

On December 3, 2004, the 20th anniversary of the Union Carbide gas disaster in Bhopal, India, a spokesperson went out live on BBC International television and stated that the Dow Chemical Company (now owner of Union Carbide) was finally taking full responsibility for the catastrophe. The spokesman, who called himself Jude Finesterra, stated that \$12 billion dollars had been set aside for the victims and for site remediation. He told the news-anchor that the Union Carbide Corporation would be liquidated, that Dow would fund any medical or scientific research about the effects of the gas, and the corporation would finally release it's own scientific studies on methyl isocyanate, the gas that leaked.

Around the world, incredulous activists celebrated, and Dow corporate officials panicked, stupefied. In Bhopal, there were tears of joy, there was celebration, and there was relief... for about an hour. Jude Finesterra (whose name alone should have given the BBC pause) was not a spokesman for Dow. He was a spokesman for the activist duo The Yes Men – famous for message and identity “correction” of corporate and political groups.

Bhopal, an issue as alive twenty years on as it was in the immediate aftermath, is unique both as the worst industrial accident in history, and in the nearly unbelievable endurance of both suffering and injustice since that night. The Yes Men's hoax was also unique in the history of anti-corporate activism. This seven-minute television statement caused a temporary drop in Dow's stock price worth \$2 billion dollars (CNN article), and on the other side potentially unlimited disappointment and frustration among the long-suffering survivors in Bhopal, where local activists had no idea what was happening.

How did the Bhopal hoax happen? What were the implications on the ground? How has it changed the possibility of corporate accountability? Below, in their first conversation ever, the Yes Men (Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno) discuss the hoax with Sathyu Sarangi, a primary organizer in Bhopal, founder of the Bhopal Group for Information and Action, and the Sambhavna Trust Clinic and Documentation Center, which provides free care to survivors..

INTERVIEW: March 3, 2005 (moderated by Bridget Hanna)

Bridget: How did each of you get involved with the Bhopal issue?

Sathyu: I came to Bhopal a day after the disaster in December 1984. Since then I've been involved with a wide range of activities mainly with the survivors' organizations. I've been involved with relief work, publicizing the situation in Bhopal and trying to get information from outside Bhopal in to Bhopal people, doing research, documentation and taking legal actions. For the past 8 years I am with the Sambhavna Clinic, that provides free care to Bhopal survivors and victims of contaminated ground water. Along with survivors' organizations I continue to be active in the campaign for justice in Bhopal.

Andy: Well, for a number of years we [The Yes Men] were involved in an anti-corporate activism website called rtmark.com. We sponsored, encouraged and publicized actions that had to do with exposing corporate misdeeds. As part of doing that, we started putting up these fake websites. One thing led to another, and we ended up with a website for George W. Bush [www.gwbush.com], a fake campaign site that got a lot of attention. And then somebody approached us with gatt.org, the fake WTO site that got more attention. Finally some environmentalist friends that we had met at a conference approached us with an idea to do a website about Dow, and that's how dowchemical.com [a satire of

www.dow.com] – and eventually dowethics.com [dowchemical.com was shut down by Dow] happened. So one thing just led to another, and then we were doing this particular action.

Mike: One interesting thing about this is that neither Andy nor I as United States residents had heard that the disaster site in Bhopal had not yet been cleaned up – at least not until these environmental activists approached us and said ‘let’s put up a site and against Dow.’ We became interested in it – with our history of anti-corporate activism – because it’s the biggest and the most dramatic example of corporate misdeeds out there. It’s the largest industrial accident in history. Since it still hasn’t been cleaned up and people still haven’t been adequately compensated, it’s symbolic of a much larger problem. It [the website] was directly about getting Dow to accept some responsibility for Bhopal.

Bridget: So, the hoax came about when someone at the BBC carelessly mistook the Dowethics site for the real Dow Chemical Company site, and sent an email to that site asking for Dow’s comments on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. Mike and Andy, what were you thinking when you originally got the email?

Andy: Well, when we originally got the email from the BBC, we immediately contacted our friends that we’d been working with on DowEthics.com for a while and we strategized about what to do. We examined two choices – one was the one that we ended up taking, and the other one was a much more brutal kind of truth telling. We thought that we would go on TV and say, from Dow’s perspective what they are really about. So it was either to say, ‘we’re going to do everything right, we now understand that we should do this, that we should compensate people’. The other option was to say ‘we have no obligation to the people, we only care about our shareholders, we’re a company, our only obligation is to profit, so why would we do anything for the people in Bhopal?’

We decided together with our friends that the approach we actually took [of announcing that Dow had taken responsibility] would actually end up making more waves, because Dow would actually have to go on the record and deny it, and that that would create a lot more media attention. The overall goal of this was to get media attention for the Bhopal anniversary in the United States, where, of course, most people still don’t know what was going on in Bhopal. A lot of people don’t even know what Bhopal was. And many who do don’t realize that the [factory] site still hasn’t been cleaned up, that still people die from contamination of groundwater, and so on. So the idea was to get as many articles in the US press as we possibly could. We all thought, this was the best way to do it, to force Dow to really respond.

For a little bit even, there was some talk about contacting people in Bhopal and alerting them and then, a kind of communal decision arose where we decided that that could get risky if it got leaked somehow. That could endanger the entire thing. So we decided, for better or for worse not to do that.

Bridget: What happened once you got to newsroom to give the report, what was surprising?

Mike: In a way the whole thing was surprising. Initially getting the invitation, and then going, and then having it go out live – it was all surprising the whole time. As far as the reactions went, we had anticipated that we would cause people some amount of grief, but we'd imagined that it would be minimal, because they'd make the correction quite quickly. So we went ahead with it anyway, because we decided that our goal for this as activists was to get attention for the issue, and not to make friends, let's say.

So it was just shocking to see the whole thing unfold, and to see that first of all it went on [air] and Andy was able to say the entire thing – everything that we wanted to say, he was able to say. They let the piece run on longer than they had initially said. They said it would be 4 or 5 minutes, but it ended up being 6.5 to 7 minutes that he was able to actually just go on, explaining everything that we would like to do if, in a parallel universe, Dow was to actually do the right thing.

So it was surprising that they didn't, halfway through the broadcast, just cut it off, realizing that it wasn't true. Afterwards it was really interesting to see the responses. We went on an emotional rollercoaster. We were initially extremely happy that it had gone off well – Andy performed really well. He nailed everything, basically. Then when we got home we started reading the reports. We started feeling like shit, about, oh, 2 or 3 hours later when we saw the effect it was having in Bhopal.

But then after about two days we started feeling better again when we saw the results in the US media and actually got to tally how many stories made it into newspapers [in the US] as a result of the hoax that probably wouldn't have been there otherwise.

Sathyu: One major impact I think it had was educating people within Dow's international global network. During our meetings with Dow officials in Europe and in other countries we were shocked to find that these officials did not know anything about the disaster in Bhopal. Even the senior officials of Dow were surprised to know that Union Carbide, with which Dow had merged, was still absconding from justice in Bhopal. For these officials it must have been a revelation about their own company. People must have called them up and tried to find out if what they had heard was true. This would have happened all over the world.

Bridget: Sathyu, can you tell us the story of what was happening the ground in Bhopal?

Sathyu: Well, we had had our anniversary march to the factory. Thousands of people were there, and the effigy [of Dow Chemical] was just burning down. Suddenly the BBC crew that had been there all day came running towards me. They came closer with their cameras rolling and told me that BBC correspondents had spoken to a Dow representative and that Dow has promised to give some \$12 billion dollars to Bhopal survivors to settle all liabilities once and for all.

I just couldn't believe it at first. And then when it sank in, which was only a fraction of a second, I couldn't hold back. I started crying. It was the hugeness of the amount that made this so different. It was so massive, you could think of so many things to do, so many possibilities... At that moment all I could think

about was how this could have been done long back and so much suffering avoided. That was the most intense thing I was feeling. But also I was feeling how this meant the opening up of so many possibilities in Bhopal, like good health care, and proper cleaning up of the toxic contamination. With so much money Bhopal would be a completely different city.

By then a crowd of local activists had gathered around us. Because the conversation with BBC reporters was in English they could not understand what was going on but they figured it was some thing momentous and were eager to know. In Hindi I told them what the BBC reporters told me. They ran to tell others. There was much screaming, crying, hugging – people not knowing what to say, people trying to figure out how much was 12 billion \$s in rupees, people wanting to know more. Meanwhile, because the BBC people were filming us, other media people came running towards us. All this was happening around us for about an hour. Up until then we did not know [that it was a hoax].

The BBC reporters said that they wanted to do live interviews with lots of people, and began setting up their equipment. After some time they came back to us and said ‘no no that was a hoax,’ and ‘our people have checked, Dow has refused’. So that was when it all came crashing.

But when we realized it was a hoax by the yes men we were no longer unhappy. Particularly, when the activists and leaders of the survivors organizations found out why it had been done and the impact it had had, I don’t think there was any anger left.

Mike: Well, firstly we just really want to apologize. And please pass it on to anybody else that was there with you. We really didn’t intend to put you through that, even if it was for only a few hours. Do you have anything to add to that, Andy?

Andy: Sathyu, you mentioned that you weren’t *that* disappointed when you found out that it was a hoax. Are you just being polite?

Sathyu: No, no. Firstly because it was too good to be true, so I was kind of suspicious. It was all very sudden when the BBC guys said and the rational part of the mind got suspended. Once I knew it was a hoax I imagined how much trouble Dow would have had all over the world. Also it wasn’t like the news had reached a lot of people in Bhopal.

Still, for a few days afterwards there was a lot of speculation as to who would have done this. And then there people who said pretty terrible things about the Yes Men, not knowing who they were, and why they had done it. Later the whole story came out in the newspapers as to how this was part of a subversive activity, and then there was much wider appreciation.

Our big worry was the Bhopal Medical Appeal, because we raise all our money through newspaper advertisements in England, and we thought that if our potential donors read this – because this ad also goes out around the time of the anniversary – they would think, ‘what’s the point of giving or donating more money?’ It didn’t really affect, because people there also soon got to know about it. But the timing was very close.

Bridget: Has this experience changed your ideas about what you're doing, or might do in the future?

Mike: Well, if opportunities like this came along, we would certainly take them. We felt like this was probably our most successful project to date, in terms of being able to focus attention on an issue that we cared about. As far as where we take it in the future – well with this thing we want to follow it up and keep working on the issue of Dow Chemical and their negligence in Bhopal.

But these sorts of pranks are only part of what we do; the other part is making media about the pranks that we then show to a different audience. We are going to be pursuing this with this Dow work as well.

Bridget: What does it take to do this kind of anti-corporate activism?

Mike: Well, our two methods, that we had, that were choices in this Dow project, were one, showing that another world is possible and laying out some simple steps to achieving that other world, and two, shocking people into realizing how awful the consensus is. We couldn't do either of them without other kinds of activism existing out there.

For example, there are people who are thinking specifically about alternative models for how we can do things like run economies or run governments. We rely on those organizations to figure out what it is that we want to propose. That's why for this Dow thing we ended up working with these other activists who had been working on the issue for a long time – because we needed the guidance that they could offer in proposing a solution.

Andy: The core of it is that the work that we are doing is a kind of education rather than real hardcore activism. The real hardcore stuff is being done by people on the ground who are fighting with their bodies, or with their minds in changing laws, or in doing research that provides people with all kinds of tools to become more active. What we're doing is sort of popularizing these issues – like with our film about the WTO stuff, it's not even popularizing the issues, it's just sort of interesting people in the issues.

Sathyu: To me, this was a clear case of how these two different kinds of activism really need each other. Because, if you leave aside the few hours of disappointment and all, I think that this was a very positive example in terms of education and convincing people of the importance of this issue, and inspiring people to become agents of change or to get involved.

Andy and Mike can be examples for lots of people of what you can do with a smart text and a borrowed jacket. So these are things that show people the different range of activism that you can do, that can be subversive as well as fun.

Related links:

www.dowethics.com - the Yes Men's Dow Chemical parody of www.dow.com

www.bhopal.org - the Sambhavna Clinic and the Bhopal Medical Appeal.

www.bhopal.net - the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal.

www.theyesmen.org - the Yes Men (watch the video of the hoax here)