. Having already examined the Yes Men's hoaxing activities in great detail, we are now well equipped to explore how the Yes Lab potentially differs and/or builds upon their historical precursors. In what follows, I introduce a representative sample of Yes Lab collaborations to highlight this new wave of the media hoax and to signpost the Yes Men's ever-evolving trajectory.

The Yes Lab vs. The Chamber of Commerce

The Yes Lab's first hoax would prove an ambitious undertaking, targeting the world's largest business organization--the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. On the eve of their "Balls Across America" (Survivaball) prank, the Yes Men teamed up with the Avaaz Action Factory to stage a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Speaking on behalf of the U.S. Chamber, the group presented a surprising reversal of the organization's position on climate change legislation. Chamber spokesperson Hingo Sembra (i.e., Andy) addressed a dozen reporters, stating that the organization had decided to cease its opposition to the Kerry-Boxer Bill (then making the rounds in Congress) and would support the adoption of a carbon tax, a surprising turn given the fact that the Chamber had spent months lobbying *against* the climate bill. To longtime critics of the Chamber, the decision to reverse its position was totally inconsistent with its previous policy decisions. [For example](#), the Chamber had previously attempted to derail the Clean Air Act and to undermine the Environmental Protection Agency; in 2010, the Chamber spent \$32 million during the midterm elections, 94% of which went to candidates who are on record as being climate change deniers.

Recent changes in the Chamber's membership would, however, introduce a wrinkle to the story. Major companies like Apple, Exelon, and Pacific Gas and Electric had recently resigned their membership to the Chamber over its opposition to its unpopular policies. [In a press release](#) tailored to express its dissatisfaction with the organization's stance on climate legislation, Apple would make the following public statement: "Apple supports regulating greenhouse gas emissions, and it is frustrating to find the Chamber at odds with us in this effort." This unflattering drop in the Chamber's membership, as well as a recent revelation that the organization had long inflated its numbers (200,000 actual member groups in lieu of its advertised three million), added a degree of plausibility to the announcement. As an organization looking to shore up its base and get on side with sweeping changes in public opinion, the move seemed a welcome change.

Within twenty minutes of the National Press Club conference, however, the game was up. The activists' cover was blown when real Chamber spokesperson Eric Wohlschlegel made an unexpected appearance: "This guy [motioning to Andy] is a fraud! He's lying! This is a stunt that I've never seen before." As it turns out, a journalist looking for the press conference mistakenly phoned Wohlschlegel's office to confirm the venue, thereby informing the latter of the event. This is precisely when things would get interesting. Wohlschlegel interrupts the press conference and he and Bichlbaum/Sembra engage in an uncomfortable exchange that unfolds in the following way:

- the real spokesperson accuses the gentleman at the podium of being a fraud and of misrepresenting the Chamber;
- the fraud at the podium then challenges the real spokesperson's authenticity vis-a-vis his standing with the Chamber;
- Bichlbaum/Sembra accuses Wohlschlegel of being the real fraud!
- "Can I see your business card?" asks Wohlschlegel. "Can I see yours?" counters Andy.

In the most tantalizing aspect of their exchange, Wohlschlegel affirms to the audience of confused journalists and onlookers that business cards are the only means of establishing the legitimacy and credibility of the Chamber's real spokesman--and because he has business cards, only he can be trusted to speak as the Chamber's true voice. "This gentleman I will assure does not have any business cards and he's not legitimate." What more could one need to establish his doppelganger Hingo Sembra as a fraud?! Andy, to his credit, remains calm and collected throughout, arguing that he is in fact speaking on behalf of the Chamber and that Wohlschlegel's disruption is in poor taste. "Who are you really, sir?" asks Sembra. Once most of the initial commotion had passed, a real journalist from *Mother Jones* asked Wohlschlegel if the Chamber supported the climate change bill, to which he refused comment. In the aftermath, journalists playfully reported on the Yes Lab's clever ruse and Wohlschlegel's surprising appearance; *Washington Post* journalist David A. Fahrenthold offers a representative storyline: ["Will the](#)

real U.S. Chamber of Commerce please stand up?”

Of course, the entire press conference--including the heated exchange between both of the Chamber's representatives--was captured and soon after recirculated across mainstream media. Yes, the Chamber had been “punked,” as MSNBC's Rachel Maddow put it, and the stunt forced the organization to reaffirm its unpopular policies against climate legislation. In this regard, the action had succeeded in drawing attention to the Chamber's activities at a moment when greater efforts were needed to curb carbon emissions across major American industries. The prank would, however, prove costly: the Yes Men had so provoked the Chamber's ire that they would find themselves enmeshed in litigation in federal court for over four years. In June 2013 the Chamber would eventually withdraw its trademark infringement lawsuit; in these instances, [as the Electronic Frontier Foundation \(EFF\) would argue](#), U.S. law generally sides with parodists and satirists because you cannot quash first amendment rights (free speech) “just because the speaker happens to use your trademarks as a necessary part of its activism.”

What is to be learned from this example?

The Yes Lab's first hoax is instructive: first, the key target is readily identifiable (corporate malfeasance); second, the motivations are clearly expressed (corporate responsibility/accountability to the environment); third, the tactics are familiar (fake press release, fake press conference); and fourth, news media quickly pick up the story (due to its sensational arc). The only uncharacteristic detail is the Chamber's legal pursuit of the group following the hoax, an anomalous action in their storied career. Even Dow Chemical showed restraint in not taking the Yes Men to court, despite having briefly lost a reported \$2 billion on the German stock exchange. While the Chamber hoax marks the first instance in which the group is taken to court, the lawsuit was eventually dropped. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Chamber [allegedly dropped the suit](#) so as to limit any further publicity of their obstruction to climate-related legislation and to curb the publication of any information regarding their financial backers. For activists in the U.S., the Chamber's failure to prosecute represents a victory for progressives wishing to question, critique, and satirize the actions of powerful corporations without (fear of) penalty; on the other hand, this legal challenge also suggests that organizations like the Chamber are increasing their resolve to pursue activists for expressing unfavourable or misrepresentative characterizations of their work. For the Chamber to sustain its pursuit for four years also suggests that the divide between activist organizations and corporations has grown, bringing both actors to an impasse. As I argued previously with regards to the Chevron “We Agree” campaign, we are once again afforded the opportunity to pause and reflect on the effectiveness of such actions. Do hoaxes engineered to publicly humiliate and embarrass an organization inspire the target to reform its ways, or does the act work merely to express a political position meant to galvanize the public toward greater mobilization? Do citizens tangibly benefit from the knowledge that influential economic institutions such as the Chamber go to great lengths to dismantle environmental protections? Regrettably, the Chamber has not reformed its ways and it remains to be seen whether hoaxes of this nature inspire greater political action on the part of everyday citizens. What is evident through the many Yes Lab actions to have materialized since the Chamber hoax is that these actions are inspiring activists and activist organizations to adopt these tactics in their awareness campaigns. Let's see how well these questions stand up in our exploration of other Yes Lab hoaxes.

C.R.I.M.E.: A Hoax for Haiti

On July 14 2010, France's Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs announced that the government would pledge €17 billion (\$22 billion) in reparations to Haiti to aid the country's reconstruction process in the aftermath of a catastrophic series of earthquakes. The gross sum would be reimbursed in a yearly budget over a fifty-year period. The announcement would come on Bastille Day (the French National holiday that celebrates the beginning of the French Revolution), marking a pronounced turning point in

France's diplomatic and economic relations with Haiti. But the story would not merely paint France as a benevolent benefactor. In an interesting twist, the French spokeswoman also affirmed that the €17 billion reimbursement constituted a sum that the government owed the Haitian people for extorting 90 million gold francs from 1825 to 1947 (the year Haiti won its independence from France). As an accompanying press release explains, Haiti was subjected to pay an "independence debt" under King Charles X (beginning in 1825), who demanded compensation for former landowners who had been driven out of the country during the Haitian revolution. With French warships stationed along the Haitian coast, France was able to coerce the Haitian people to pay its former colonizer ten times the sum of its total annual revenues, grossly impoverishing the nation and its citizens. Whereas observers of the announcement would have expected France to deliver aid for Haiti's reconstruction (international donors having pledged over \$5 billion to the cause), the news of France's exorbitant repatriation, along with its surprising admission of colonial exploitation, was both unexpected and hotly contested. The news presented a nuanced picture of France's complex relationship with its former colony, presenting the former as a well-intentioned benefactor looking to make good on its all-but-forgotten history of extortion and exploitation.

The following day would bring widespread coverage of the news, a flurry of commentary and speculation, as well as the revelation that the story was in fact a hoax perpetrated by an international group of activists called C.R.I.M.E. (Committee for the Reimbursement of Indemnity Money Extorted from Haiti). The government denied the news in swift fashion and signalled its intention to pursue legal action against the group. According to Agence France-Presse, "France has no plans to repay Haiti this sum, and a foreign ministry spokesman confirmed that the press release, video and website were all fake." Real Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero's comments--that the hoaxers were "spreading false information and fraudulent[ly] copying the [Ministry's] site"--informed the government's decision to illegally shut down the fake website, an act that generated even greater interest in the story. In characteristic fashion, news of the hoax and the government's denial prompted observers to visit C.R.I.M.E.'s mirrored website, which featured text and video content of the press conference in both French and English. Adding even greater pressure on the French government, an international cadre of scholars, artists, and activists issued an open letter to President Nicolas Sarkozy in the French daily *Libération*, providing even greater historical context regarding France's exploitation of its "most profitable colony." Within twenty-four hours, C.R.I.M.E. had used France's national holiday to instigate dialogue on a much darker aspect of the nation's history, bringing the plight of the Haitian people in full view.

Despite the falsity of the press conference and website, the information provided was both accurate and well documented. In piecing together the story's historical arc, journalists reported that the hoax was rooted in an earlier demand made by former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who, in 2003, asked France to repay this debt in celebration of Haiti's bicentennial anniversary. The Los Angeles Times reported that France swiftly rejected the demand for restitution, a decision that galvanized widespread protest across Haiti, inspiring television ads, radio broadcasts, banners, and even bumper stickers demanding payback. It is precisely this historical past that is often missing in accounts of Haiti's crippling poverty, a facet of the nation's cultural memory that the hoaxers wished to introduce via mainstream media coverage. As C.R.I.M.E. spokesperson Laurence Fabre explains, the hoax struck at "an amazing moment to shake up the debate, to cast light on the ongoing legacy of colonialism and slavery, and the current economic state of Haiti." For Fabre, the mere act of publicizing Haiti-related issues for any prolonged period of time is nothing short of miraculous, given how systematically neglected these discussions are in the media. As Fabre insists, the hoax was the most crucial element needed to attract, and later to ensure, mainstream reportage. Without an official statement from the French government, a story tackling colonialism, debt, and extortion dating back to the nineteenth century would never see the light of day. But as soon as an official pronouncement is made on behalf of a powerful actor such as the state, especially one that offers a tantalizing hook for journalists to report on, the story is afforded an opportunity to be told and re-circulated across many news outlets.

Because the Yes Men provided guidance and mentorship at different stages of the project, parallels between this action and the Yes Men's Bhopal hoax are noteworthy. Just as the Yes Men depict Dow Chemical as a socially responsible corporation ready to do the right thing, C.R.I.M.E. casts the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in an equally positive light, promoting the initiative from the perspective of an enlightened government wishing to right previous wrongdoing. The French government is proud of its new economic "framework initiative" and it encourages other nations to follow in its stead. In presenting a moral dimension to an economic question, the activists are here able to frame "serious political issues in such a way that it comes across politely to the media" (Fabre), and as such, the tone of the critique pre-emptively favours the hoaxer for proposing an ethically driven statement on the part of an already embattled community (Haiti). In the court of public opinion, it is inherently difficult to side with the transgressor, unless the media hoaxer presents the latter in a positive light. It is only when the likes of Dow Chemical or the French government deny their willingness to do the right thing that the transgressor is cast in an unfavourable light, thereby confirming the true nature of their previous and ongoing actions. Once again, the activists choose to corner (or coerce) the target into doing the right thing, but to no avail. In this instance, putting the French government in a decision dilemma does not produce the desired outcome.

It should also be noted that while France is squarely targeted by C.R.I.M.E. to provide some much needed historical context to discussions surrounding Haiti's reconstruction infrastructure, the broader import of the hoax is to draw attention to the disquieting fact that of the \$5 billion pledged by the international community, only five nations had delivered on their promises, amounting to less than ten percent of the funds reaching Haiti. Thus the hoax also functions as a much needed intervention to prompt, goad, remind, and shame these countries into immediate action, so as to speed up Haiti's critical reconstruction project. If the hoax can be said to accomplish anything, it contributes greatly to raising awareness regarding the historical and current plight of the Haitian people; in addition, the hoax also presents a viable narrative for how once oppressive nation-states could rectify troubling regimes of colonial exploitation; lastly, C.R.I.M.E.'s work signals how loosely-affiliated groups can adopt and appropriate Yes Men-style tactics in the service of activist struggles designed to open the door toward creating pressure for social change. When asked why C.R.I.M.E. chose to partner with and emulate the Yes Men's tactical style, Fabre is very clear: the Yes Men have repeatedly and successfully "done the right thing on behalf of a bunch of corporations that weren't prepared to do the right thing." Such an act keeps the social and political imaginary alive and well, situating the actions of governments within a progressive--even utopian--frame. Thus, for a short while, the hoax would shine a light on the plight of the Haitian people through greater awareness, discussion, and debate; it would also re-present alternative paths and solutions to improving their collective well-being.

#Shellfail

In March 2013, the U.S. Department of the Interior released its findings concerning the Shell corporation's bid to begin oil exploration and offshore drilling operations in the Arctic. In their report, the committee found that Shell had not adequately prepared for the extreme weather conditions in the Arctic, citing a recent slew of blunders and accidents that culminated in the grounding of its primary drilling rig on New Year's Eve of the previous year. Thus the company would be banned from any further operations without a comprehensive overhaul to its agenda, ensuring that safety regulations were strictly observed. The decision would prove costly for Shell, which had already spent \$4.5 billion securing permits to drill in Arctic waters. The decision was described as a minor victory for environmental groups and activists who had worked tirelessly to halt drilling operations in the Arctic. Groups were targeting corporations

like Shell for the audacity of carrying out oil extraction operations in such a fragile ecosystem; other organizations critiqued the U.S. government for issuing permits to Shell without comprehensively reviewing the environmental consequences and risks associated with oil extraction in these parts. The report's function was twofold: to announce the grounding of Shell's operations and, less overtly, to publicize the intentions of oil corporations to pursue drilling in the Arctic as a viable business venture. For everyday citizens unaware of Shell's proposed activities, the news would raise the public profile of these highly contentious oil extraction projects.

Thirteen months prior, Greenpeace emerged as the first and most dedicated actor devoted to publicizing and putting an end to Shell's plans. In February 2012, Greenpeace made their first big media splash by occupying an Arctic-bound oil rig. The protest was staged by six Greenpeace volunteers and film and television actress Lucy Lawless (most famous for her role of *Zena: Warrior Princess*). They would occupy the drill tower for 77 hours. By the fourth day, they had generated enough media coverage to solicit 130,000 Internet users to join their "Save the Arctic" campaign (close to four million having since joined). [According to Greenpeace](#), the campaign represents an earnest attempt to create "a global sanctuary in the uninhabited area around the North Pole (the region some people call the High Arctic) and a ban on offshore oil drilling and industrial fishing in the wider Arctic region." Despite the short-won success of its initial action, Shell moved swiftly to [secure a legal injunction](#) that prohibited anyone from going within one kilometre of Shell's main drilling vessels. This legal maneuver would force the organization to adapt new strategies in its campaign, and thus, another notable media hoax was born.

Epic. PR. Fail.

Looking to increase the visibility of its "Save the Arctic" campaign, Greenpeace would turn to the Yes Lab and members of the Occupy movement as a means of creating an attention-grabbing scenario that would incite even greater discussion regarding Shell's proposed activities. James Turner, head of communications for the Arctic campaign, [speaks to the nervous optimism](#) associated with such a project:

We've tried a bunch of different tactics over the years to combat oil companies, but we're trying something completely new today. It's nerve-racking for me because I understand that this is also the first time the Yes Lab have taken on anything like this, too.

In an effort to command the attention of a mass audience, Yes Lab collaborators set out to create a video capable of going viral. To do so, they would revert back to the now well known tactic of staging a false press conference (and a reception). The general premise was to stage a gala event designed to celebrate Shell's imminent plans to commence explorations in the Arctic. The party, held at the Space Needle (Seattle's prestige cultural venue), would feature top Shell executives presenting a general overview of their ambitious undertaking, but not before an embarrassing gaffe had been recorded. A central fixture at the event was a miniature beverage-dispensing model rig (or *kulluk*). In a ceremonious act, the host invited one of the guests of honour (the 84-year-old widow of the kulluk's designer) to receive the first honorary drink from the fountain. It was precisely at this point that the kulluk malfunctions, spraying the indefensible lady for an uncomfortably long period of time, her shrieking and apparent confusion occupying the centre of frame. To make matters worse, they were momentarily unable to stop the steady

stream of Diet Coke from the fountain. To monopolize on the visual intrigue of the scenario, the group would adapt the broader cultural trend of circulating controversial and spectacular footage captured from a mobile phone. At first blush, the video appears to have been recorded by someone who just narrowly manages to exit the event without having his phone confiscated. Together these efforts would culminate in a minute-long video capturing an epic public relations disaster from an exclusive Shell party. In leaking what is perceived to be raw footage of an embarrassing situation--an “epic fail” on the part of Shell during a gala event--the video spread like wildfire, garnering over 700,000 views within the first two weeks. The symbolic malfunction of the kulluk nicely mirrored Greenpeace’s deep-seated concerns that oil extraction in the Arctic would produce similar results, a visual that brought Shell’s plans to an even larger audience.

Having already gained a preliminary foothold in various Internet forums, the Yes Lab would milk the stunt for maximum publicity.

Recall that Greenpeace’s initial foray into the [“new school of environmental protest”](#) was motivated in part by Shell’s legal injunction, forcing the former to revisit its ways of mobilizing its base and expanding its reach. This challenge to harness new tactics would soon materialize in two more clever interrelated Internet-based ploys: the first, a Twitter hoax; the second, a website actively soliciting user generated content. The Yes Lab assembled a “Social Media Team” on Twitter (@ShellisPrepared) to publicize the campaign’s flagship site--[arcticready.com](#)--a brilliant parodic replica of Shell’s official web domain. The website’s “Let’s Go! Arctic” advertising contest invites visitors to choose from a variety of pristine Arctic-themed images, then to pen an appropriate caption to re-brand Shell’s drilling program. Not to outdone by the site’s accompanying kids game, *Angry Bergs*, the Ad-Generator proved an impressive draw, generating over 12,000 contributions. The winning ad features an image “of a cute polar bear cub resting on his mother with the slogan ‘You can’t run your SUV on ‘cute.’ [Let’s go.](#)”

To raise their website’s profile, the Yes Lab depict the Social Media Team as being grossly unqualified and far too inept to do any sort of social media outreach; stealing a page from their previous hoax, the Twitter team represents yet another spectacular failure in brand management for Shell. In one instance, the team tweeted and retweeted the following statements, much to the amusement of perplexed onlookers: (1) “Our team is working overtime to remove inappropriate ads. Please stop sharing them”; and (2) “WE’RE FLATTERED BY THE ATTENTION BUT PLEASE STOP. We’d hate to get the #Shell legal team involved.” As part of its Twitter bio, the team explained that it was using the platform in the sole interests of monitoring and responding to slanderous statements directed toward Shell. For the estimated two million Twitter onlookers unfamiliar with the vague controversy, they were kindly directed to the sister website, thereby making the campaign even more spreadable. In a culture awash in the tightly scripted PR-speak of corporate media, audiences and readers relish the rare opportunities to witness the symbolic derailing of what should otherwise qualify as slick media performance and management. To witness Shell’s Social Media Team reach new lows of professionalism is to experience the unanticipated joys associated with the powerful being brazenly ridiculed. One Twitter user referred to @ShellisPrepared as “possibly the funniest PR disaster I’ve ever witnessed.” Just as the users were falling for/over the disaster, so too were journalists temporarily swayed by the [“juicy social media ‘fail.’”](#) translating into even more news reportage.



Social Media Team

@ShellisPrepared

In light of recent events, our web team is actively monitoring and responding to slanderous statements made toward Royal Dutch Shell.

<http://arcticready.com>

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WE'RE FLATTERED BY THE ATTENTION BUT PLEASE STOP. We'd hate to get the #Shell legal team involved.

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Social Media Team @ShellisPrepared

1h

@ErinMRowley We're glad you're excited by the campaign but please do not share offensive ads. #shell #arcticready

[View conversation](#)

[“It’s like in *Spinal Tap* where they turn the amp to 11”](#)

To understand the lengths to which the Yes Lab went to ensure greater visibility of Shell’s Arctic campaign, some discussion of Greenpeace’s motives are necessary. The two month-long social media blitz would put Arctic oil operations at the forefront of public discourse with the larger goal of pressuring world leaders to safeguard the Arctic waters from any ecological harm. The Yes Lab campaign operates under the logic that *any* plans to carry out drilling operations are ill-conceived and should be thwarted. To do so, requires the concerted efforts of many to discredit and delegitimize Shell’s proposed plans. In the event of this multilayered hoax, the target isn’t presented as a progressive protagonist devising actions that will significantly improve the world; rather, Shell assumes the role of the short-sighted, ill-equipped, dysfunctional, profit-centered corporation looking to destroy one of the earth’s most sacred natural sanctuaries. In the inevitable revelation of each layer of the larger hoax, commenters were keen to assess the efficacy of the larger strategy. Given that Greenpeace came to represent the key actor involved in the controversy, the discussion moved to position the hoax as either [brilliant or villainous](#). Had Greenpeace gone too far in its aggressive send-up of the oil giant? Would the tactic risk alienating its longtime activist base? Would the campaign undermine their credibility as a trusted organization? While these questions remain difficult to answer, what is clear is Shell’s unwillingness to give the Yes Lab campaign any sign of acknowledgement; what’s more, it is highly unlikely that hoaxes of this nature will do anything to change the corporation’s future plans or to alter its views on corporate social responsibility. The Yes Lab may have symbolically corrected Shell’s identity, but any tangible changes are nowhere to be deciphered. A hoaxing campaign of this kind ultimately serves to highlight the problematic actions of

a powerful corporation and to sustain popular discussion regarding such actions, resulting in the online and offline mobilization of concerned citizens around the globe. At the time of writing, Greenpeace has solicited over 5 million signatures for its Arctic “global sanctuary” petition. Whereas it is arguable that public awareness regarding prospective drilling in the Arctic was known before the Yes Lab hoaxes materialized, it is quite clear that the issue has reached a critical mass, particularly in 2014.

If You (and the Yes Lab) Owned Bank of America | “Your Bank of America”

In April 2012, the Yes Lab would contribute to an ever-growing critique of multinational financial institutions and banks, devising a clever send-up of what could foreseeably happen in the event of another bailout. If the decade-defining 2008 bank bailouts in the U.S. had set off a wave of criticism and outrage on the part of taxpayers and citizens, those sentiments had not yet waned in 2012. Almost four years after then-Treasury Secretary Hank Paul committed \$700 billion in taxpayer funds to rescue Wall Street, anxieties about the bailout’s legacy continued to inspire critical commentary within a number of public forums. Some of the bailout’s most ardent critics have maintained that what was thought to have been a temporary solution to global financial catastrophe has now morphed into a permanent taxpayer burden. Far from reducing or curtailing the risks taken on the part of Wall Street bank(er)s, the bailout has served to increase both the degree and scope of risk-taking across the world’s financial markets. [As one journalist warns](#), the bailout has tied “American taxpayers to permanent, blind support of an ungovernable, unregulatable, hyperconcentrated new financial system that exacerbates the greed and inequality that caused the crash.” It is precisely these concerns that would inspire the Yes Lab to carry out its hoax on Bank of America, one of the U.S.’ Bix Six banks. In its “Your Bank of America” (Your B of A) campaign, the group presented the following scenario: in the event that Bank of America would emerge as the next big bank to fail, the financial conglomerate has chosen to preemptively solicit the feedback of its clients to “revamp” its core operations. More than a mere public relations re-branding campaign, the hoax would pose an invaluable question: how would taxpayers respond to another bailout?

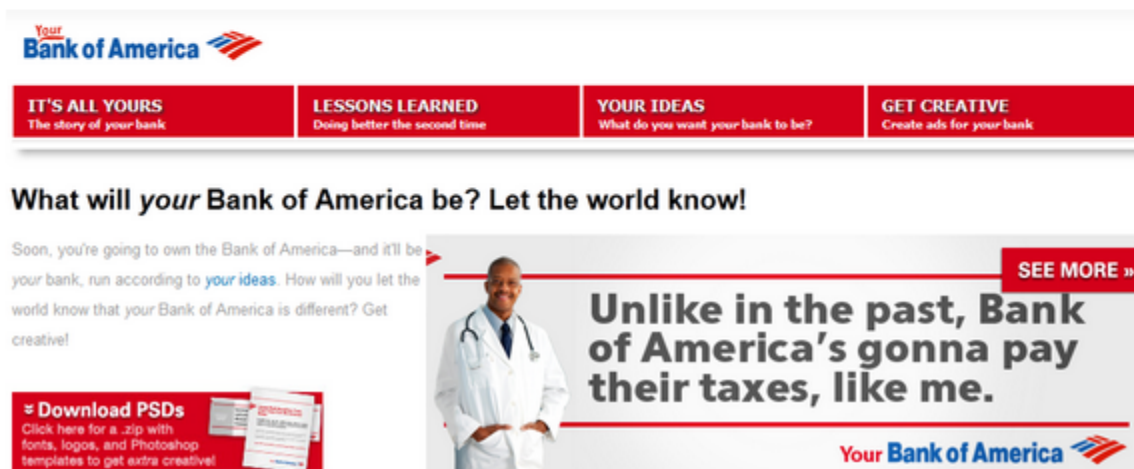
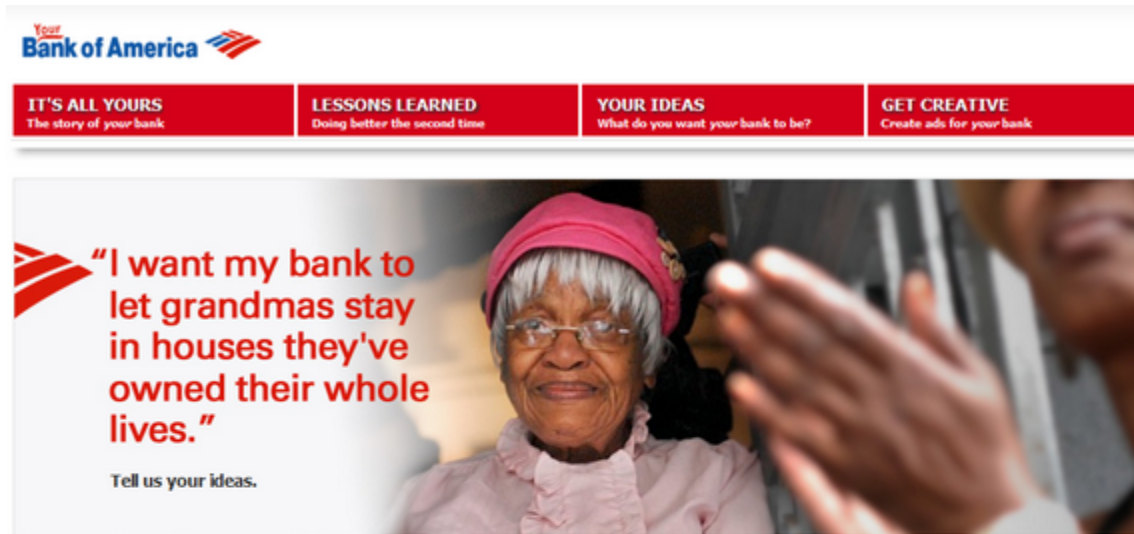
To answer this question, the Yes Lab would go about systematically re-branding the bank through a clever fake website (YourBofA.com). Visitors to the site were first greeted with a candid message from (real) Bank of America C.E.O., Brian Moynihan: “Today it’s time to acknowledge that our bank isn’t working anymore--not just for the market, but for the people, our real customers.” In an accompanying press release falsely attributed to Moynihan (“Letter to Fellow Americans”), the Yes Lab reveal some of the bank’s shortcomings and failures, including the need to pay \$8.58 billion to borrowers, \$324 billion in fines and sanctions, huge declines in the company’s shares, as well as lawsuits filed by citizens, state, and local governments. In framing Bank of America as an institution failing its customers--and by extension, as a big bank that could very well prove a future liability to taxpayers--the website would offer an array of opportunities for visitors to comment on B of A’s future.

As Andy would make clear in a [post-hoax interview](#), the site was designed with two main goals in mind: to illustrate that most people have “better ideas about what banking should do than the people who actually run the banks,” and to inspire people to talk about banking and to exchange ideas about how to improve banks to better reflect the interests of their customers. To bolster these claims, the site would publish hundreds of comments in the guise of user-generated ideas and advertisements, revealing a

refreshing set of perspectives on the state of banking today.
Some of the most poignant ideas expressed the need for banks

- to stop predatory lending and to make reparations for predatory lending practices;
- to refrain from pressuring customers to commit to products, services, or investments they neither want nor need;
- to show total transparency in investing;
- to ensure that chief executives never earn more than one hundred times the (current) salary of their lowest-paid workers;
- to explain all potential charges in clear and understandable language before any charges are incurred;
- to abolish overdraft on card purchases;
- to pay taxes and to obey the law.

In a move reminiscent of the utopian journalistic narratives discussed in the previous chapter, the Yes Lab enlist the creative and critical sensibilities of Your B of A visitors to spark a common-sense dialogue on both the functioning and performance of financial institutions. [As one member of the Yes Lab eloquently put it.](#) “[With this hoax] We are holding the microphone away from those who are destroying the American financial system and [giving] that microphone back to the people.” Rather than feed on the anxieties and cynicism of readers, the site presents a utopian sheen on a potentially catastrophic outcome. If B of A were to fail tomorrow and taxpayers were to assume their place at the helm, the reader responses briefly sketched out above suggest that more sensible and reasonable solutions would be waiting to be implemented. In presenting the almost unthinkable notion that bailout-enabling citizens could in fact meaningfully contribute to the broader management operations of a big bank on the scale of B of A, the Yes Lab group once again present a poignant reminder that the systemic structures now defining the contemporary world can be re-imagined to produce better, more accountable, and more responsive alternatives. The hoax also serves as a welcome reminder that the massive failures of some of the world’s most powerful banks may be repeated; in other words, the hoax asks: if such disastrous failures beget another set of bailouts, what are the appropriate channels for reforming the problems that have exacerbated these crises. The Yes Lab argue that this work can and should be done now, well before (the warning signs of) a future crisis materialize(s). Rather than level its critique against Bank of America exclusively, both the hoaxers and those responding to the hoax present viable solutions that could be incorporated within existing banking operations. In the event that these solutions are never integrated at the big banks, the Your B of A community suggests that customers move their business to local credit unions, financial institutions that are answerable and accountable to local communities. In the best case scenario, all of the large banks would be broken up into smaller credit unions, thereby giving customers greater leverage and decision-making power over the money they entrust to the bank.



Despite the optimistic tenor and outlook of the hoax, B of A was decidedly less enthusiastic about the Yes Lab's vision for a better bank. B of A immediately flagged the website to Google, claiming the site's creators were behind an elaborate phishing scam (financial fraud), resulting in its swift removal. The idea that the bank would so quickly call for its removal is unsurprising. As corporations of this magnitude have shown time and time again, actions of this nature are not tolerated and only rarely openly acknowledged. The move to legal censure is the most consistent method for containing and deflecting any possible public backlash. In the absence of any PR-related gaffes or missteps, the Yes Lab would circulate its own follow-up press release on B of A's behalf, denouncing the hoax and its creators' attempt to mislead the public; they would also threaten to prosecute those behind the hoax to the fullest extent the law allows. Far from assuming a benevolent voice, B of A is cast as a predatorial institution looking to discount the public's knowledge of, and involvement in, its operations. And rightly so: in 2014, B of A was ordered to pay nearly [\\$800 million in penalties](#) for deceiving millions of customers for fraudulent

credit card practices (many of these activities taking place between 2010 and 2012). In this scenario, it would seem that B of A emerges as the real hoaxer, profiting from the very deceptions made public on the Yes Lab's now defunct fake website. Based on the bank's recent economic performance, these kinds of deceptive maneuvers have proven indispensable to the expansion of its coffers. In January 2014, B of A delivered [a profit of \\$10 billion](#), its best performance since 2007; with its increased liquidity, the bank was also able to set aside \$2.3 billion for litigation expenses during the first quarter (twice the amount from 2013), suggesting that the bank is already embroiled in and/or anticipating a spate of legal action from a host of actors.

Thus, it is understandable that [on this occasion](#) the Yes Lab consisted of a "group of friends and concerned citizens and people who have been affected by Bank of America's practices." Despite attracting coverage from *Huffington Post*, *Fox Business News*, *Dow Jones Newswire*, and *CNN Money*, among others, the hoax didn't spread nearly as far or as wide as the hoaxers would have liked. What's more, because the fake website has all but disappeared in the aftermath of the hoax, the fruits of the group's brilliant satirical critique of B of A are difficult to trace, even when you are actively searching for them. When so much of the hoax's resources and creative input are made public (a precondition for initiating a successful hoax on the web), the likelihood of losing those materials through legal challenges and informal channels is significantly higher. In this case, one of the risks associated with carrying out high-level Internet hoaxes is the real possibility of either losing access to the campaign you've created or of losing the means of effectively sharing and publicizing that work. With "Your Bank of America," the Yes Lab and its affiliates present a funny, interesting, and eyebrow-raising critique of the American (read: global) banking system. Through this hoax, they mix a deft critical perspective with an eye toward engaging the wit, humour, and insights of creative and dissatisfied big bank customers. What's unclear about this hoax is what tangible gains are to found: the parody site has been dismantled, B of A has continued on its current trajectory, and the divide between activists and corporations is either deepening or irrelevant. That said, the hoax's power resides in its ability to bring together disparate groups and individuals in the service of re-imagining of a systemically flawed sector of society. As with most actions carried out in isolation, the hoax's power can only be deduced when studied alongside other movements, practices, refusals, and affirmations. That Your B of A materialized through the efforts of the Yes Lab, Rainforest Action Network, New Bottom Line, and facets of Occupy Wall Street (Alternative Banking) suggests that hoaxes can serve as the affective glue for various factions to bring about their version(s) of social change. That is a powerful idea.

In this chapter, discussion of the Yes Lab has been limited to systemic critiques regarding the economic policies of leading institutions, political inaction on the part of wealthy G8 countries, and the misguided initiatives of multinational corporations. While it is beyond the purview of this chapter to discuss all twenty-seven actions performed under the Yes Lab banner, some reference to the scope of these hoaxes is warranted. The above projects explore familiar territory and new targets: colonial economic injustice, coal/fossil fuel industry malfeasance, factory labour practices, immigration reform, racial profiling, water conservation and protection, genetically modified food, global trade, and the financial sector, among others. Together these hoaxes challenge audiences to consider a variety of issues not normally making the rounds in their information streams, playfully posing questions in a register that instigates further reflection. What would it mean for everyday citizens to have decision-making power in the day-to-day business operations of a multinational bank? What would it mean if a multinational corporation (General

Electric) voluntarily repaid tax benefits amounting to \$3 billion? What would it mean to have more frank discussions about immigration policy, to deliver “fair, inclusive, common sense and humane immigration reform”? In keeping with the critical utopian and satirical tone of the Yes Men’s work, Yes Lab hoaxes present the absurdities of a given social structure and offer some directives as to how we might go about eradicating or reforming them.

If an overarching theme is to be found amongst the various hoaxes, social justice appears to be the common rallying point. When the Yes Men set out to establish their training and mentoring laboratory, they wanted to facilitate a dramatic increase in the visibility and number of actions carried out in the interests of social justice. Indeed, the launch has been enormously successful on this front: both the number and range of actions have ballooned, giving the Yes Men a far greater stake in the creation of timely and time-sensitive media spectacles. What this means is that the Yes Men have created bridges for organizations already hard at work on specific campaigns to reach bigger audiences and have a more tangible impact on public discussion and debate. As they see it, an ideal manifestation of the Yes Lab would see the realization of a much larger movement rooted in the desire to first publicize then reform social and political inequities; the movement would then arguably spur the rejuvenation of twenty-first century democratic politics, a reality far from being realized in North America.

Laying the groundwork for these organizations has undoubtedly presented a number of new challenges for all parties concerned, but the initiative is one that has deepened the need for spectacle, humour, fun, and entertainment within the political arena. The Yes Lab teaches us that fun and politics can go hand-in-hand, that the most reprehensible institutions can be pressured to reform their ways, and that democratic ideals have not yet escaped the popular imagination. Perhaps the most powerful idea underpinning the Yes Men’s desire to bring their zany and hilarious politics to the mainstream is the notion that their work can be carried out by just about anyone passionate enough to pursue a cause. Although the Yes Lab has continued to give the Yes Men’s work greater traction and increased visibility across mainstream media, the project is limited to organizations that are already deeply engaged with specific issues, such as the environment and corporate/institutional reform. A solution to this issue is currently being elaborated thanks to a successfully funded Kickstarter campaign that attracted over 2,500 backers and raised over \$146,000. The project’s goal was twofold: to raise enough money to finish their forthcoming film (*The Yes Men Are Revolting*) and to build “a human-staffed platform to help every viewer of our film—or anyone at all—get involved.”

What’s truly interesting about this project is not only that it was funded (the initial funding goal was \$100,000), it’s what they intend to do with the funds. In addition to completing the film, the group will create an “Action Switchboard” that will enable viewers of the film to tap into their 100,000-person database and their larger activist network. The switchboard could potentially bring everyday filmgoers into a broader activist fold to “create fun, meaningful, movement-building projects around the issues we all care about.” Put another way, the creation of an “Action Switchboard” makes possible the mobilization of everyday citizens not normally predisposed to political action. “What we do,” Andy suggests [in a recent exchange](#), “is galvanize people who are already on our side.” The idea behind the switchboard to generate a deeper level of engagement on the part of their film audiences. It remains to be seen, but initiatives of this kind may very well have a broader impact in translating what is generally regarded as armchair activism into soft and/or more committed civic or political participation. The notion

that viewers of the Yes Men's work could be mobilized following the very screening of a film is at once powerful and refreshing. Although there are few compelling instances where political satire tangibly moves beyond critique to galvanize individuals, social groups, and communities, these two recent initiatives--the Yes Lab and the Action Switchboard--present promising iterations of satire and activist practice.

My discussion of the Yes Lab hinges on a desire to present a promising model of creative activism, one that relies on the elaboration of tools, tactics, theories, and principles coupled with the mentorship and guidance of proven organizers and activists. The above hoaxes were made possible through the broad proliferation of pragmatic materials and the creation of training and mentorship programs designed to lay the groundwork for a future generation of changemakers. These developments teach us that social change hinges on a constellation of factors, not least of which includes community organizing, training, teaching and pedagogy, creativity and know-how. As Andrew Boyd reminds us, "It's important to understand that a lot of things have to happen to create social change, and that creative activism has a certain set of things and another set of tactics, but in no way it is sufficient in itself." Hence it remains to be seen whether these opportunities will translate into more sophisticated activist projects, slicker media campaigns, or increased media attention to marginalized issues. It is also unclear whether creative activist practices create stronger relays between online and offline civic and political participation. We can now say confidently that we have entered an exciting era of activist protest; only time will tell what these larger pockets of activity will yield.

CONCLUSION

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias." — Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

"...if it sounds too good to be true, it's probably the work of the Yes Men." - [Allison Kilkenny, The Nation](#)

When I first embarked on the writing of this book, I'd imagined that the finished product would prove little more than a primer on the Yes Men's work for both their admirers and the uninitiated. In telling their story, however, I've been afforded the opportunity to address a number of powerful ideas, problems, dilemmas, and courses of action currently defining the contemporary moment. In examining media hoaxing as a ubiquitous twenty-first century cultural practice, I've argued that there is much to learn about the makeup of individuals susceptible to falling for such deceptions. If Nietzsche is correct--that human beings are perfectly willing to immerse themselves in illusions and dream images, to say nothing of their desire to extend and abuse their "chief powers in simulation"--perhaps we shouldn't

be surprised that lying, cheating, and deceiving others continue to mark our everyday interactions. If deception is a natural part of human experience, it follows that certain actors and institutions will wield their powers to gain advantage or win favour. When deceptions of the public are carried out in secret only to be unwillingly unmasked, the perpetrators of these schemes can be thoroughly ostracized and ruined (Richard Nixon's dramatic departure from the White House) or they can escape without legal recourse (the Bush Administration's bogus claims of WMDs in Iraq). But at the turn of the century, the field of deception has certainly broadened in size and scope. Deceptions are as sophisticated as they are wide-ranging, and the variety of actors currently peddling deceptive stories for mass consumption is at once impressive and alarming. Of late, both Facebook and Twitter have seen a dramatic increase in such stories, from stock market misinformation to fake user accounts to celebrity death hoaxes. And this is just a superficial sampling of the terrain. While deceptions that wilfully mislead the public into making poor decisions about self-governance are of great concern (going to war, allocating funds for local and national infrastructure), a fair share of hoaxes today occupy a nebulous position in this regard. They may be strange, stupid, obvious, and benign; they may also be dramatic, plausible, shareable, and dangerous.

Cultivating Skepticism, Improving Information Literacy

Hoaxing today presents an opportunity for anyone with a penchant for trickery to pull the proverbial wool over mainstream media's Argus eyes--and by extension, over our own. To deceive the gatekeepers of various media platforms and their respective communities is to secure a temporary sense of aggrandizement and superiority. As I have attempted to show, there are several motivations and incentives for doing this kind of work, be they economic, aesthetic, social, egoistic, ethical, and political. I do not mean to suggest that hoaxing should be lauded as a superior form of communication; indeed, to hoax and to deceive with success requires a degree of skill, craft, savvy, wit, and luck. What I am arguing for is a deeper familiarity and engagement with hoaxes of all kinds. If hoaxes enjoy the capacity to wilfully deceive in everyday life--particularly via the very channels through which citizens learn about the day's events--it is crucial that news consumers of any age or bent be equipped to read critically. To introduce a healthy dose of skepticism in the reading practices of people both young and old is to tangibly improve one's participation in our news media culture. Media literacy, however problematic a term, should be encouraged on all fronts of news consumption: print, visual, aural, and experiential. With greater familiarity of stories of this tenor comes greater fluency in negotiating the sometimes unflappable speed of the 24-hour news and information cycle. To debunk a hoax requires a willingness to read closely, look for clues, and exercise judgement. While even the world's best journalists have been fooled by elaborate ruses, the importance of cultivating this critical disposition cannot be understated. To introduce this care and skepticism into one's daily interactions with news remains a powerful tool for making sense of the modern world. The means through which to cultivate this disposition is to foster these skills across education platforms and to reinforce them in our everyday transactions with news.

If hoaxing has much to teach us about the intended and unintended outcomes of deception in modern life, we may also have much to learn from media hoaxing. Given the current structure of news dissemination, it is an interesting time to ponder how most people gain access to information. While the dominant broadcast model of the twentieth century has been transplanted (albeit not entirely uprooted) by the more

unpredictable patterns of circulation found on the Internet, news media outlets are simultaneously vast and robust, small-scale and fringe, niche and attention-grabbing, serious and entertaining, professional and amateur. The oft-repeated chorus of the Internet as a powerful tool of democratization and access is by now well known, but despite the proliferation of countless high-quality alternative media sites and resources, the fact remains that the world's most influential mainstream media outlets--those capable of consistently reaching mass audiences and publics--are controlled by five giant media corporations. That is not to say that alternative media outlets do not reach their audiences nor that the work they do is any less important. The notion that a small oligarchic few operate and control the majority of the world's image-producing, sense-making, politics-defining, conversation-leading media means that business interests will consistently trump discussions and debates on education, law, health, food, security, the environment, and many other social justice issues. Business, celebrity, sports, institutional politics, and human interest stories seem to be the order of the day.

If the airwaves (networks, digital signals, and algorithms) are only reserved for those voices sanctioned by elite interests, it follows that average, everyday, and outsider perspectives will be muted, if disregarded entirely; if the airwaves no longer belong to the public, bringing wide-ranging social issues to a broad audience may prove difficult, if outright impossible. Whereas it may have once been conceivable to introduce local issues to one's community via community access programming on radio and television, such avenues have been increasingly foreclosed. However celebratory the dream of bringing one's YouTube content to a critical mass, the reality is that most videos posted to the site are hardly watched by anyone; [according to one source](#), 53% of the videos have fewer than 500 views and about 30% have less than 100 views. The shrinking availability of public media for various communities has produced at least one interesting response: the hijacking of dominant media outlets, be they billboards, radio waves, television newscasts, and various online publications. It is precisely these activities that have fuelled the Yes Men's oeuvre, making their work an important case study for thinking about why so many community actors are committed to hijacking media outlets. By engaging in this kind of civil disobedience, they are not only pointing to the problems associated with not having meaningful access to the means of production and distribution capable of securing mass audiences, they are also expressing the larger frustration that journalists and their employers have not found a way to make important issues a profitable avenue in their day-to-day business operations. In other words, if community groups had greater access to media publics and if social justice issues proved a profitable venture for advertisers, there would be less incentive for groups like the Yes Men to hoax media outlets. Media hoaxes that would materialize under this configuration would surely be of a different stripe and character. In this regard, the Yes Men's activities can be seen to function in relation to the dominant structures of today's big media paradigm. As we've seen throughout this book, the deceptions serve as the necessary hook for bringing less popular stories and perspectives into an already crowded ecosystem.

Another key aspect of this book is how media hoaxing can function in the interests of putting forward a broader ethical, progressive vision. In [*Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*](#), Stephen Duncombe proposes that big attention-grabbing actions and interventions (or spectacles) can be harnessed within the context of contemporary politics. In thinking about how spectacle functions in various pockets of everyday life, Duncombe argues for an active engagement with the visual and media culture of our age, one that is rooted in popular culture. For example, by making sense of how video

games, celebrity culture, and advertising appeal to people's desires, Duncombe asserts that progressives, activists, and satirists alike can use the languages of visual culture to push forward various political agendas. By appealing to citizens' hopes and desires, his argument goes, progressives stand a much better chance of speaking directly to and engaging with publics that are otherwise deaf to their tired rational arguments. The larger idea is that progressives don't always have to appeal to fact, reason, and logic, but rather that they should be finding ways of presenting and framing facts and issues "in such a way that they make sense and hold meaning for people" (10).

Satirists and activists now have the opportunity to construct spectacles differently. Ethical spectacles can work toward creating a better-informed citizenry, a diverse group of constituents that is privy to a wide range of information, rhetorical platforms, visual patterns, and political viewpoints. As Duncombe insists, "We live in an age where spectacles make us stupid; [progressives] can engineer them to make us smarter" (120). Within today's media landscape, such undertakings are not without merit. When deceptions of this kind are structured not in the interest of harming others but in the service of bracketing corruption, malfeasance, and wrongdoing, there is reason to validate these actions. When spectacles are created to generate news media coverage that will facilitate the broader circulation of alternative and at times dissenting perspectives, there is reason to ponder these acts.

Problems, Shortcomings, and Limitations

If I've painted a fairly optimistic picture of this strand of media hoaxing, it is because I see the potential to learn a great deal from these experiments in news dissemination. That said, it would be disingenuous on my part not to express some of my reservations about this work. The Yes Men emerged at a moment where culture jamming, pranking, and hacking offered some of the most exciting opportunities for activists to express their disenchantment with the structures of power and domination represented by the modern-day corporation and nation-state. Humour, irreverence, fun, and a certain willingness to embarrass and ridicule powerful figures and institutions, all marked and informed the zeitgeist of this moment, a set of features still very much at the forefront of current Internet and popular culture. As I've shown through numerous examples, the Yes Men's work has evolved considerably since this period, but a core question remains regarding the efficacy of these tactics.

For Mike and Andy, the use of humour is the sugar-coated pill that softens one's willingness to engage difficult issues, particularly for apolitical or disaffected audiences. As recent studies have shown, representations of politics in popular culture have made politics more accessible to segments of the population that would not otherwise seek out political information and, in some cases, to apolitical audiences that do not typically read, watch, or listen to the news ([Baum 2002](#); [Prior 2003](#)). Humour can also have a galvanizing impact for the already-converted, cultivating a powerful bond between the pranksters and their like-minded publics. My main concern, however, is that the strategies devised to publicize, ridicule, and thwart the suspect activities of powerful actors may have the adverse effect of pushing the latter further and further away from the purported goal of bringing about meaningful change and reform. If the targets of these pranks do not share in the mirth created by these hilarious pranks (hint: they never do), they may begin to pursue new courses of action that will only further exacerbate the

problems we are currently witnessing.

As I've repeated throughout the book, these strategies may prove invaluable to solidifying the Yes Men's base of supporters and in potentially attracting new fans, but activists resorting to these tactics may also be unwittingly deepening the divide between both sides. If the bridge to be built between the two sides is a mere fiction of future cooperation, my concerns are ill-conceived. But given the recent influx in corporate monitoring practices of activist groups and organizations, it seems as good a time as any to ponder this question more deeply. Most recently, the Yes Men have attracted the attention of "private spy" intelligence firm, Stratfor. Hired by Dow Chemical in the aftermath of the Yes Men's *BBC World* hoax, Stratfor collected any and all information pertaining to the group's campaign against Dow. [Stratfor's role was to monitor the group's actions](#) so as to enable Dow to anticipate and, if needed, to prepare for a larger and more concerted critique of corporate power. To situate the Stratfor story even more firmly, the company was hired to surveil several activist organizations (not just the Yes Men), pointing to a troubling increase in the corporate surveillance of these communities. One journalist likens Stratfor's activities to [waging information warfare](#) against activists and organizers. Not to be outdone, [Chevron recently won a US federal court ruling](#) that enables the corporation to collect the IP usage records and identity clusters for email accounts owned by over one hundred environmental activists, journalists and attorneys involved in Ecuador protests.

Even if we were to discount the severity of the surveillance tactics espoused by Dow and Chevron, corporations are also beginning to respond with softer, gentler, PR-approved tactics. For example, a [recent *Fast Company* article](#) (published in relation to the Yes Men's Shell hoax) presents its advice on how to respond when "digital social activists have you in their crosshairs": first, resist the urge to fight; second, strengthen media ties; and third, take ownership of the issue. PR counter-strategies of this ilk are being increasingly incorporated into corporations' responses to potentially embarrassing or unflattering press coverage. The default setting for corporate handlers is to contain, deflect, and ignore these critiques, thereby minimizing the potential to disrupt business as usual. University of Minnesota law professor [William McGeveran puts it this way](#): "Companies like Shell are usually smart enough to know that legal action will only draw attention to the hoax and cause more long-lasting PR damage. It's similar to how defamation lawsuits often do more harm than good by dragging out the original story all over again." Indeed, the Shell and Chevron hoaxes illustrate that the issues presented by activists are of little to no importance to the corporations they attack; rather, they seek at all cost to [protect the brand's corporate image](#). To say the least, being ridiculed, mocked, satirized, and critiqued does not necessarily produce the most amicable of relationships. It is perhaps a contradictory position to espouse: one stands to win a larger following through the performance of clever satirical commentary just as one risks losing favour with the very target s/he wishes to reform. In a climate fraught with antagonism, it is thus important to exercise caution in terms of how one approaches actions that seek to humiliate powerful actors, however attractive it may be to solidify or expand one's base. To be clear, the Yes Men's use of humour--in addition to their presentation of utopian ideals--mark what are undeniably the most appealing aspects of their work, but they do produce some irreconcilable outcomes. If neither set of groups are willing to dialogue in good faith, the current impasse will prove a defining characteristic of the era.

Despite the Yes Men's dedication to promoting ethical and moral standards through their actions, they are not impervious to critique on these grounds. The group has been consistently vilified by their detractors for raising the false hopes of the very communities they wish to bolster. The example that continues to draw the most ire is the *BBC World* hoax in which they proposed to swiftly and significantly improve the lives of the people of Bhopal. Although the group was in no way looking to maliciously raise the false hopes of a people, they were deeply invested in demanding accountability from a corporation they deemed were unwilling to do the right thing. The hoax may very well have been engineered to place blame squarely upon the shoulders of Dow Chemical and Union Carbide, but one cannot readily discount the ongoing disappointments suffered by Bhopali victims--both the long term suffering brought about by the disaster and the short-term disappointment that would spread following the revelation of the hoax. The Yes Men have revisited this question of false hope several times throughout their career, never fully escaping the charge. As a tactic devised to produce a "decision dilemma" on the part of the target, hoaxes of this kind can, in the best case scenario, force accountability, or, at the very least, publicize just how backward the target truly is. While I certainly do side with the Yes Men in their deployment of this strategy, it should be reiterated that their efforts remain at times highly contentious.

The Limits of Media Hoaxing

Media hoaxing can also be a thankless, tedious, labour-intensive, anxiety-inducing endeavour. A given hoax can take months to plan and execute and there are never any guarantees that the work will ever see the light of day, let alone reach an audience of millions. Hoaxes require care, attention, time, labour, savvy, collaboration, as well as access to resources and funds. The hoaxes described in this book are truly engaging, thought-provoking, even funny; in presenting such captivating examples, I've certainly attempted to show the more intriguing aspects this line of work affords. What I haven't sufficiently described are the other less titillating aspects therein: the tedium of waiting on other people to produce work; the challenges of defining a workable course of action; the clashing of competing ideas and egos; the grind of working long, unpaid hours. Not to mention, the anxieties associated with pulling off the hoax in the final instance. For the Yes Lab's Mary Notari, the latter constitute the greatest challenges in this area of work. What's more, the greatest difficulty appears to be that of motivating and sustaining people to continue an action beyond the initial highs of the brainstorming stage. A project may seem interesting for the first two days, but it may run for another two weeks (or months), depending on deadlines, logistics, and labour power. Add to this the regularity with which journalists are duped and one can appreciate how activists may not always be on the best of terms with the very people upon whom they rely to relay their stories. The challenge remains how best to cultivate relationships with journalists who will understand the inner dynamics of hoaxing. As Notari humbly explains, "it's a downside when you piss them off." After all, news media serve as the mouthpiece for communicating issues, and journalists must be reminded that hoaxes of the Yes Men variety are not designed to embarrass journalists (fake *NYT* and *NYP* excepted). Figures like Alan Abel and Joey Skaggs may differ on this point.

No matter how just the cause or how terrible the target, there is no universal formula for generating a hoax that will capture the popular imagination. For these reasons, it is important to note that hoaxes may

not always function as the most effective ways to address wrongdoing or to create awareness. Activist groups may enjoy greater traction through more traditional means: letter-writing campaigns, petitions, public talks/film screenings, and rallies--to say nothing of the wealth of web- and app-based tools being used today. A media hoax should thus be considered an important tool in the activist's toolbox, one that can be leveraged in relation to, or in tandem with, other aspects of a given campaign.

Hoaxes can also be incredibly costly. Given the Yes Men's penchant for traveling to international conferences, building websites/mainframes, producing films, and publishing fake newspapers, hoaxing can require modest to considerable economic capital. Because the group does not rely on corporate sponsors to fund their initiatives, they have had to consistently rely on the generosity of fans and friends (via their massive email list), documentary film proceeds, and most recently, crowdfunding ventures such as Kickstarter. Indeed the Yes Men's precarious financial situation places a number of constraints on what projects they can and cannot pursue; questions of distribution and access are also notable due in part to the group's limited opportunities to distribute its work across mainstream platforms. The bind is that of enjoying the creative freedom to express ideas without fear of censure or restraint, but of always having to struggle to raise capital for various projects.

While hoaxing is rarely the seat of litigation and censorship, the Yes Men story does provide glimpses of reactionary measures on the part of corporate actors such as the US Chamber of Commerce. Well before the Yes Men saw the publication of its fake *NYT* edition, another group of media activists in Canada were eagerly preparing their own parodic interpretation of a well-known newspaper, this time in Vancouver, British Columbia. On June 7, 2007, the Palestine Media Collective (PMC) distributed an estimated 12,000 copies of a fake *Vancouver Sun* edition. Responding to what it deemed a pro-Israeli bias in its news reportage, the parody was meant to criticize the *Sun* for distorting its coverage in the Middle East. The publication of the fake newspaper immediately set off a civil lawsuit from the *Sun*'s parent company, CanWest, who filed legal action on the basis of trademark infringement. In a move no different than the Yes Men's appropriation of the *NYT*'s and the *NYP*'s iconic mastheads, the PMC's major flaw was to reproduce the *Sun* logo, landing the primary defendant, Gordon Murray, in the position of violating Canada's Trade-marks Act. In a surprising turn, the PMC was not being sued for libel or defamation (a position CanWest might have entertained in the elaboration of its case); rather, the plaintiff would argue that the fake paper's malicious character expressed an overt willingness to tarnish the reputation and standing of the newspaper in the community. As CanWest's litigators would argue, the perpetrators of the hoax were "motivated by hostility" to the company and operated in the interests of hurting the company's business; for these reasons, the company's lawyers would ask for punitive damages, not to mention "an injunction prohibiting the defendants from producing similar papers" ("[Canwest Suit](#)").

While this may sound very much like the foundation of a libel or defamation suit, CanWest would take a different and less predictable tack by exploiting weaknesses in the Canadian legal system. While the U.S. Trademark act contains two "fair use" provisions that make parodic and satiric commentary possible, Canada's Trade-marks Act offers no such allowances, effectively outlawing humour and/or social commentary. Thus as soon as the PMC "stole" the *Sun* logo, even if its appropriation was in the interests of putting forward a parodic critique of the newspaper's editorial stance, it was in violation of copyright and intellectual property law. At its best, the case highlights the considerable deficiencies in

Canada's legal position on issues like freedom of expression, copyright, parody, and satire; at its worst, the CanWest lawsuit reduces complex issues to the level of its legal correspondence ("Is this satire?"; "Is this libel?"; "Is this copyright infringement?") and places the plaintiff in the privileged position of controlling the terms of debate. What is certain, however, is that under the current legal framework of Canada's rights and freedoms charters, as well as under its copyright and intellectual property laws, the culture of critique fostered by media hoaxing may not only be threatened but also silenced.

Critiques of the Yes Men

It must also be stated that the project's life and vitality rests squarely on the shoulders of its two founders: Jacques Servin (Andy) and Igor Vamos (Mike). Were either Jacques or Igor to abandon the group, it would be entirely plausible that the Yes Men would cease to exist. Indeed these tensions will inform much of the thematic overtones of their forthcoming documentary, *The Yes Men Are Revolting*. Over the years, however, the group has collaborated with countless individuals and organizations; for example, the fake *NYT* solicited the help of thirty writers, fifty advisors, and one thousand volunteer distributors. For Mike and Andy to have brainstormed, conceptualized, produced, and executed such a broad range of pranks has required a great deal of collaboration, a facet that is most often depicted in their documentaries and web videos. In the public eye, the Yes Men are almost exclusively cast as a "dynamic duo." On the face of it, Mike and Andy represent two white, middle-class university professor-activists that have tirelessly sought to remake the world in their own image: a society that fosters freedom of speech, equality, and justice--to say nothing of the primacy of humour and laughter. Occupying this position has meant that they must respond to criticism surrounding issues of privilege, attention-grabbing, labour, and voice, among other things. When Mike and Andy set out to describe the injustices of the Bhopali people, are they within their rights to speak on behalf of this community? When they prepare an action with a large group of contributors, are they required to mention their key collaborators? When they recruit contributors for projects, to what extent should they include their insights and input? Why do women figures less prominently in Yes Men actions and why are their voices marginalized in certain projects? When they appear on national media to perform a hoax, shouldn't new faces be promoted in actions against harmful targets?

These questions represent the core critiques leveled against the group, many of which the group has attempted to resolve or circumvent over the years. Answers to these questions are difficult, particularly with respect to the issue of speaking on behalf of others, but the group has evolved enough to demonstrate a real commitment to changing its own way of doing things. Without retreading the previous chapter, the Yes Lab has proven a key site of change. Since its inception, Mike and Andy have shone the light on other key players and voices, focusing on training and mentorship as a vehicle for empowering marginalized groups to gain greater footing in the public sphere. It would be naive to suggest that the Yes Lab has eradicated in one fell swoop all of the group's shortcomings, but it has certainly opened up "identity correction" politics to a much broader activist community. What may have once appeared to be an exclusive, two-man operation has increasingly been re-cast as a massively multiplayer online/offline group. Seeing as their notoriety now gives them greater leeway in passing the gatekeeping establishment,

the Yes Men's star quality is still very present in mainstream media reportage (especially in Yes Lab-created projects). This might be misconstrued within activist communities as a form of bastardized politics ("shouldn't the cause come first?"), but there is something deeply inspirational about seeing the group continue to pursue its core causes; their celebrity provides but a means for them to reach greater and greater audiences. These critiques will undoubtedly never be fully resolved insofar as each group carries with it its own ideological blind spots. If the Yes Lab continues on a similar trajectory, there is room for even greater gains to be made on this front.

How are some of the other Yes Lab hoaxes qualitatively or quantitatively different than more or less standard Yes Men hoaxes? Anything problematic? Any inspired innovations and/or deviations from the norm? What do we learn?

Why The Yes Men Matter

In July 2005, Australian journalist Andrew Denton interviewed the Yes Men for his program, *Enough Rope*. [During the interview](#), Denton poses a difficult question: "The World Trade Organization manipulates truth for its ends, you fake things for your ends--who can we trust and how will we ever know the truth if we see it?" Mike's response is that one of the greatest lessons their media hoaxes can offer is that citizens should retain a healthy level of skepticism in their everyday interactions with media and information ("trust nobody, but especially distrust those who have power"). To trust blindly is to enable deceptions of a more malicious strain to impact public life for the worse. Just as there are competing discourses and truths circulating at any given time in any given realm of daily life, readers should cultivate this skepticism in the service of apprehending the great complexity of human thought and action. In acknowledging that a given actor's purchase on truth can be easily manufactured to suit his/her agenda, more opportunities are needed to confront, identify, and respond to harmfully deceptive stories and actions. Hoaxing has long proven its standing as a mainstay in human communication--the maelstrom of activity I have only briefly alluded to in these pages is not only here to stay, it will also profoundly mark the epistemological contours of the current century. For this reason, literacy, competency, and skepticism will remain important skill sets and dispositions for twenty-first century citizens, particularly amongst those who wish to claim greater understanding of our highly mediated democratic life.

But hoaxing constitutes a slippery form of discourse. Hoaxes of all kinds can and do infiltrate mainstream media reportage, often going largely undetected by everyday citizens unable to discern the tactics deployed by the hoaxer. Even satirical or parodic hoaxes remain, in large part, a difficult interpretive undertaking. Although knowing fans of the Yes Men and committed readers of *The Onion* may instantly recognize and revere the kinds of hoaxing or parody these practitioners produce, the uninitiated stand a real chance of missing the overall intent or implications of the work. For readers unable to decipher the ironic or parodic tone of a given piece, they risk reading the story straight, leaving them vulnerable to being duped, deceived, or ridiculed. While being deceived by satirists is arguably less dangerous than being duped by corporations or the state, one's inability to discern the multiple meanings at work in a given news satire may ultimately cancel out any positive elements attributed to the form. Indeed, satirists offer numerous opportunities for the audience to be in on the joke (enabling them, at several turns, to decode nuances and knowing winks), but with each work comes the possibility of misreading. Unlike straight-up satire, hoaxes present several interpretive problems because the humour (or critique) is not

readily discernible, especially in the Yes Men's wide-ranging pranks. When the Yes Men impersonate Dow Chemical or Environment Canada, one must patiently wait for the revelation of the hoax; without it, one has very little reason not to interpret these actions as legitimate. If one misses the revelation of the hoax along with the subsequent elaboration of the hoaxer's intentions, one is likely to misinterpret the speaker's real message. In the case of the fake *NYT*, one is still presented with the difficulties of discerning between fakery and factuality, notwithstanding the paper's inclusion of dozens of references that reveal the authors' otherwise hidden agenda.

Summing up: fakery presents its own set of interpretive problems. For readers to misread fake video news releases posing as real news means that everyday citizens risk accepting propaganda as legitimate news; for audiences to misinterpret an *Onion* news item as real news suggests that the story's real intent, however political, will have been missed entirely; and for observers to misapprehend the meaning of the Yes Men's "identity corrections" casts the politics of their work in doubt. The implications are clear: if citizens are unable to distinguish between legitimate and false accounts of the news, if they fail to perceive the growing divide between what constitutes accurate information and misinformation, and lastly, if readers are ill-equipped to detect the subtlety of satirical criticism and ironic utterances cultivating a healthy democracy will prove to be an elusive endeavour. At what point should we be concerned that satirical news stories are read as straight news, activist interventions as real government news websites, and covert propaganda as trustworthy information? It is for this reason that literacy, competency, and skepticism play an increasingly crucial role in the consumption of news. If citizens miss or misread propagandistic, ironic, and parodic forms of discourse, much work is needed to ensure that (future) citizens, especially in the younger demographics, are adequately prepared to make these distinctions. If the information before both young people and everyday citizens lacks veracity, they will need the critical tools necessary to navigate a digital culture awash in news content of questionable integrity and value. For this reason educators, parents, and community stakeholders across the spectrum must present and demystify these variants of news to empower the citizenry to make better sense of a chaotic media environment.

We have much to learn from deceptive practices such as hoaxing. As sites of study, hoaxes present us with opportunities to stimulate critical thinking and to encourage self-reflexive analysis of news media content; as I've argued throughout, hoaxing also represents an important pedagogical tool in the relay of information and in the articulation of alternative perspectives. Given its ubiquitous standing in contemporary media and its widespread appeal, hoaxing will prove a useful tool for teaching a baseline of media literacy skills, and for expanding one's understanding of media, journalism, satire, and civic culture. Although theories of satire and its uses within critical pedagogy have only begun to emerge, there is good reason to believe future research in this area would enrich our understanding of the ways in which ethical hoaxes of the Yes Men-variety produce more media literate citizens and discriminating news consumers.

As this book has unfolded, I have tried to temper my enthusiasm for deception, trickery, and falsehood. Like many of the people around me, I don't relish being deceived, tricked, fleeced, or made to look a fool. With very few exceptions, I don't welcome the humorous or malicious deceptions described in these pages. What I do know, however, is that these modes of communication present fascinating areas of inquiry for thinking about human nature, information dissemination, social (in)justice, and democratic

self-governance, to name a few. Not all hoaxes are malicious or harmful nor are they progressive or humorous. This book has attempted to draw attention to the various kinds of hoaxes now circulating, with an eye toward unpacking the deeper motivations behind such practices. While in most cases, the financial incentives underpinning a given hoax are unflappable, aesthetic, social, interpersonal, and professional motives abound. As my study of the Yes Men makes clear, the political dimensions of this work cannot be understated. And herein lies my greatest fascination with the group and the knowing deceptions they continue to inspire. With a clear political agenda that enacts a utopian vision for how the world could be, the Yes Men's bold, steadfast, and unflinching activism has laid the foundation for organizations, activists, and otherwise apolitical audiences to carry out their work. Their mischievous pranks are ushering in an era in which the call for greater social justice can be funny, playful, heartfelt, ethical, serious, and scathing.

A successful media hoax, Mike and Andy would say, is one that is seen, discussed, and debated as widely as possible. A hoax never truly achieves its promise without garnering media attention. For hoaxing to be truly politically effective, it must also be linked to progressive initiatives like activist interventions, political lobbying, policy recommendations, and ultimately, legislation. Through the Yes Lab, bridges between activism, advocacy, policy, and legislation are all possible. For the time being, the Yes Men continue their work through awareness and mobilization campaigns, in the express interests of promoting ideas for a better world. "Progress," Oscar Wilde famously noted, "is the realisation of Utopias." Hoaxing represents one such possibility for bringing this world into sharper relief.

Postscript

On September 26, 2011, an independent trader by the name of Alessio Rastani appeared on BBC television to discuss the Eurozone rescue plan, a bailout fund projected to reach sums of up to €2 trillion. In this painfully candid interview, Rastani made a number of provocative statements: first, that the rescue plan would do little to appease the economic crisis in Europe; second, that financial traders had virtually no interest in following the bailout plan or in fixing the economy; third, that the economic crash would prove a veritable boon for traders able to capitalize on widespread/ongoing economic depression; and fourth, that "governments don't rule the world, Goldman Sachs rules the world." Rastani's statements were soon after picked up by mainstream and Internet news media outlets, quickly generating a great deal of commentary and analysis. As *Forbes Magazine's* [Emily Lambert reports](#) in her summary of the day's events: "Gawker promptly called him a 'sociopath.' My colleague at Forbes said he might be a psychopath. Some people commenting on his Facebook page called him a 'muppet,' a 'nasty little self-publicist' and a 'totally honest bastard who wants to rise to the top of [on] the rest of the world's misery.' Another suggested that he die."

Indeed, the story is fascinating on a number of counts. Immediately following Rastani's appearance, Twitter was abuzz with speculation as to whether the rant-like musings of this "independent trader" might have been yet another successful ruse on the part of the Yes Men. Those engaged in fuelling the speculation cast the trader's statements as being far too hyperbolic to be read straight and that his pointed arrogance should more readily qualify as satire (to their credit, one might argue that there is a kernel of Swiftian satire to be plucked from the otherwise straightforward rhetoric). Much was also made Rastani's

physical resemblance to former Dow spokesman, Jude Finisterra (Bichlbaum).



In an interesting twist, several commenters noted not only a physical resemblance (both men part their hair to the right in each video!), but also a similarity in the cadence and delivery of their words. What made the fallout of Rastani's appearance so rich as a viral media spectacle was just how keen writers and journalists were to label the appearance a hoax. Rastani's credentials as a trader were at best dubious: no one could verify if he'd ever actually worked for a leading firm; his grasp of basic trading terminology seemed shaky when interviewed by *Forbes*; and (for those familiar with Yes Men-style pranking of multinational corporations) the appearance seemed entirely plausible as a prank engineered to make investment bankers, Wall Street, and the broader financial sector seem like complete assholes. The BBC would deny any suggestion that a hoax had been committed. When asked to confirm Rastani's credibility, the BBC issued the following statement:

We've carried out detailed investigations and can't find any evidence to suggest that the interview with Alessio Rastani was a hoax. He is an independent market trader and one of a range of voices we've had on air to talk about the recession. ([BBC Press Office](#))

In another interesting turn, the Yes Men were asked to comment on any potential ties Rastani may have had with the group. Upon denying any connection to Rastani, Bonanno told the BBC that "People in power don't speak that way. But who cares if he is or is not real. What we should be paying attention to is our own surprise at hearing his words." Bonanno's stresses the importance of taking Rastani's words at face value. Irrespective of Rastani's standing as a legitimate trader in the financial sector (or of his supposed lack of credible affiliation with a Wall Street firm), the trader's comments should register loudly not because he may be at the heart of yet another hoaxing controversy at the BBC, but because the larger hoax is actually being perpetrated by the very people Rastani represents: traders and industry insiders whose sole goal is to make money on the misfortune of others. As Rastani exclaimed: "Personally I've been dreaming of this moment for three years. I have a confession which is: I go to bed every night and I dream of another recession." In what is perhaps his most controversial remark, Rastani painfully encapsulates the *Wall Street* adage "Greed is good" but updates it for twenty-first century depression era Europe. Sociopath or not, Rastani's comments resonated at a time when deep structural insecurities

surrounding the European economy were pervasive. His comments incurred widespread outrage in some camps, admiration in others. What viewers learned from Rastani's appearance--and what so disquieted the BBC journalists that interviewed him ("jaws have collectively dropped at what you've just said")--is that economic disasters constitute critical moments in which those who are prepared to act can financially benefit from collapsing economic infrastructures. What Rastani made clear to his bewildered audience was that the economy was "toast" and only those with the requisite expertise and foresight would be able to weather the oncoming economic collapse. Returning briefly to two insightful comments regarding Rastani's appearance, he was cast as both a "nasty little self-publicist" and a "totally honest bastard who wants to rise to the top of [on] the rest of the world's misery." To characterize Rastani in this way based on his rhetoric alone seems altogether appropriate. Forsaking any mention of the Eurozone crisis, Rastani makes the following claim: "If I see an opportunity to make money, I go with that." The logic here is straightforward enough, as are the motivations--money and the pursuit of wealth.

Which brings me to my final point regarding Rastani's motivations for appearing on the BBC and the apparent fallout following his interview. Why would this interview qualify as a hoax? What are the implications of even labeling this event a hoax? Who benefits most from the act of naming Rastani a prankster or a fake? It is a cruel irony that anyone bold, crude, or reckless enough to engage in a frank and more or less truthful discussion of the status quo would almost immediately inspire the wrath, suspicion and/or contempt of others. To do so would be to draw immediate scrutiny because of just how rare it is for public figures and media experts to stray from talking points, if not the seamlessly scripted notes prepared by public relations professionals. For Rastani, a virtual unknown by all accounts, the act of truth-telling (however warped) created a perfect storm that would enable critics to question the veracity, integrity, and credibility of his words. As soon as these aspects of your character are called into question, you flirt dangerously close with being called a fraud, a scam artist, or a prankster.

Which is precisely what happened. Aside from making callous and heartless comments regarding the (then) impending collapse of the European economy, there is no evidence to suggest that Rastani is and/or was a hoaxer in search of a mark. Rather, Rastani's motives for appearing are about as straightforward as they come: he is an independent trader looking to shore up influence in the express interests of securing public speaking engagements, draw traffic to his website (*Inside Trader: The Home of Honest Trading*), and promote a forthcoming (read: teacherly) book on how to trade (*Beginners Guide to Trading*). For a relative unknown, Rastani would have relished the media exposure a mainstream media outlet like the BBC could provide. Rastani reaches a broad audience in his real-time appearance on the BBC, but the expansive coverage generated by the video clip (amounting to several million views) would more than amplify this standing amongst a diverse Internet public. As his website reveals, his Internet fame and notoriety has increased his visibility in several media outlets (*Frost Over the World*, *Alex Jones Show*, *Saturday Night Show with Brendan O'Connor*) and his speaking engagements have multiplied. Just as hoaxers hijack mainstream media to profit economically, professionally, and socially, so too do perceived hoaxers benefit from the false appraisals of their statements and actions. In Rastani's case, the hoax was a false alarm, and perhaps the real hoax in all this is that figures like Rastani retain any credibility or legitimacy in the wake of their callous pronouncements. What so shocked Bonanno wasn't that Rastani was initially cast as a member of the Yes Men (it was a more or less plausible scenario), but rather that his words were not treated as somehow representative of a broader ideological worldview that has caused

catastrophic harm to the global economic system and to the people directly affected by it.

Yes Men Best Of Pranks, 2010