Media Hoaxing

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The Yes Men and Utopian Politics

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Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of more than six years of curiosity, intrigue, exploration, frustration, boredom, stress, laughter, and dedication. It also serves as a barometer of sorts for measuring personal, professional, and social change. During the years dedicated to this book, I lived in three different cities and worked at three different universities. The kernel of this larger project materialized in late 2011 while I was teaching as a sessional lecturer at the University of Guelph-Humber in Toronto. I completed the first full draft during my time at Concordia University in Montreal, where I'd secured a limited term appointment as an assistant professor (2012–2015). I would complete the book in my current tenure-stream appointment at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. Although the above trajectory may seem long-winded and unnecessary for the purposes of an Acknowledgments section, it attempts to illuminate the often hidden labor conditions that underpin the production of creative, artistic, or academic texts and works. Precarious labor is now a defining feature of life across most industries, especially in the cultural, creative, and media industries. Life and labor in academia are no different. To teach, conduct original research, supervise/mentor students, and serve the university community is an incredibly difficult undertaking under any circumstances, particularly when stable employment is nowhere on the horizon. Books are challenging enough to write under even the best conditions, and the added pressure of producing work under the stress and weight of precarious living, made this a difficult and solitary endeavor.

One of the great joys of engaging in a book-length project is the freedom to explore ideas in writing, done in places of one's choosing. Because writing is at times tedious, onerous, and joyless, the question of where one chooses to do this work is of crucial importance. Luckily, there is no shortage of inspiring venues and places in which to carry out this work. Indeed,

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Parts of chapter 1 have previously appeared in "Ragots, rumeurs, legends urbaines, et hoaxes : vers un éclaircissement des genres," *Nouvelle Revue Synergies Canada* (7) (2014) (co-authored with Aurore Van de Winkel), and parts of chapter 4 have appeared in "From critique to mobilization: The Yes Men and the utopian politics of satirical fake news," *International Journal of Communication* (7) (2013): 1243–64. Parts of chapter 5 have appeared in "The comedian, the cat, and the activist: The politics of light seriousness and the (un)serious work of contemporary laughter," *Comedy Studies* 6(1) (2015): 49–62.

Introduction

In *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization* (published in 2004), two anti-globalization activists 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, globalization, genetically-modified food, hunger and starvation, 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-colored 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 refer to as an "era of enlightened profit-seeking" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 141). The fact that these two largely unknown activists (Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin[1]) 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 actions. For over twenty 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 media activism. Their deceptive 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.

Add to this the notion that popular media and entertainment have now become the standard, bringing geopolitics and global affairs into the warm embrace of satirists and activists 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 social, political, and economic spheres of culture has proven an important hallmark of popular culture since the turn of the new century.[2] Making humor central to the ways in which audiences encounter and (endeavor 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.[3] It has also proven the means through which satirists and activists have been able to meaningfully cope through challenging periods of sociopolitical regression; as Willett (2008) puts it, humor and laughter are deployed "to keep from crying," serving as preemptive strikes against hubris and folly.[4] For the Yes Men, humor is the primary vehicle for "making it into the news" and of "collaborating with journalists" (Bichlbaum, 2010). Humor is also the necessary ingredient to bring disaffected, apathetic, or ignorant groups and individuals into the fold,[5] 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 three documentary films make clear from the outset, their wicked humor, biting satire, and the eruptive and disruptive fits of laughter that ensue all serve as powerful hooks or incentives to spur people to scrutinize and contest the misdeeds and misbehaviors of the targets they ridicule. As Yes Men co-founder Igor Vamos affirms, "The reason we do [what we do] 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" (Smith, Ollman, & Price, 2005).

With laughter and humor 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 humor as a weapon, those sympathetic, neutral, or oblivious to the more serious-minded Marxist and political-economic critiques of media and capitalism are perhaps more susceptible to decipher the underpinnings and shortcomings of globalization as it currently operates.

STRADDLING THREE REALMS: JOURNALISM, HOAXING, AND MEDIA ACTIVISM

Scholars of media and cultural studies have discussed the Yes Men within the context of art and activism (Dzuverovic-Russell, 2003), culture jamming (Carducci, 2006; Lecoeur & Pessar, 2006; Nomai, 2008), tactical media (Boler, 2006), political discourse (Hynes et al., 2007; Reilly, 2012), ironic activism (Day, 2011), and pranking (Harold, 2007; McLeod, 2014). While their work readily qualifies as political satire, culture jamming, tactical media, pranking, performance art, and media criticism, this book frames the Yes Men, first and foremost, as media activists who have consistently deployed the media hoax as *the* means to convey systemic and institutional critique while operating both outside and within the established discourses of traditional news media. The media hoax, thus, represents a conceptual, performative, and political vehicle for bringing together these at times overlapping and complementary mode(l)s of action. True to their contemporaries' culture jamming practices,[6] the Yes Men "appropriate existing hegemonic practices, languages, and aesthetics in order to interrupt the flow of mass media culture and introduce an assessment from within the very discourse that is being critiqued" (Casey-Sawicki, 2007, p. 414). If, however, the Yes Men's work could be neatly distilled into discrete categories, the overlapping realms of journalism, hoaxing, and media activism offer the three most compelling points of departure. The Yes Men are perhaps best understood as (1) media activists that make strategic use of the Internet to (2) influence the ways in which journalists tell stories about current events that (3) enable them to hijack mainstream media outlets in the interests of (4) shifting public opinion on important issues through spectacular, unusual, humorous, 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 undergoing 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 (soft news, Reality TV narratives, gossip and celebrity culture), so too are they vulnerable to pranks, hoaxes, and misinformation. In framing the group's interventions as media hoaxing, we are afforded the opportunity to explore various facets of activist politics, aesthetics, and praxis, as well as some of the era-defining relationships between activists, news organizations, and corporations. Throughout their history, the Yes Men have consistently participated in the creation of high profile media hoaxes, a tactic, strategy, method, and cultural practice that has enabled the group to reach audiences via news broadcasts, print and online journalism, documentary films, books, public and university lectures, community workshops, and so on.

Despite the perceived destructive motives underpinning their deceptive actions, their designs to undermine the integrity of mainstream journalists or news organizations have been largely exaggerated. Rather, the group exploits flaws in mainstream news reportage—namely, the ways in which editors, journalists, and staff 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 from this vantage point is to openly address systemic failures and blind spots that underpin the ways news organizations go about *making* or *constructing* the news.[7] In this respect, it is significant to note from the outset that the Yes Men don't describe themselves as mischief-makers looking to destroy the fabric of news and information culture (a label often ascribed to hoaxers more generally); 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. They present their work in the interests of galvanizing public support in favor of stimulating critique, debate, and action on broader social justice issues.

And yet the Yes Men are most commonly described as media activists or culture jammers. Since the appearance of their first documentary film in 2005 (*The Yes Men*), 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 traditional and DIY (do-it-yourself) political culture: marches, demonstrations, rallies, protests, sit-ins, zine and pamphlet production/

circulation, and so on (Meikle, 2002). The tools and tactics deployed by these and other activists are leveraged by groups that have historically occupied marginalized positions across society, thereby wielding little power in the decision-making process. If tactics are, as de Certeau (1984, p. 37) writes, "an art of the weak," it follows that the Yes Men leverage hoaxing as a critical tool in their arsenal to critique and challenge the hegemony of powerful actors and institutions. The strategies and tactics they deploy offer a brief reprieve from which to critically interrogate the world as it is currently fashioned. Following Bogad (2016, p. 63), "Their performances show that it can be fulfilling, empowering, and even enjoyable to throw oneself into an action in an effort to interrupt the hegemonologue of a corporation or a government."

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 consistent 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. While there is good reason to keep pronouncements of the web's emancipatory and utopian potential at bay,[8] there is a great deal of Internet activity that warrants further inquiry and engagement.

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 twenty-four second news cycle, the so-called "continuous partial attention" of media consumers, and culture's ever-growing enchantment with entertainment-driven technologies and content, it has become increasingly difficult to draw attention to issues that connect to social justice, civil liberties, or human rights. Without an audience to wow or a public to titillate, the Yes Men's activist contributions might more readily be relegated to the dustbin of history. Harrebye (2016, pp. 14–15) persuasively argues that attention is one of the most precious resources in an information age; as such, creative activist praxis must be designed with two overriding objectives: to create a space for the "revitalization of the political imagination" and to do so in highly inventive ways. 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.[9] Such an event should feature a spectacular arc in a story that defies easy explanation or categorization. Ideally, the story should be uncommon, unbelievable, too-good-to-be-true, entertaining, and preferably funny. Together, these elements will decide how much attention a given story will generate, influencing the degree to which the issue will be shared, discussed, debated, and repurposed.

In what follows, I fill in the contours of the Yes Men's twenty-plus-years of activity to highlight how they have consistently modelled a powerful mode of media activism that fuses humor, irreverence, critique, and collaboration in a desire to spark meaningful social change. I argue that the group's efforts to model media hoaxing as an important tool in the advancement of social justice activism have produced a range of failed and successful experiments, a broader endeavor that has pushed the group to explore greater collaboration and to cultivate a more pronounced utopian ethos. In situating the Yes Men's work in relation to the growing scholarly work on failure and success in activist and social movement struggles,[10] I present an account of how failure and success have informed some of the group's most dynamic and innovative work. Their adaptations to and deviations from (un)successful actions have significantly marked their evolution, pushing the group to balance their more prankster-like sensibilities with more utopian ones. The result has been the diffusion of a wide range of innovative actions and the elaboration of a burgeoning network of activist collaborations through their Yes Lab for Creative Activism.

Re-Imagining Utopia through Humor, Trickery, and Sincerity

Boler & Turpin (2008, p. 397) describe the 2000s as an era marked by living contradictions and desired truths. Within this complex and contradictory discursive ecology of truth and lies, sincerity, irony, and satire have emerged as crucial tools in the contestation of, and deliberation over, political discourse. The Yes Men have proven one of the greatest adapters of these tools, offering ironic redescriptions[11] of the world that convey a sincere desire to uproot harmful and undesirable aspects of contemporary life. Through their parodic impersonations of both government and state representatives, this group of what Day (2011) calls "ironic activists" wields irony in the service of sincerity for earnest political aims.[12] Day's argument, however, is not without its line of detractors. For example, Frye (1957, p. 23) famously describes irony as a kind of "intellectual tear-gas," an expansive and destructive force that creates unwanted destruction.[13] Similarly, Wallace (1997, p. 67) argues that irony, however entertaining, retains an "exclusively negative function": it is critical and destructive, a "ground-clearing" that is "singularly unuseful when

it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks."[14] In a certain measure, the Yes Men can be seen to answer Wallace's charges against the ironist, as they painstakingly refute the latter formulation of his critique. In lieu of merely satirizing or mocking a given target, the group presents utopian propositions to counter the already-critiqued phenomena they wish to remedy. Wallace would go so far as to concede that even "gifted ironists work best in sound bites" (1997, p. 67), an apt description for the Yes Men, a group that has turned the (ironically-inflected) sound bite into a mechanism for promoting sincere and candid dialogue and debate on a number of pressing issues.

Through their hoaxing experiments, the group deploys irony to "turn on the unsaid," or, as Boler (2006) theorizes, "to express horrors that are palatable; [to create] a sense of shared meaning and community by using the unsaid to create recognition of the dominant culture as misrepresentation." Trilling (1972) has suggested that "if we speak [the word sincerity today], we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony" (as cited in Magill, 2007, p. 162), but the ironic politics enacted by the Yes Men produce the conditions through which sincerity can be expressed, particularly with respect to the broader discomforts and injustices they wish to publicize. Although irony may in many instances seem incompatible with sincerity (or the expression of sincere thoughts and ideas), the laughter produced via irony becomes a refuge of sincerity (Boler, 2013, p. 282), a form of sincerity that expresses a desire for accountability and a renewed sense of utopian possibilities. The Yes Men are masterful creators of "prefigurative interventions," that is, of direct actions that offer a "compelling glimpse of a possible, and better, future, and also—slyly or baldly—point up the poverty of imagination of the world we actually live in" (Boyd, 2012, p. 82). The sincerity conveyed through their deceptive strategies, ironic utterances, and humorous performances informs their desire for a transformative politics based on what Cooper (2013, p. 3) calls "the articulation of the utopian and the everyday"; indeed, the Yes Men are calling for increased attention to "the utopian as an orientation or form of attunement, a *way* of engaging with spaces, objects, and practices that is oriented to the hope, desire, and belief in the possibility of other better worlds." The group's concerted efforts to channel utopian thinking in both theory and practice bespeaks a greater desire on their part to transform humanity and culture in the long term, and more generally, "to lead people and their societies in new directions" (Jamison, 2016, p. 162). Their work presents a useful framework for testing Wright's (2010, p. 4) seemingly paradoxical notion of "real utopias," that is, of the expression of utopian ideals grounded in the raw potential of human imagination and action.

Finally, a core theoretical concern of this book relates to the efficacy of activist tools, tactics, and strategies through the wider lens of media

hoaxing: this book explores how these activist interventions can produce the conditions needed to expose illusions and ideologies, to unmask untruths and various forms of domination and power, and to occasion a new shift "to make possible what might be" (Kompridis, 2015, p. 185).[15]

Book Structure and Organization

The book is structured to present the Yes Men's oeuvre in terms of their evolution as media activists. In what follows, I draw from extensive interviews and media archives, a wide array of local and international news coverage and media discourse (1996—present), and a range of journalism, communication studies, and humanities scholarship. Chapter 1 surveys the broader history and terrain of hoaxing, illustrating the ubiquity of hoaxing as an artful mode of communication. This chapter highlights the varied and complex motivations that underpin (the history of) the act, as well as the predominantly negative characterizations ascribed to the practice, before turning to a more generative account of media hoaxes as welcome deceptions. Chapter 2 presents the Yes Men as key figures in the recent history of media activism. By foregrounding the group's work in connection with their peers and contemporaries, I examine the constraints and possibilities afforded media activists from the late 1990s to the present. In so doing, I explore the Yes Men's innovative approach to "doing activism," especially with regards to media hoaxing. To foreground the analysis of the case study chapters, I also introduce a theoretical framework for examining media hoaxing and media activism through the prism of failure and success.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 serve as the book's core case studies. Given their standing as transmedia artists with a penchant for showcasing their networked aesthetics in relation to diverse media forms and technologies,[16] I address the full breadth of their hoaxing activities by way of discussion of their conference hoaxes, web-based hoaxes, news/journalism-related hoaxes, as well as the depictions of their hoaxes via their documentary films. Each chapter offers a different set of modalities for understanding how the Yes Men go about engineering their wide-ranging actions. To contextualize the evolution of their work and to evaluate the efficacy of their actions, I address their interventions in terms of failure and success. Chapter 3 discusses the merits of failure as a constitutive element from which the group would articulate their most generative ideas. Chapter 4 sheds light on their most defining successes, particularly with respect to their cultivation of a progressive utopian imaginary. Chapter 5 surveys the group's most recent activities; namely, their founding of the Yes Lab for Creative Activism, a training ground for future Yes Men-style projects. This final case study, punctuated by failures and successes, shows an activist group in transition endeavoring to bring

its vision of activist engagement to fruition through a series of training and mentoring collaborations.

Each iteration of their work, in turn, offers a variety of channels to explore hoaxing within a larger ecology of deceptive practices. To study and make intelligible these minor and major shifts within the representational politics of hoaxing is to understand its power in and application to the contemporary moment. Contemporary culture is awash in both productive and destructive, politically progressive and regressive, varieties of hoaxing. This book argues that hoaxing ought to be judged with reference to its practitioners, contextual cues, and larger impacts. Through my study of the Yes Men, I show that hoaxes can contribute to the greater good.

NOTES

1. Both men have used pseudonyms in their Yes Men work: Mike Bonanno (Vamos) and Andy Bichlbaum (Servin). With rare exception in this manuscript, Vamos and Servin are cited using their pseudonyms, as they use their Yes Men names in media accounts and published works.

2. For a sample of foundational scholarly works, see Street (1997), Corner & Pels (2003), Jones (2005), Van Zoonen (2005), Lewis (2006), Day (2011), Gournelos & Greene (2011), Williams & Delli Carpini (2011), Baym & Jones (2013).

3. The importance of laughter, humor, irony, parody, and fun has figured prominently in critical and scholarly discussions of media activism and media criticism. See Day (2008), Dery (1993), Duncombe (2007), Hynes et al. (2007), Jenkins (2006), Jones (2005), Moore (2007), Reilly (2010), Warner (2007), and Wettergren (2009).

4. See Willett (2008), especially chapters 1–2. It is no wonder that two important recent volumes incorporate hard/dark times into their titles: Boler's *Digital media and democracy: Tactics in hard times* (2008) and Gournelos & Greene's *A decade of dark humor: How comedy, irony, and satire shaped post-9/11 America* (2011).

5. As Servin (2015, p. 196) explains, the Yes Men's " 'theory of change' is that by using humor to bring underrepresented issues to large groups of people, or (more usually) to pile on to issues that are newly getting attention, we can 'shift the spectrum of allies'—getting 'passive opponents' (people on the other side of the issue, but only by default, who don't really care that much) to see the issue in a new light and become 'passive allies,' and possibly getting 'passive allies' to become 'active allies' (for this, they need to discover ways they can act on the issue at hand)."

6. While culture jamming is not (and has never been) a coherent movement, it is most often celebrated as a set of anti-consumer activist practices, as evinced and bolstered by the practice's continued champions, Adbusters Magazine. The Yes Men's staunchly anti-corporate stance and their creative and critical sensibilities invite many to describe them as culture jammers.

7. The language invoked here is culled from Tuchman's groundbreaking work, *Making news: A study in the construction of reality* (1978).

8. I am unmoved by hardline techno-determinist accounts (see Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011), particularly with respect to debates surrounding activism, ICTs, and social change. I am sympathetic to the more cultural and phenomenological interpretations of the latter; as Gerbaudo (2012, p. 9) proposes: "Rather than being concerned merely with the efficiency or otherwise of different communication technologies, I pay attention to what activists actually do with them, to the concrete and local 'media practices.'"

9. Elsewhere, Delicath & DeLuca (2003, p. 315) refer to the creation of "image events," that is, of "staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination."

10. See, for example: Bogad (2016); Castells (2015); Dauvergne & LeBaron (2014); Duncombe (2016); Haiven & Khasnabish (2013); Harrebye (2015); Kauffman (2017); Khasnabish & Haiven (2015); Rentschler (2005); Srnicek & Williams (2015); Turbulence Collective (2010); White (2016).

11. Irony can be seen to perform what philosopher Richard Rorty (1989, p. 34) has called "redescription," a metaphoric reconfiguration of virtually every facet of life and culture. For Rorty, redescription is used to uncover contingency and lay bare the social construction of various discourses.

12. See Day (2008) and (2011), especially "Ironic Authenticity" (Ch. 2).

13. Frye (1957, p. 23) goes so far as to say that even when irony misses its objective, it still manages to "hit something in [its] enemy's territory."

14. Ironists tyrannize their publics, Wallace (1997, p. 67) writes, precisely because they are "*impossible to pin down*"; they never quite mean what they say; they use the very tool that exposes the enemy to insulate themselves from critique.

15. See, for example, Griffin & Moylan (2007), Wright (2010), Frase (2016), Jacobsen & Tester (2016), and Jameson & Žižek (2016).

16. The term transmedia's commercial application is also applicable to the Yes Men's work insofar as the group has produced a number of hybrid products that "cross and connect multiple media narrative threads, genres, and forms" (Chen & Olivares, 2014, p. 246).

Chapter 1

Hoaxing in Context

The Dynamics, Motives, and Unevenness of a Ubiquitous Cultural Practice

Hoaxing represents a vast and ambiguous form of human communication. Both the notion and the idea of hoaxing can be traced back to Antiquity, but the term's slipperiness is bound up in its comparatively brief historical arc. While the act or practice is arguably as old as human nature, the term was first introduced in the eighteenth century, a derivative of *hocus* or *hocus pocus* (a conjuror or juggler). It is no wonder that the practice (as well as the terminology) has inspired a broad range of interpretations and definitions. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (OED) refers to hoaxing as "a humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous." Similarly, Collins and Penguin English Dictionaries place deception at the center of their respective entries, placing even greater emphasis on the act of playing a joke or trick on someone.[1] Interestingly, the term enjoys a certain elasticity in its historical uses. While a hoax can most certainly refer to the act of deceiving or inducing one to believe something via an "amusing or mischievous fabrication or fiction" (v.), it may also

- denote the strained relationship between the perpetrator (hoaxer) and the victim (hoaxee) (n.)
- come to describe the nature or essence of a hoax (a hoaxical statement) (adj.)

From these cursory definitions one learns that hoaxing hinges on the perpetuation of a dishonest act or statement—a concealment or misrepresentation of a more accurate state of affairs—one that gives rise to humorous or malicious acts. But hoaxes retain their power, our OED lexicographers insist, because they are expressed "in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim."

From the outset, Joudeh (2009, p. 3) writes, hoaxes produce a doubling effect in that they can refer to the person and/or event, the doer and/or the deed, and the coupling of strange and funny phenomena. Hoaxes require "rhetorical skill, familiarity with and critical distance from audience beliefs, and a sense of play" (Fredal, 2014, p. 74). Indeed, for hoaxes to achieve their goals they must be masterfully constructed and charged with intrigue and humor. The double meanings ascribed to hoaxing can also correspond to the hoaxer's ability to enhance or undermine the plausibility of rhetorical statements, claims, and events (Fredal, 2014, p. 90). Due to their parasitic relationship with the host texts they inhabit, hoaxes can assume whatever form or guise they wish to disrupt: historical accounts, news items, scholarly articles, websites, conference presentations, radio addresses, literary biographies, memoirs, oil paintings, and museum artifacts, among many others.

For Fleming & O'Carroll (2010, p. 45), hoaxes refer to anything that seeks to deceive, with the proviso that some forms are more akin to frauds and scams designed to conceal their existence while others are structured to make a point. Hoaxes are generally synonymous with scams or frauds (with the hoaxer in large measure deemed to be up to no good), but this characterization eschews some of the key differences between similar deceptive practices. Scams, frauds, or cons make use of deception to take advantage of a mark (usually in the interests of securing money), and they go to great lengths to hide the deception; prank artists and jokers leverage deception for fun, with the ultimate goal of entertaining an audience without truly harming the target; hoaxes can be seen to occupy the middle ground between these two poles. Despite the perceived negative charge ascribed to hoaxing, both the practice and its practitioners shed light on the complex ontological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions tied to the intentional dissemination of falsehoods: first, hoaxes often channel both serious and comic motivations; second, they involve some of kind of artful or aesthetically sophisticated deception; third, they can also seek to correct deceit and folly through the deliberate circulation of lies (Fleming & O'Carroll, 2010, p. 58). In the best instances, hoaxes perform a didactic role that seeks to provoke, entertain, educate, and enlighten. To examine the contours of these issues more fully, a better understanding of the structure (or anatomy) of hoaxing is needed.

THE BASIC STRUCTURE (OR ANATOMY) OF A HOAX

As temporal events, hoaxes tend to unfold in stages, revealing a basic structure. Secor & Walsh (2004, p. 72) offer a succinct overview:

> Something is made public, people react, taking it seriously, then somehow the rug is pulled away, and people first suspect, then realize that they have been fooled. Sometimes a state of uncertainty prevails, and the event just fades from public consciousness; sometimes the hoaxer gets unwillingly unmasked much later; sometimes the hoaxer is exposed to public opprobrium; more often, the hoaxer claims credit to construct public notoriety for himself or herself.

Simply put, hoaxes must be public, involve deception, and be staged. At its most basic level, hoaxing operates under the guise of "fooling and revealing" in relation to an audience that understands a given hoax as "the real thing" until they are told otherwise (Walsh, 2006, p. 167). A hoax must first and foremost resemble the real thing and readers must be " 'taken in' by the form and demonstrate a lack of integrity when it comes to evaluating the content" (Collins, 2008, p. 78). As Castagnaro (2009, p. ii) argues, "hoaxes are events consisting of both text and textual effect; hoaxes tend to begin as textual objects and attain the status of hoax only when they are disseminated and generate secondary and tertiary accounts." As Collins (2008, p. 80) asserts, hoaxes are most readily deciphered according to three main loci: ontological ("if the author did not intend a hoax there was no hoax"), consequential (the hoax achieves its intended effect only if the audience believes it has been hoaxed), and epistemological (if the author doesn't confirm or reveal the hoax to be true, no-one can prove otherwise).

As temporal events, hoaxes follow recognizable patterns that undergird whether a given hoax will be successful or not. The hoaxer's first move is to identify a constituency (an individual or group of people that care passionately about the explicit or implied issue). She will then find an unsuspecting champion to parrot and preferably authenticate the story (an ardent amateur or deluded professional). The hoax must not be too perfect—it should remain open to interpretation and contention, and observers should be invited to participate in the discovery, elaboration, and elucidation of the hoax. Importantly, criticism of the hoax will give the latter (and its creator) a much wider berth in the realm of public discourse. The success of a hoax can be measured in several ways:

- by the level of attention, publicity, or notoriety it receives,
- by the degree to which it has been convincingly staged,
- by the extent to which the target has been identified as an object of ridicule,
- by the (perceived) impact it has generated through public scrutiny and debate,
- by virtue of interpellating the audience as the object of entertainment and instruction. (Hancock, 2015, pp. 179–81).

Appraisals of success will vary according to the practitioners, targets, publics, and critics, as well as the selection and championing of certain criteria over others, but the above dynamics bring us closer to evaluating both the success and shortcomings of hoaxes more generally. Or, to put it more bluntly, "the hoax either *works or it does not work*" (Fleming & O'Carroll, 2010, p. 58).

Hoaxing has thus become an umbrella term for instances where intentions to deceive occur in a one-to-many communication setting, inspiring a host of "new medial challenges or epistemological insecurities" (Busse & Hübler, 2012, p. 12). For contemporary 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."[2] 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 story), and ultimately the audience they seek to court or influence (anyone privy to the hoax). As cultural theorist Richard Dyer (2007, p. 29) suggests, "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." To do this, the hoaxer must take advantage of the individual's ardent wish to believe or be swayed of something. The relationships cultivated by the hoaxer are thus 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.[3]

Once the hoax has fooled (or at the very least bypassed) gatekeepers—and most importantly, once the prank has been purposefully revealed by the perpetrators—those on the wrong end of the deception will actively seek clarification, explanation, or analysis. Some news organizations and journalists will relish the prank because the deception offers them an opportunity to pursue issues that may only rarely attract media attention, given the narrow frame with which profit-seeking news organizations now frame current events.[4] 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).[5] What's interesting 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 hoaxer all the while trivializing his/her 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 explain the validity of his/her actions. More than this, if the issue at hand raises enough interest or causes enough controversy, the 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.

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. With a long and robust variety of hoaxes and hoaxers to draw from historically, there is certainly no shortage of examples, and the motivations for and rationales behind hoaxing are at once numerous and complex.[6] Ancient rhetoric, for example, is filled with tales of trickery and incredulity: Herodotus is widely known to have shared accounts of stories that he himself did not believe or could not confirm to be true, but circulated these tales because they were instructive, entertaining, and useful, with an eye toward allowing his readers to accept or reject their veracity (Fredal, 2014, p. 74). In the latter part of this chapter, I delve more deeply into the motives and guiding imperatives that inform these practices historically.

With the makeup and anatomy of the hoax now firmly in place, it is difficult to deny the presence of certain pleasures at the heart of this enterprise, especially on the part of the audience: the pleasure of being deceived or of believing the implausible, amazing, or unexplainable; the pleasure of discovering the ruse and of observing the hoax's inner workings; the pleasure of watching others who are fooled (Fredal, 2014, p. 77–78). Add to this the notion that people are generally fascinated by hoaxes—not to mention, frauds, tricks, pranks, mockery, hearsay, lampoons, and other sensationalist tales—and the stage is set to enter into a conversation about the pervasive role deception and falsity play in everyday life. Human beings are all unwittingly and perhaps uncomfortably implicated in this realm because human experiences are at times colored by deceitful and deceptive acts (well-intentioned or not), such as white lies, elaborate ruses, or practical jokes. People regularly serve as fodder for and/or the agents of gossip; they 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 literary frauds (Clifford Irving, James Frey).

Given this susceptibility to engage in (and with) these kinds of everyday interaction, it seems crucial that some attempt be made to decipher why exactly these activities not only continue to punctuate everyday life, but also why they are encouraged. In what follows, I contextualize why hoaxes retain their power, before engaging the various incentives and motives that underpin hoaxing (both historically and at the current moment). To prepare the way for my analysis of the Yes Men's wide-ranging approaches to media hoaxing, I also situate hoaxing culture in relation to journalism and news dissemination as a means through which to evaluate the consequences and contributions of this practice.

THE ATTRACTION TO HOAXING: SELF-DECEPTION, LYING, AND BULLSHIT

Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lie in a Extra-Moral Sense" (1873), a posthumously published fragment, offers an excellent starting point for beginning to untangle the broader cultural attraction to hoaxing. In it, Nietzsche depicts an unflattering view of the human species—feeble intellects, unreliable systems of knowledge, unwavering dogma, elusive searches for truth and meaning, and so on. But Nietzsche's steadfast critique against humanity is instructive in terms of thinking about how people's everyday lives are structured to realize trivial goals and inauthentic pursuits. As he argues, human beings are "deeply immersed in illusions and dream images," making them perfectly adept to explore and abuse their "chief powers in simulation" (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 45). As a result, individuals 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 others.

Despite the apparent advantages associated with carrying out various kinds of deception (namely, self-preservation), individuals do not readily dismiss notions of (lower-case) truth—truth does hold a vaunted place across civilizations and cultures—but they do "forever buy illusions for truth" (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 43). This is where Nietzsche's argument helps clarify contemporary culture's fascination with hoaxes: if one accepts 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 (Nietzsche, 1982, p. 45). As McLeod (2014, p. 4) puts it, "people buy into [deceptions] when they resonate with their own deeply entrenched worldviews." Human beings want to lie and deceive, convey truth and beauty, all on their own terms. While Nietzsche offers some insight into why we might paradoxically embrace and reject various hoaxing activities, it's necessary to examine some of the finer points of deception by briefly surveying the terrain of lies and lying.

In *This Means This, This Means That* (2012), semiotician Sean Hall offers a playful entry point to the topic with this unassuming sentence: *That's a good haircut*. Because it is difficult at times to distinguish between truth and falsity, Hall considers the different inflections and modalities of speech one might attach to a statement of this kind. He devises 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—the haircut has been skillfully done—and the intent behind the statement is to relay the fact. One may also show genuine appreciation for a friend's Travis Bickle-style haircut (the mohawk), thereby presenting a value judgment based on what one deems fashionable or aesthetically pleasing. For those quick to say (with tongue firmly planted in cheek) the exact opposite of what they mean ("That's a good [insert terrible example] haircut!"), they can be seen to embrace their ironic sensibilities. Lastly, one may choose to lie outright in expressing the sentiment. If, for example, your mother/best friend/significant other asks you to comment on an 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 to ensure that s/he will continue to parade the new hairstyle confidently around town.

Hall's example illustrates the complexity of everyday interactions through a seemingly straightforward statement; he 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 one's thoughts. As he puts it, "Lies are like truths in being almost never pure and rarely simple" (Hall, 2012, p. 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 also to develop strategies for interpreting these conflicting modes of address. For example, misinterpreting the phrase "I love you" can have disastrous consequences if you fail to draw the correct conclusion (i.e., buying an engagement ring based on a platonic "I love you").

Indeed the stakes are high because of the pervasiveness and prevalence of these modes of communicating: "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 1). So begins philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt's widely read essay "On Bullshit" (2005). 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." As Frankfurt (2005, p. 61) puts it,

- The liar understands his relationship to truth, but chooses to express the opposite (s/he may very well know where your car keys are, but wants you to stay; hence, s/he doesn'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."

Somewhere amidst a Nietzschean love of self-deception, a propensity to accord indeterminate meaning to things and sayings, and a love of lies and bullshit lies a satisfactory answer to why it is human beings champion, denounce, love, vilify, contest, and celebrate all manners of hoaxing.

Nowhere is the attraction to this kind of play more evident than in the realm of arts and letters. Dramatizing the interplay between fantasy and reality (and between the authentic and inauthentic) constitutes an important part of the artist's mode of inquiry and critique. For example, questions of authenticity, sincerity, and legitimacy abound across the realms of literature and poetry, as writers create personae, invent masks, deploy artifice, and construct imaginative spaces that claim (at least implicitly) some purchase on

truth within the bounds of human experience (Hetherington, 2012). Such an undertaking illustrates just how fluid (if arbitrary) these binaries are, illuminating the inherent difficulties in deciphering between the real/artificial and the authentic/inauthentic.[7] Indeed, we confront a legitimate conceptual problem when we begin to conflate these binaries because the real is in the process of incorporating the fantastic, the artificial, and the inauthentic within its larger systems of representation.

Žižek (1994, p. 21) argues that "reality is never directly 'itself,'" in that it assumes the "structure of a fiction [that is] symbolically (or, as some sociologists put it, 'socially') constructed." Far from merely reproducing misleading, deceptive, and "empty signifiers," this realm of "symbolic fictions," Žižek writes in *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997, p. 94), "enables us to adapt ourselves to new situations, radically to change our self-perception." These practices raise larger questions about the premium society places on truth in its democratic exchanges and about the anxieties that circulate when falsity can pass as truth. Importantly, the pervasive co-mingling between real and imaginary extends to all provinces of contemporary media culture, precisely because "any kind of cultural experience is always already constructed, mediated and performed" (Voigts-Virchow, 2008, p. 175). With simulation, fakery, forgery, and deception constituting key characteristics of the artistic and aesthetic field (Geier, 1999), the presence of deceptive stories muddies the channels of information, just as it presents clearly defined challenges at the levels of representation and epistemology (Walsh, 2006).

FACT + FICTION = FACTUAL FICTIONS: MAPPING TIES TO NEWS AND JOURNALISM

Whereas the notion of distinguishing between fact and fiction is a distinctly modern enterprise (one that carries a great deal of importance in the modern era), drawing such distinctions in the medieval period was insignificant, if non-existent. As Boese (2002, p.7) 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." History has shown that faith and belief held greater weight than skepticism and criticism. During the Renaissance, the emergence of journalism would challenge the hegemony of blind faith and belief through the more rigorous application of skeptical thought and expression.

Journalism occupies the single greatest arena in which hoaxers have sought to define themselves. Before unpacking the varied motives and incentives attached to different kinds of hoaxing, it is now crucial to foreground journalism's pivotal role in making the former such a pervasive phenomenon.

To appreciate the historical significance of the relationship between fact and fiction, a brief overview of Early Modern accounts of journalistic reporting is warranted. 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 (1983, p. 71) 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 mode of information, and prose replaced poetry as the primary vehicle for describing the world and ongoing events. 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" (as cited in Davis, 1983, p. 75). The mixing of truth and falsity would become increasingly problematic due to growing expectations of what novels and news were meant to offer the public—the news, factual discourse; the novel, fictional discourse.

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" (Jenner, 1997, p. 71), an undertaking that gave the state apparatus (or elected officials) some recourse in the event of invented or unfounded slanderous accusations; legal cha(lle)nges 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.[8]

These crises would return with greater force at the turn of the twentieth century, a period that saw the pervasive influence of two competing journalistic models that sought to define the practice of 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 centered on providing "satisfying aesthetic experiences," the latter emphasizing the "truth value of news"

(Schudson, 1978, p. 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 ensured stories of questionable accuracy and integrity would continue to reach to a mass readership.

The Function of the (Eighteenth Century) Hoax

Perceptions of hoaxing have shifted gradually over time. In the eighteenth century, what is most commonly referred to as the golden age of 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, 2002, p.29). These eighteenth century practices stood to firmly counter the lingering medieval superstitions of the age. Whereas the eighteenth century hoaxer was more often than not committed to Enlightenment ideals, medieval hoaxing existed in large part to cheat, dupe, scam, trick, fool, swindle, and deceive.

It is perhaps due to the ambiguities and uncertainties created by the circulation of various (un)truths that eighteenth century writers began to deploy hoaxing as a critical tactic to entertain and enlighten their readers. The general idea among 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 their 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" (as cited in Fox, 2003, p. 113). 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.[9] Despite the strong ethical currents running through his work, I'll draw from two infamous Swift hoaxes to address 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 literary ruses also illustrate some of the defining grey areas associated with hoaxing. With the "Bickerstaff Hoax" and "A Modest Proposal," Swift would establish a dominant frame for positioning the hoaxer as either righteous villain or champion of morals and ethics.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: SWIFT'S "BICKERSTAFF" AND "MODEST" HOAXES

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) (Swift, 1871, p. 544). 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" (1871, p. 544). The almanac hoax was meant to materialize as a very imaginative April Fool's Day jest in which Bickerstaff proclaims that the famous astrologer Partridge will in fact die by way of a raging fever (Mayhew, 1964). 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" (1871, p. 544).

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 29, 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, a national celebrity, still very much alive, was treated to further public humiliation when no one heeded his second attempt to out Bickerstaff (printed on April 1, or April Fool's Day). Instead, Londoners were all too eager to accept that Bickerstaff's predictions were true (Mayhew, 1964, p. 274).[10] 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 (Mayhew, 1964, p. 272). 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 perceived as a quack and a bully,[11] 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, however, 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; as McTague (2011, p. 84) asserts, "Partridge's life and work are now viewed through the prism of Swift's hoax." Whatever Swift's real motivations, the outcomes were dramatic and the implications far-reaching: a hoax could serve as a powerful brand of corrective, but it could also work to destroy a man's reputation and livelihood.

If the Bickerstaff saga doesn't fully convey the thorny ethical dimensions of hoaxing, Swift's "A Modest Proposal" represents an even clearer distillation of the larger stakes at play. To this day, Swift's essay (published anonymously in 1729) remains one of the most poignant indictments of injustice ever written. As the work'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" (2004, p. 227) 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. (Swift, 2004, p. 228)

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 cold and calculating precision. 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 endeavor 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) (Swift, 2004, p. 229).[12]

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 [is] making a dark comment on the inhumanity of the rich toward the poor" (Boese, 2002, p. 33).

Rather than merely attack a figure who stands in for an impoverished 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 unconscionable and avoidable. In these instances, Swift relies upon the cloaks of pseudonymity, anonymity, and/or irony to peddle deceptions 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 concerns he wished to express (a feature that will figure prominently in the hoaxes described in this book).

FOREGROUNDING HOAXING MOTIVES IN 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* (1941), 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 center 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 alludes to the intricacies of deception at work in literature (Irving's infamous "autobiography" of Howard Hughes), art (de Hory's celebrated forgeries of Modigliani, Picasso, and Matisse), and in radio and film (Welles' own era-defining *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 collectors, museums, and galleries. To paraphrase François Reichenbach in *F*, 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. In wedding these artist biographies together, *F for Fake* illuminates many of the machinations and motivations that drive artists to carry out hoaxes.

And yet the motives and rationales for hoaxing are seldom 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 (Hughes hadn't been seen in public for over fifteen years). In sum, Irving writes a fake biography of the world famous recluse to produce what he deemed would be the defining novel of the twentieth century. His 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 have been largely dismissed and the question of money, that is, the economic and financial gain tied to Irving's hoax, remains central. 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 or artistic 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.[13]

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. 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 artworld expert, it must meet all of the criteria of the original to be institutionally validated. As de Hory himself explains in *F for Fake*, 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, museums, and private collections, 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: first, virtuoso that he was, he could easily reproduce a Modigliani, a Picasso, or a Matisse and, second, 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.[14]

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 record of how new media have the potential to shape communication environments. As Welles (1955) himself 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 predigested 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 (alleged) moral panic[15] 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.[16] 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 classic case study 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.

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 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 practice. 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.

HOAXES EXIST FOR A PURPOSE: HOAXING AND MASS MEDIA

The history of hoaxing across mass media systems is rich and varied, illuminating a complex web of human desires. No matter the hoax, newspapers would provide the very catalyst for a successful stunt to capture the popular imagination through front-page spectacles. 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.

"Hoaxes seem to generate greater controversy when newspapers find themselves at moments of change" (Castagnaro, 2009, p. 266). In 1830s America the newspaper industry was revitalized by way of a series of cheap daily papers (the Penny Press), a move that would introduce timely news as "a purchasable commodity" (Castagnaro, 2009, p. 66) and would shape and expand mass audiences. 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 (Boese, 2002, p. 54; Thornton, 2000).

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 professional 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.[17] 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 great insight into the cleverly deceptive tactics developed by journalists and editors to simultaneously attract readers and discredit rivals.[18] This brief case study offers a compelling look at how the Penny Press would anticipate "a paradox of competitive, market-driven journalism; the need for new and sensational stories, yet the need to uphold some principle of reality or truth" (Castagnaro, 2012, p. 255).

The greatest proponents of mass media hoaxing—P. T. Barnum, Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst—ushered in a new era where sensationalism (Yellow Journalism) was used in the interests of selling newspapers and promoting professional entertainment. 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, newsmakers of the 1890s prove to be almost universally concerned with spectacle and sensationalism. Barnum, Pulitzer, and Randolph Hearst 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.

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 (Harris, 1973). He was just as confident 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 (Farquhar, 2005, pp. 11–14). 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 behavior) was cast as entertainment, the deceptions were tolerated, if not totally embraced and encouraged. As Boorstin (1961, pp. 209–10) recounts, "Barnum's great discovery was not how easy it was to deceive the public, but rather, how much the public enjoyed being deceived. Especially if they could see how it was being done. They were flattered that anyone would use such ingenuity to entertain them." Barnum's entire career was founded on the notion that audiences cultivate the desire to witness spectacles and entertainers/hoaxers exploit that interest at every profitable turn.

Media Hoaxing as Welcome Deceptions

Contemporary media hoaxing shares with its historical precursors a deft ability to initiate public discourse with regards to both trivial and important matters; 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 fascination 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.[19] 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 or hostility. To do so, however, is to miss an opportunity to examine the politics embedded in this specialized kind of labor and in this artful mode of public discourse. Contemporary media hoaxes form a peculiar genre because they are almost always meant to be deciphered or discovered. As Fredal (2014, p. 78) explains: "A hoax that deceives no one fails. But to an equal degree, a hoax that is never discovered also fails. Its truth wants out." Media hoaxers such as 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 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*), denounce the unseemliness of breastfeeding (*Citizens Against Breastfeeding*), publicize the merits of a national fat tax ("A fat tax is a fair tax"), popularize professionalized panhandling (*The School for Beggars*), bring an end to bird pornography ("Stop bird porn"), and other such deviously concocted pranks.[20] Given such outlandish and diverse subject matter, it is challenging to pinpoint Abel's overarching 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, Yellow

Journalism-era-like stories that would be right at home 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 its unmistakably absurdist, satirical tone. With Abel, humor 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 (2012) puts it:

> I use humor as the underlying theme in all my hoaxes. It's really deadpan comedy. But a serious demeanor 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.

As Mark Twain (is said to have) once quipped, "It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled."

Indeed Abel's own rationale for his work as a professional media hoaxer is 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 prompts 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."[21] 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 offers audiences the opportunity to evaluate and compare the integrity of these type stories, as well as the credibility of the news organizations that 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" (as cited in Boyle, 1992). 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, props, and pre-packaged footage (press releases and video content). The advertisement quickly drew the attention of several New York City television stations, the *Soho News*, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the Bureau of Animal Affairs, and the New York City Police Department 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 cited in Harold, 2004, p. 194). 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 cited in Boyle, 1992). 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" (as cited in Harold, 2004, p. 197).

An equally combative Abel vindicates his desire to jump in and create havoc across mainstream media precisely due to its traditionally ruthless behavior: "They deserve to be pricked once in a while. Their pomposity and insensitivity are overwhelming. The media lies and lies and lies."[22] 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 a given 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, 2008, p. 192). While the initial power of the media hoax stems from its ability to capture the attention and imagination of the public, its true potential lies in its capacity to incite democratic possibilities and to question the health and vitality of contemporary news media.

Figures like Abel and Skaggs "create stories that are so unusual that reporters are almost anxious to cover them" (Fedler, as cited in Boyle, 1992). 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" (Boyle, 1992). 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.[23]

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 endeavor.

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.

One of the most powerful outcomes of this cultural practice may indeed reside in what 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 (2006, p. 169) 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." It is precisely in this way that hoaxing—as well as repeated exposure to hoaxes—prepares the way for a greater understanding of the ways in which news and information dissemination not only operate but evolve through journalism and corporate public relations. What's more, hoaxing as progressive media activist praxis can also be seen as a tool for sharpening the overall efficacy of political critique by introducing oft overlooked issues, debates, and ideas largely missing in mainstream media reportage.

Importantly Abel, Skaggs, and their historical precursors 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" (as cited in Van de Winkel & Reilly, 2014). The remaining chapters map the Yes Men-engineered media hoax as a highly adaptable and polymorphous activist practice. Through this discussion, I demonstrate that, however contentious, variable, unpredictable, or (un)successful, the group's hoaxing activities have helped shape a powerful utopian imaginary that actively seeks to question and reform the contemporary moment.

NOTES

1. See Garmonsway & Simpson (1965), Makins (1991), and Soanes (2004).
2. A. Abel (personal communication, June 1, 2012).
3. 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. In an example to follow, I describe the great lengths to which art forger Elmyr de Hory and literary hoaxer Clifford Irving each went to keep their hoaxes hidden from view.
4. A recent book by Boczkowski & Mitchelstein (2013) explores the dynamics at work in the selection of news items and in the preferences given to certain types

of news stories. The work is noteworthy because it illustrates just how divergent preferences between reading publics and news organizations have become.

5. The best and most comprehensive analysis of this process appears in Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom (1985).

6. For a general overview of rumors, gossip, urban legends, frauds, and hoaxes, see Boese (2002), Farquhar (2005), Rosnow & Fine (1976), Solove (2007), Spacks (1985), Stewart & Strathern (2004), and Van de Winkel & Reilly (2014).

7. One of the most visceral reflections on the subject appears in Philip's *A genealogy of resistance: And other essays* (1997, p. 141): "Fiction is about telling lies, but you must be scathingly honest in telling those lies. Poetry is about truth telling, but you need the lie—the artifice of the form to tell those truths."

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. Within weeks of its publication, thousands of authorized and pirated copies of the *Predictions* and were making the rounds across all ranks of society in Dublin and London.

11. To be even more precise, "the customary image of Partridge is that of a bigoted anti-Catholic Whig, and a quack-practitioner of a bogus science" (McTague, 2011, p. 85).

12. 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 endeavoring 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."

13. 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" (Brown, 2007).

14. 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, 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, 2011).

15. As one study of the period suggests, the broadcast was said to have disturbed an estimated two million people in the Eastern United States, the greatest mass panic materializing in the Greater New York area. For the original study, see Cantril (1940). For divergent accounts of the broadcast's larger impact, see Heyer (2003).

16. 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 figure, 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 (Campbell Soup) for its weekly program. Such is the unevenness attributed to hoaxing in the realm of art.

17. For decisive accounts of the Great Moon Hoax (and Richard Adams Locke's orchestration of the hoax), see Castagnaro (2012), Copeland (2007) and Thornton (2000). Such tactics have proven foundational to tabloid publications like *National Enquirer* and (the now defunct) *News of the World*. It is totally apt to think of the *New York Sun* as a foundational precursor to today's ever-popular tabloid media.

18. In an interesting variation on this theme, *The Onion* would publish a brilliant article in 2009—"Conspiracy Theorist Convinces Neil Armstrong Moon Landing Was Faked"—a hoax-within-a-hoax.

19. Fredal (2014, p.75) writes: "More recently, the study of what I call the hoax has proceeded under or evolved into a number of related concepts, including humbug, legendary, pranks, and satire, frauds and cons, self-reflexive or parafiction, détournement, culture jamming, interventionist art, reality hacking, estrangement, skaz, simulacra, and more."

20. Many of Abel's hoaxes are featured in the 2005 documentary, *Abel Raises Cain*. The film is co-directed by Abel's daughter, Jenny, who seeks admiringly to unravel her father's motivations for dedicating his life to the hoax.

21. A. Abel (personal communication, June 1, 2012).

22. A. Abel (personal communication, June 1, 2012).

23. The Yes Men attempt in certain instances to offset this problem by making reporters/journalists complicit in the telling of the story.

Chapter 2

The Intersections of Hoaxing, Journalism, and Activism

Hoaxing is a practice ripe for frauds, artists, writers, and performers of all kinds. Amateur and professional hoaxers alike are motivated to participate in the creation of deceptive storyworlds because they stand to benefit from the tales they weave. Whereas the previous chapter establishes the porous quality of the hoax (its sizeable reach across art, entertainment, print, radio, television, mass and Internet media), I now turn to a discussion of hoaxing within the realm of media activism. Media activists have increasingly experimented with hoaxing as a means of simultaneously signaling the problems with information and media systems and have harnessed these platforms in the interests of pushing forward struggles for greater social justice. As I argue throughout the book, hoaxes engineered by media activists perform three important roles: they prepare the way for understanding the current state of contemporary news media; they serve as important tools for sharpening the overall efficacy of political critique; finally, they give shape to a powerful utopian imaginary. In what follows, I establish a frame for contextualizing why the practice has become such a central facet of the Yes Men's activist politics. This approach represents but one of many competing modes of activist praxis, but it is an insightful sphere of activity from which to better situate the failures and successes of creative activist interventions. Because hoaxing and media activism are routinely understood through the prism of failure and success, this chapter also contextualizes the politics of failure and success at work within these broader cultural practices.

Building on the previous chapter, I foreground the Yes Men's work as politically motivated media hoaxers and explain the uses and politics of media hoaxing in their work. To explain the ubiquity of media hoaxing more generally and its centrality to the Yes Men more specifically, I first address the attendant crises of modern-day journalism: the problems tied to corporate

media ownership and conglomeration, advertising revenues, the devaluation of journalism/journalists, and the prevalence of fake news. I also present a brief overview of media activist responses to twenty-first century news media, highlighting the efforts of culture jammers, hacktivists, media advocates, and creative activists, so as to explain the uses and stakes of activist interventions in these pockets of dominant, capitalist, neoliberal society. Finally, I contextualize these activities in relation to scholarly and activist accounts of what constitutes failure and success in an effort to evaluate the shortcomings, limitations, and possibilities of media hoaxing within and beyond activist communities.

JOURNALISM IN CRISIS

Media activists circulate their work in the interests of galvanizing public support in favor of stimulating critique, debate, and action on broader (social justice) issues. To better appreciate this strand of media activism, an overview of the problems and crises of mainstream news media is needed to highlight the risks, incentives, and opportunities afforded media hoaxers. Global media conglomeration has created space for lax editorial practices, speculative reportage, and fake news to reach a fever pitch across news media, producing the conditions for media activists to experiment with hoaxing in the creation of mediagenic campaigns.

Contemporary scholarship situates journalism as "the sense-making practice of modernity" (Hartley, 1996, p. 32), as well as "one of the primary instruments through which the culture is preserved and recorded and, therefore, available to be reconsulted" (Carey, 1993, p. 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, 2004, p. 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. 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, 2008, p. 12). Over the past thirty years, Ben Bagdikian has charted these 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 (2004, p. 3) 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." To better contextualize the discussion, I offer a snapshot of how media ownership and conglomeration have changed the face of contemporary 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), and so on.

The most powerful transnational media corporations (TNMCs) own or control the lion's share of symbolic and material resources needed to produce, market, and distribute media products and content the world over (Mirrlees, 2013, p. 87).[1] 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. The commodification of news, dramatized through a clash of capitalist and journalistic imperatives, has profoundly compromised the citizenry's collective ability to make "educated political choices that can improve our own quality of life and the greater social good" (Jackson, 2009, p. 150). The impacts of ownership restructuring for the media system are widely felt: for example, pressure from the parent company leads a given news organization to go easy on politicians and government to secure the protections, subsidies, and policies it desires, to say nothing of the organization's capacity to critique said parent company (McChesney & Nichols, 2010, p. 41). The number of media outlets and range of distinctive voices are extremely limited, thereby diminishing "the possibility of a vigorous exchange of competing perspectives" (Freedman, 2014, p. 51). Media power is thus exercised through complex ownership structures and configurations; not to be outdone, the profit motive greatly informs another important facet of news media production: editorial practices.

Editorial Practices: Context-Free Information and the Race to Publish First

Neil Postman (1992, p. 67) 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." In today's age of Big Data and information overload (what philosopher Paul Virilio [2000, p. 48] 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.[2] In North America, online users get their news from Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps, microblogging websites, and at times, from actual news websites.[3] These aggregated news platforms deliver information to all manner of tethered or mobile devices. But, as Postman (1992, p. 65) observes of the telegraph, changes of this kind accelerate the proliferation of "context-free information" and transforms information into "a 'thing' that [can] be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning."

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 (Starkman, 2013). While it would be misguided 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 deciphered in a number of ways: according to the Pew Research Center, 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,[4] and the Twitterization of journalism has encouraged the proliferation of 140 word character news items.[5] Postman (1985) would argue that these changes to the character of our information have the power to radically shift the epistemological foundations of a culture.[6] If 41 second news stories or 140 character news items come to dominate how we understand the world around us, in what capacity can citizens truly apprehend the complexity of their surroundings?

With the constant push to produce bite-sized 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 coaxing readers to procure newspapers and to

click-through to news content. 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 (Cohen, 2016, p. 14).[7] 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 (currently catering to upwards of 25 million unique visitors per month) (Klein, 2013). 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" (as cited in Somaiya & Kaufman, 2013). To read *Gawker* thus requires a greater degree of reader skepticism and sophistication to separate truth from falsity, fact from fiction. 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" (as cited in Somaiya & Kaufman, 2013). Truth and veracity become liabilities in the march toward securing greater and greater pageviews. Perhaps the most fitting motto for accuracy in reporting seems to be "publish first, correct if necessary" (an interesting variation of the Apollonian precept, "Shoot first, ask questions later") (Coffee, 2014).

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 *New York Times* journalists convincingly argue, the implications are clear: "if a story is viral, truth may be taking a beating" (Somaiya & Kaufman, 2013). Such viral stories are on the rise, attracting millions of pageviews and encouraging the news establishment to produce news items of this ilk. Somaiya & Kaufman (2013) 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. As *Reuters* journalist Felix Salmon (2013) 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 colors

to travel with unprecedented freedom through both traditional and emerging gatekeeping establishments. As Chris Hedges (2010, p. 207) has argued, contemporary news media have "ushered in a culture in which facts, opinions, lies, and fantasy are interchangeable," a move that has signaled 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*); whereas taste-making websites broker primarily 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.

SPECULATIVE JOURNALISM

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. Gómez-Mompart (2009, p. 56) likens speculative journalism to a superior version of tabloid news, if only because it is now firmly embedded in the everyday reportage of so-called prestige news media. Just as the term speculation carries economic and financial connotations, so too does speculative journalism: under this model, news is understood as "an intangible asset with exchange value once its useful value has been cancelled out." Speculative journalism is now an important feature of daily coverage on CNN, one of the prestige media companies to which Gomez-Mompart refers. In a moment of great insight, *The Daily Show* (*TDS*) comedian Jon Stewart addresses the destructive nature of this practice by critiquing CNN's daylong coverage of a mass shooting in Washington. The *TDS* segment, aptly titled "Wrongnado" (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, but at no time do they refrain from reporting highly speculative information. Of these exchanges, CNN anchor 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."[8] These brash on-air acknowledgements—that they should not be engaging in this kind of journalistic practice—are

leveraged because they serve as unapologetic 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 were also 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

Fake news has become so ubiquitous a term 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 since the 2000s. With fabricated news stories from the *New Republic*[9] and the *New York Times*[10] to fake news journalists infiltrating the White House[11]—not to mention news media's questionable coverage of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction[12]—questions about the trustworthiness of news and contemporary journalism have loomed in the foreground. Add to this the alarming broadcast of deceptive print and video news releases 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 & Price, 2006).

In April 2006, the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD, 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.

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. In *Trust Us, We're Experts!* (2001), Rampton & Stauber 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" (Rampton & Stauber, 2001, p. 23). "There is nothing inherently deceptive about issuing a news release," Rampton & Stauber (2001, p. 22) 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.

In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, a maelstrom of critical commentary has re-emerged on the unprecedented circulation of fake news stories in/across popular and mainstream media. The propagation of fake news stories across far-reaching and influential sites such as Facebook quickly became a focal point in mainstream media news coverage following Donald Trump's election win. The first wave of reportage framed Facebook's role in stark terms, positioning the company as helping "spread misinformation and fake news stories that influenced how the American electorate voted" (Isaac, 2016). Elsewhere, one of the most newsworthy themes to appear following Trump's election involved a chorus of commenters citing Facebook as a major (if not the sole) proponent of Trump's win.[13] Far from merely serving as a tool of state, corporate, and political propaganda, fake news should be firmly situated as a ubiquitous mode of public discourse that is leveraged and deployed by a wide range of actors, including propagandists, hoaxers, hackers, partisans, and activists. The same mechanisms that push the journalists at Gawker to hastily publish without verifying the credibility or veracity of stories create the conditions for interested parties to circulate hoaxes, false information, fake news, and a whole range of other ethically-suspect activities.

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 the Yes Men summarize the issue, speaking in part to address why the group has 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 newspapers 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. (as cited in Linkins, 2009)

Given the troubling state of the news and information climate in North America, I now turn to a discussion of how media activism responds directly to media hegemony and crisis to articulate its own strategies and tactics of information dissemination.

BROADER CURRENTS OF MEDIA ACTIVISM

The systematic exclusion of activists from meaningful participation in news media discourse in recent years has stirred global movements to openly challenge conventional information dissemination models through the creation of alternative channels and practices (Harrebye, 2016, p. 130). Media activists today have turned to hoaxing as a means of intervening in the battles over public perception and political 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. Access to media power is "highly unequally distributed and remains out of reach for most people" (Freedman, 2014, p. 145). Mainstream media coverage of social justice issues are regularly ignored or dismissed (White, 2016, p. 122). Furthermore, social movements may not receive favorable coverage due to ideological reasons or institutional logics, with journalists disliking or disagreeing with a movement's politics, and corporate news media marginalizing movements so as not to jeopardize their business-dependent advertising revenues (Tufekci, 2017, p. 30). Radical activists are routinely cast as non-conformist groups that exacerbate social anxieties, threaten economic stability, and undermine national security (Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014, pp. 74–75).

Media power is thus leveraged and negotiated on the part of multiple social actors competing in a dynamic and hotly contested terrain to gain some control over the representational space (Dutta, 2011, p. 270). Gaining public visibility through mainstream media (MSM) has always proven difficult, often forcing activists to make concessions about how they present themselves publicly. Poell & van Dijck (2015, p. 527) have gone so far as to suggest that activist groups have historically been cornered into "catering to mass media's need for spectacle, conflict, and flamboyant newsworthy individuals."

Because MSM do not "easily represent demands, movements, and frames which are inchoate, subtle, and most deeply subversive of [their] core principles" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 271), these groups must resort to constructing spectacles that enable them to bypass an otherwise impenetrable gatekeeping establishment.[14] In so doing, media activists have diligently worked to express a "politics by other means" (Flacks, as cited in Milan, 2016, p. 109). Media theorists position these activists as social actors that highlight points of view not normally presented in mainstream media, serve communities rarely catered to by mainstream media, create and disseminate ideas in ways that are intentionally out of step with mainstream practices, organize and operate using alternative frameworks, and advocate for social change and the transformation of existing structures (Dutta, 2011, p. 272; Waltz, 2005).

Without spectacular interventions and alternative infrastructure, their participation in public life would be more or less muted because they would not be able to reach larger audiences. Nowhere was this phenomenon more readily confronted than in the anti-globalization movement's creation of its own dedicated communications infrastructure. Due to a perceived inability to develop communications infrastructure outside capitalist structures of profit and accumulation and as a response to the censorship of radical news content, anti-globalization activists championed the motto, "Don't hate the media, become the media" to create a standalone alternative communications paradigm on the Internet (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 139).

Because infrastructural barriers to digital news media platforms (costs, maintenance, specialization, and expertise) have been greatly reduced, participation in news and information dissemination is no longer solely dominated by rich and powerful actors, such as empires, states, and media conglomerates (Kaempf, 2017, p. 105; Tufekci, 2017, p. 205). Russell (2016, p. 6) puts it this way: "Corporations win battles, governments win battles, but publics win battles, too." By recasting the uses of networked communication around alternative interests and values and by engaging in the production of concordant mass media messages, writes Castells (2015, p. 9), media activists are engaged in the articulation of *counterpower*, that is, "the deliberate attempt to change power relationships." These experiments to harness media in the service of global social justice have been likened to "promoting reform-from-below of the communications system" in a much broader effort to bring an "emancipatory communication activism" into being (Milan, 2017, pp. 108–9).

Media activists have thus pioneered highly adaptive styles that have opened up new avenues to critique the failures of corporate rule and state governance, all the while performing the broader practice of what Meikle (2002, p. 132) calls "turn[ing] familiar signs into question marks." The object and focus of their critique is on "media-related injustice," by which both content- and

structure-related injustice is widespread (homogenizing discourses and coercive corporate media arrangements/relations) (Milan, 2017, p. 114). Their goals are at once implicit and explicit: to question the legitimacy of images and information circulating across mainstream media; to exert pressure on global media outlets to gain coverage on critical issues; and to create alternative narratives and interpretations of global events (Dutta, 2011, p. 270).[15]

As we speak, there is no shortage of oppressed individuals, communities, and citizen groups the world over. 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 activist groups to advocate for change. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Yes Men's activist contemporaries were contributing to a stunning display of anti-consumer activist interventions such as anti-advertising promotions, graffiti and underground street art, defacement and alteration, billboard liberation, street parties, and flash mobs[16]—all designed to interrogate capitalist consumption and accumulation through highly creative tactics. Some of the most provocative, attention-grabbing, media-savvy and politically motivated examples have been put forward by the likes of Guerrilla Girls (feminist art activists), Barbie Liberation Front (culture jammers), Critical Art Ensemble (tactical media artists/theorists), Reverend Billy (performance artist), Reclaim the Streets (civic activists), Billionaires for Bush (ironic activists), Banksy (graffiti artist), and Pussy Riot (feminist activist collective), among many others. In the online realm, activists were testing the political uses of the Internet through a variety of practices (from electronic civil disobedience to virtual sit-ins to hacking government websites), "seeking solutions in software, in the search for a specific technological fix to a social problem" (Meikle, 2002, p. 141). The social problems identified by activist communities were wide-ranging, cast through the lens of civil/human rights, local political decision-making, economic policy (Earl & Kimport, 2011), and often hinging on corporate or state abuses of power.[17]

In more recent history, civic and activist resistance narratives have materialized in relation to the WTO protests in Seattle (1999), the global anti-war protests of 2001, the G-8 and G-20 protests in Toronto (2011), the Occupy Wall Street movement (2011), the Quebec student protests for universal education and the Idle No More indigenous movement (2012), protest movements across the Middle East (Egypt, Syria, Libya), Black Lives Matter (2013), and the Women's March Movement (2017), among many others. 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. Together, these groups are devising "new ways of practicing communication activism" (Tufte, 2017, p. 104) and

preparing the way for moments of political transformation (Downing, 2001, p. 72).

Over the past decade alone, many activist groups have worked tirelessly to reverse systemic and institutional forms of oppression. For the purposes of this book, the term *creative activism* warrants special attention. 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 (Jasper, 1997). To help differentiate the term from these precursors, creative activism here denotes a model of action that is *process-oriented* and *project-based* (Harrebye, 2015, pp. 127–28), a form of praxis that strategically and consciously deploys new media in the fulfilment of 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 toward bringing positive social change into the world. On the face of it, there is little to distinguish so-called creative activism from traditional (forms of) activism; fun, awareness, and social change—to say nothing of creativity—form the kernel of many activist projects and social movements (past and present). Indeed, the political potential of art is well documented across the creative efforts of the Art Workers Coalition of New York, the Artist Placement Group, as well as the likes of Guy Debord and the Situationists in Europe and Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and the Yippies in North America.

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 leafleting, viral campaigns, and media pranks. Creative activism should not be seen as supplanting traditional modes of activism that continue to produce important political outcomes, but rather characterized as "strategically augmenting and utilizing the precious resources the contemporary media ecology affords" (Harold, 2007, pp. 208–9). The former 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 web platforms and many-to-many communication technologies, activists are pushing to enhance their repertoires by "building rhizomatic movements marked by creativity, humor, networked intelligence, technological sophistication, [and] a profoundly participatory ethic" (Boyd & Mitchell, 2012, p. 3). Distributed actions, for example, 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. In 2009, 350.org (a global environmental activist movement) was able to mobilize 5,200 actions in 181 countries in a single day, in what is cited as the "the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history" (Russar, 2012). 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 critical mass user base. Returning to 350.org, the social dynamics at work are instantly palpable: 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 creatively-themed actions that foster solidarity and a collective sense of belonging to a larger environmental movement.

These dynamics are also present within Avaaz, a 46 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 U.S.; in May of that year, over two million Avaaz members pressured Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff and the Brazilian Congress to reject a bill that would have given logging companies free reign to destroy huge swathes of the Amazon.[18] The ties that knit Internet censorship and environmental degradation together may be tenuous to some and hidden to others, but to the Avaaz community these issues are of pressing concern. Increasingly what happens in Brazil, the U.S., 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, and health. That citizens of the world can express their support or dissatisfaction with global policies through online participation speaks to the growing clusters of solidarity these modes of activism foster.

Twenty-first century activist interventions such as MoveOn, Change.org, Avaaz,[19] and online resources such as *Actipedia* and *Beautiful Trouble* offer exciting templates for the future of both individual and collective action. 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.[20] 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.

Unlike other more conservative models of protest, creative activism is marked by the unapologetic appeal to affect, emotion, and feeling.[21] The latter attempts to move beyond interpellation to a more affective realm in which "bodies are 'pressed' upon by other bodies" and wherein, Ahmed (2015, p. 208) writes, "these presses become impressions, feelings that are suffused with ideas and values, however vague or blurry." Put another way, creative activism refers to a model of action that relies heavily on the projection or display of feelings and sentiments (Shouse, 2005) that give potential rise to an "emotional resonance" (Roberts, 2004, p. 74), 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, 2007, p. 93). As Duncombe (2007, pp. 94–95) 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, flowcharts, and data visualization software, these instruments often fall short of communicating the full import of complex issues. The expression of hard data in the absence of creative storytelling devices may fall short of stirring the popular imagination or of triggering the empathy of others. This is why the question of *affective effect*, *effective affect*, or *æfficacy* (Duncombe, 2016), is of growing interest to those studying twenty-first century activism. According to Harrebye (2016, p. 118), "Creative activism simply seems to be entertaining enough for a large and potentially powerful segment to take things seriously." That is not to say that traditional activism doesn't appeal to the affective selves of constituents nor that creative activists don't have any purchase on reasoned, logical arguments. 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, 1971, p. xix). What creative activism does best is to integrate a wide range of activist tools, tactics, and technologies[22] and 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 (2007, p. 65) laments: "Perhaps one of the reasons progressive are not winning much these days is that lately our game isn't much fun to play." Creative activism, thus, represents an important moment in the reorganization of critique and in the bolstering of a playful, ironic, and utopian imaginary (Harrebye, 2015, p. 132).

What Do We Learn from Failure? What Constitutes Success?

The study of media hoaxing and creative activism opens up fruitful areas of inquiry related to the outcomes and impacts tied to these cultural practices. Situating notions of failure and success within these spheres of activity is both useful and essential to illuminating their strengths, limitations, and shortcomings. Failure and success as organizing concepts, ideologies, and ways of life continue to fuel and animate the contemporary zeitgeist: for Brock (2010, p. 182), "an entire generation seems to be living under the impression that they will fail—economically, ecologically and socially"; for Berger (2010, p. 30), success in everyday life constitutes nothing less than the elaboration of "the most complex imaginative constructions of the human mind and the liberation of all those peoples of the world who until now have been forced to be simple." On one end of the spectrum, we intimate the foreclosure of options and the diminished resources and capacities required to redress ongoing and prospective dangers. On the other end of this continuum, we identify and unleash the creative capabilities and critical resources needed to liberate individuals and groups who have been held back in the broader abstract project of human flourishing. To discuss failure and success as separate-yet-interwoven concepts is to embark on a rich philosophical journey of human thought, (in)action, and movement. The failures and successes described in this book speak directly to the iterative stages embedded within short- and long-term struggles to create social change and transformation.

Activist Failure(s)

Nothing is more intrinsic to human nature and experience than failure. Indeed, the origin story in Western culture is punctuated by immediate failure: just as humanity is created, it fails to fulfil its creator's expectations from the very start (Müller, 2010, p. 200). Communication is also understood as failure, in that history has shown that "humans fail to communicate far more often than they succeed" (St. John, 2006, p. 250), notwithstanding the omnipresence and endlessness of their efforts to communicate. Despite remarkable feats of invention and innovation—and with them an expansive

global communication paradigm—total human communication is impossible; no perfect word or language, no perfect medium or media will enable us to achieve complete control over ourselves or our world (Moran, 2010, p. 6). In Groys' (2016, p. 41) formulation, "Total success is impossible, but so is total failure."

More generally, failure remains a measure of sorts, but a vague and unstable one, used to determine "all that is errant, deficient, or beyond the logic and limitations of a particular ideology or system" (Cocker, 2010, p. 160). Ideas about failure are contingent on the contexts from which they emerge. For example, failure in nineteenth century America is conceptualized in purely economic terms, as it emerges from the language of credit rating and reporting: within this paradigm, an individual's failure is likened to the overreacher who is too ambitious; a century later, a similar typecast failure is portrayed as an underachiever without ambition (Sandage, 2006). Given the term's history of defining arbitrary deficiencies within the broader framework of global capitalism, failure works to solidify the status quo, especially in relation to dominant measures for what constitutes success (discussed below). And because capitalism continues to contort and constrain what people think is true and workable within its enclosures, failure can also be described in terms of what Gramsci calls the "limits of the possible" (as cited in Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014, p. 9). Importantly, progressive thought and action by way of artists and activists alike (among many others) have tirelessly rejected the notion of failure as an inevitable and enduring way of life (Müller, 2010, p. 200). Groys (2016, p. 42) writes that modern and contemporary art has created the conditions for and integrated the possibilities of failure within its own activities. Artists such as Bruce Nauman stage and systematically document failure as a record of human experimentation that resists negative associations and designations (Lange, 2010, p. 133); artists such as Francis Alÿs have adopted failure as a mode of protest against capitalist cultures driven by productivity and efficiency (Cocker, 2010, p. 160). Following Halberstam, failure is imagined as a liberatory practice that challenges the normative codes of success at the roots of oppressive and exploitative structures of neoliberalism (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, pp. 482–83). Failure can thus be liberating in its accumulation of alternative modes of experience and a certain kind of knowledge (White, 2016; Wark, 2013, p. 24).

For activists looking to transform the world for the better, failure permeates the cycles of struggle of which they are a part (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 18). In terms of repertoires of tactics and actions, failure can range from not knowing how to garner attention for one's activism, not knowing what to communicate to news media before drawing their attention, not being able to sustain activist work due to poor planning for long-term strategies, or not being able to resonate one's message with like-minded people (Rentschler,

2005, p. 538). The dominant tactics—protesting, marching, occupying, and other direct forms of action—have become so ingrained in the well-established narrative of contemporary activism that the people and the police state comfortably perform their now ritualistic roles. As White (2016, p. 27) argues, public protest since the turn of the twenty-first century is not enough to sway governments or corporations to change policy, and Western democracies are not responsive to public spectacles and mass media frenzy.

For social movements, failure is characterized in a number of competing ways. In some of the most well travelled terrain, social movement failure is often mistakenly measured either in terms of achieving concrete social changes or stated objectives: policy changes, electoral victories, and effective campaigns; to do so, however, is to miss how social movements actually work and it "ignores the ways in which they create and sustain platforms for counter-hegemonic forms of social relationality and reproduction" (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2015, p. 24). Within this matrix of relations, failure is conceived of in terms of the health and vitality of its membership: To what extent do burnout, cynicism, alienation, and apathy come to bear on the activities of a given group? (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 486). To what extent do movements get blocked, cease to move, slow down, or lose the capacity to reflect on their own activities? (Turbulence Collective, 2010). In what ways do movements succumb to setbacks, impasses, frustrations, fragmentation, atomization, and polarization? (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012, p. 414).

Failure is also perceived at both cultural and institutional levels. Second wave feminism has precipitated widespread acceptance of feminist ideas today, but its cultural success has yet to translate into institutional change (Fraser, 2013, p. 220). Occupy Wall Street was "culturally influential" but failed to live up to its revolutionary call to end the influence of money across democratic institutions or to remedy income inequality (White, 2016, p. 26). Increasingly, "activist groups must work within the confines of global capitalism . . . and with each passing year, activist fundraising, projects, and goals are becoming more entwined with corporate interests" (Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014, p. 4). Similarly, NGO activists are also constrained by the process of having to ally with rather than against the governments and corporations upon which they rely for their operational funding (Yang, 2016, p. 13). Such observations do not seek to discredit or delegitimize activist work; rather, they point to the constraints and limitations of movements to bring about widespread social and political change. This should come as little surprise to those working from the ground-up. It is also indicative of Castells' (2015, p. 296) insights into the different registers and temporalities of a social movement's purchase on such change: "the transit of movements to their indirect political expression in the institutional system requires time, as it has to be negotiated in the hazardous transition between outrage, hope,

and hopeful pragmatism." The process of change is non-linear, chalk-full of surprises and detours, and subject to unintended and even undesirable outcomes (Castells, 2015, p. 311).

Somewhere between the lukewarm embrace of failure as a mode of resistance against a globalizing neoliberal ideology and the cold reality of constant struggle to bring about meaningful change, activists and artists negotiate the present moment as a tightrope with no end point on the horizon. But failure is instructive and lessons can be drawn in their wake. "In the case of activist art as an experiment," Duncombe (2016, p. 123) writes, "what doesn't work is as valuable as what does." A failed political action can yield decisive feedback because failure reveals the machinations, mechanisms, and subjectivities that underpin action even better than success" (Groys, 2016, p. 131). Failed actions are part and parcel of the overall activist experience: to accept the risk of failure is just as important as learning from praxis because they prepare the way for tweaks, improvements, and progress (Bogad, 2016, p. 280). As Beckett (1981, p. 89) once wrote, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better"—a useful reminder for activists that failure carries its own rewards and potentialities.

Activist Success(es)

Discussions of failure are never complete without some grappling with the notion of success. For the ancient Greeks, success was linked to the idea of perfection and to the more general impulse to pursue the highest ideals; for the early Christians, it was tied to the perfectibility of human growth (Fisher, 2010, p. 116). In modern day Western life and culture, success is now more finely attuned to capital, influence, advantage, profit, agency, freedom, and progress. The parameters and metrics for measuring personal or collective success are everywhere present: from constant briefings on the banal activities of the rich and famous to the troves of self-help books that promise emancipation and self-actualization. These templates and models for achieving success (often through financial, material, and spiritual means) occupy an important place in the North American ethos of what constitutes human achievement.

Although artists and activists are neither exempt from nor oblivious to the pervasive power of these systems of thought and ideology, the former have cultivated a rather different set of values and ideas regarding success. Activist success is traditionally measured most explicitly through its capacity "as a whole to transform the world order" (Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014, p. 9) and more generally through a number of desirable impacts or discernible outcomes: "change a policy, create an institution, mobilize a population, overthrow a dictator" (Duncombe, 2016, p. 118). For certain groups (including the

Yes Men), success can also be measured more modestly in terms of stimulating public debate, pushing for legislation, "or embarrassing an evildoer."[23] Success can materialize concretely via environmental activist campaigns that negatively impact the long-term profitability of a target company's market value (Lewis et al., 2017) or abstractly via a movement's ability to sustain a sense of purpose, solidarity, and hope for individuals and groups (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 487). A successful political movement harnesses a plurality of forces to raise awareness, spread media influence, secure legal support, instigate analyses of power, craft policy proposals, consolidate class memory and leadership, win state power, control key sectors of the economy, re-design infrastructure, and so on (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 163, pp. 195–96).

A movement's success is not only limited to its ability to achieve policy change but also to sustain itself across a wide array of fronts. Scholars have worked diligently to counter accounts that focus almost exclusively on institutional impact, theorizing success according to a different yardstick: as "spaces of encounter, possibility, contestation, and conflict," and through the "formation and continuation of new social relationships, new subjectivities, and a new-found dignity" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 479). Within these spaces of encounter, notions of success are tied to the capacity of building and sustaining intergenerational dialogue between and among diverse groups of social movement participants. On the ground, activists within movements like Occupy Wall Street have stressed the importance of opening spaces for conversation, "for democracy—real, direct, and participatory democracy" to flourish (Sitrin, as cited in Kauffman, 2017, p. 194); similarly, key figures in the Black Lives Matter movement have highlighted the need to create space for people from the outside to witness activist struggle that is grounded in good values and good work (as cited in Kauffman, 2017, p. 210).

Theorizing how individual actors or groups succeed is often a question of evaluating both the tactics and means through which activists carry out their work. Innovation in the deployment of tactics is regarded as crucial to bringing goals and objectives to fruition. Risks are intrinsic to the self-reflexivity needed to propose and integrate changes and improvements for future action (Bogad, 2016, p. 280). Tactical innovation and experimentation has formed a consistent part of activist praxis, with more traditional activities such as marches, protests, and boycotts paired with strategies such as leafleting, petitioning, and legislative lobbying. Although news discourse is quick to celebrate and/or deride the technological affordances and fixes attached to specific social movement praxis, success often hinges on organizational skill and the "construction of an emotional togetherness" powerful enough to motivate people to take to the streets (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 162).

Imagination and Utopia

One of the overarching questions tied to failure and success is the indeterminacy of activism's broader impact or effect. Duncombe (2016) argues that for activists to meaningfully intervene in the world to bring about social, economic, or political change, they must at once make peace with the indeterminacy of their work's impact and also work diligently toward crafting an action program that takes into account affect, effect, intent, and measurement. Whatever real gains or intangible outcomes are produced through activist interventions, the potential for social change is predicated on the ability of invested actors or groups to reflect upon, re-calibrate, change, or modify past, present, or future action (Duncombe, 2016, pp. 129–30). To do so, however, activist groups and social movements must build "a broader capacity to collectively envision the future" (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012, p. 419) if they are to have any purchase on generating more movement or creating new directions (Turbulence Collective, 2010, p. 7). For Srnicek & Williams (2015, p. 96), "any form of prospective politics must set out to construct *the new*. Pathways of progress must be cut and paved, not merely travelled along in some pre-ordained fashion; they are a matter of political achievement rather than divine or earthly providence." Indeed, with failure constituting a substantial part of broader activist and social movement histories, the need for continued engagement, reproduction, and renewal of activist energies is fundamental to any present or future manifestations of progressive social change. Activist and social movement success is also apprised as "the ability to keep hope, solidarity, and purpose alive, for both groups and individuals, that is the heart of social movement energies," to cultivate and maintain "an ecology of persistence" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, pp. 487–88).

Imagination and utopia, thus, have figured prominently in both the theorization and elaboration of activist politics and action. In its most fruitful iteration, the utopian imaginary sets out to "rigorously explore the terrain of the possible" (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2015, p. 25), not toward hollow or directionless pursuits, but rather in the cultivation of better futures based on an analysis of the root causes of social problems (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012, p. 410). As a long-term project grounded in the "re-distribution of reality" (Rancière, 2004), the utopian politics of activist movements are less explicitly invested in the immediate task of winning consent or creating dissent, but in the act of imagining and building worlds that do not exist or are not yet tenable (Duncombe, 2007, p. 25). These efforts bespeak a desire for a transformative politics based on what Cooper (2013, p. 3) calls "the articulation of the utopian and the everyday"; indeed, activists are calling for increased attention to "the utopian as an orientation or form of attunement, a *way* of engaging with spaces, objects, and practices that is oriented to the hope,

desire, and belief in the possibility of other better worlds." For the purposes of this book, the Yes Men consistently offer examples of how to channel utopian thinking in both theory and practice to transform their surroundings for the better, and more generally, "to lead people and their societies in new directions" (Jamison, 2016, p. 162). My analysis below attempts to move this line of inquiry forward.

NOTES

1. The hegemony of TNMCs has been observed across the globe; for example, Comcast in the U.S., News Corp in Australia and the UK, Mediaset in Italy, CCTV in China, Televisa in Mexico, Clarin in Argentina, and so on (Freedman, 2014, p. 51).
2. 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.
3. In the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press' most recent "State of the News Media" (2015) report, evidence of a "mobile majority" of news consumers continues to grow: "39 of the top 50 digital news websites have more traffic to their sites and associated applications coming from mobile devices than from desktop computers, according to Pew Research Center's analysis of comScore data."
4. See "Video length" (2012).
5. In 2017, Twitter integrated a 280 word character limit.
6. In Postman's (1985, p. 104) exploration of television, the very structure of TV news programs (interlaced with music and interrupted by entertainment-friendly commercials) "refutes any claim that television news is designed as a serious form of public discourse." If these codes and conventions were transposed directly to the medium of print, Postman would argue, news stories would be continuously interrupted with advertisements for shaving products and hybrid vehicles, thus making a mockery of the form and its attendant modes of inquiry.
7. Cohen likens the phenomenon to doing digital journalism in a boundless content factory defined by "continuous deadlines" and "no spacial boundaries."
8. See "Wrongnado—CNN" (2013).
9. Rosenberg (1998).
10. Kurtz (2003).
11. Boehlert (2005).
12. See Chitty (2004), Lapham (2004), and Rampton & Stauber (2006).
13. For representative headlines, see Read, "Donald Trump Won Because of Facebook" and Parkinson, "Click and Elect: How Fake News Helped Donald Trump Win a Real Election."
14. See Gitlin (1980), Lester & Hutchins (2009), and Rucht (2004).
15. See Carroll & Hackett (2006) for an extended discussion of democratic media activism.

16. See, for example, Boyd & Mitchell (2012), Harrebye (2015), and Kozinets (2011).

17. For an expansive critical overview of these sites of protest, see *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban protest and community building in the era of globalization* (2002).

18. See "Highlights" (2014).

19. These online political organizations and petition platforms attract millions of members, raise tens of millions of dollars, and campaign for a vast array of issues. MoveOn.org and Change.org represent the world's largest petition platforms (with over 70 million members in 196 countries); Avaaz is an online campaign community engaged in various kinds of petitioning, funding (direct actions), and lobbying (Sgueo, 2015, p.79). Lang (2012, p. 213) describes these entities as professional communication intermediaries that "act as transmission belts between individual citizens and social justice causes, providing direct ways for concerned citizens to make their voice heard and make a difference while bypassing issue-specific organizations altogether."

20. Dystopian and utopian visions of the Internet abound. See Wellman (1997) and Fisher & Wright (2001) for an excellent entry point to these debates. For a sense of the earliest of works to inspire utopian and dystopian binaries, see Rheingold (1993), Mitchell (1995), and Barlow (1996); Slouka (1995), Stoll (1995), and Turkle (1995).

21. The affective turn in the analysis of politics and everyday life has been elaborated through a number of thinkers, among them Corner & Pels (2003), van Zoonen (2005), Gregg & Seigworth (2010), Ahmed (2015), and Papacharissi (2015).

22. It is important to note that for all the pronouncements of ICTs and new media greatly contributing to activist movement performance and visibility across the world, discussing "all the technologies involved in publicizing and organizing their actions [is crucial]: "flyers, posters, megaphones, banners, television, newspapers and the like" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 8).

23. See "Yes Men 2.0: May a Thousand Yes Men and Women Bloom" (2010).

Chapter 3

Notes on Failure

"An Endless Dynamic of Experimentation and Search for Synthesis"[1]

For "two guys with cheap suits and fake websites" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009), 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 are looked upon to lead the way through ethical decision-making practices and modes of governance. In engineering the hoaxes described in this book, the Yes Men have sought to inspire curious onlookers and audiences to take up the group's media hoaxing formula and apply it to areas of everyday life that require interventions on the part of oppressed, under-resourced, de-politicized, and engaged 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, news parody, media hoaxes—in the interests of both publicizing and redressing wrongdoing.

One of the greatest ironies of the Yes Men's almost two decades worth of inventive activist work is that their most pronounced failure has materialized in a realm they felt might have generated the most traction: influence. The logic underpinning their actions was always meant to be straightforward. By channeling 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 unconventional-sounding names in their clever mockery of the power elite (Kinnithrung Sprat, Granwyth Hulatberi-Hulatberi-Smith, 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 build on their work. As founders Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos themselves admit, the formula they created was one that audiences and viewers readily enjoyed via their documentary films. The feedback

they received based on their first two documentaries alone was enough to suggest that the format, tone, delivery, and execution of the critiques were entertaining and inspiring. As Servin 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.[2]

Failure has thus figured as an important concept for making sense of the Yes Men's contributions to media activism and media hoaxing. As filmmaker and Yes Men collaborator Laura Nix suggests, failure is a common feature and constitutive element of any given social movement's purchase on social change and, for this reason, dramatizations and discussions of failure are crucial to measuring progress and energizing activist groups: "As activists, we fail a lot. On any given day when you're doing activism, you don't get the satisfaction of thinking, 'Oh, I've figured out women's rights today' or 'We've ended racism' or 'We solved climate change!' You mostly feel like you're just stuck or that you haven't made any progress or impact at all. That's very common" (Mirk, 2015). As co-director of their third documentary, *The Yes Men Are Revolting* (2014), she structures the film to counterbalance success and failure in a broader effort to portray the latter as a defining feature of contemporary activism, one that gives rise to resilient re-imaginings of the current state of the world. The hoaxes in this chapter and throughout the remainder of the book are best conceived of as instances in which "movements do not 'succeed' or 'fail,' they exist in the interstice, in the hiatus (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 488). This chapter examines instances in which failure has marked the Yes Men's work, with an eye toward unpacking how these moments have contributed to the evolution of their work as activists and hoaxers, and what these actions reveal about the group's strategies and tactics. What follows is, in Servin's words, "a few of the highlights of the accidents that led us to do what we're doing."[3]

THE EARLY DAYS: RTMARK AND THE LIMITS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION

RTMark (pronounced *art-mark)* is a good point of departure for exploring the edges and contours of failure within the Yes Men's storied history. In simple terms, RTMark served as a clearinghouse of sorts for activists

looking to participate in and contribute to a number of diverse projects and actions. Co-founded in 1996 by Yes Men Jacques Servin and a network of artists and activists who found one another at the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s, RTMark 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. RTMark's impressive project listings served as a shout-out to anonymous, interested parties on the web to donate some of their time, effort, and expertise toward the completion of a diverse set of actions, anything from publicizing the dangers of genetically modified foods and the need to close corporate taxation loopholes to more slack/er activities like changing the U.S. motto from *E Pluribus Unum* ("Out of many, one") to *Quis Te Rogavit* ("Who asked you?"). RTMark would go on to fund about twenty activist projects in total—among them the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), 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 activist innovation. In an interesting political maneuver, RTMark 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" (as cited in Harold, 2007, p. 83). Although the project's mission statement is at once noble and insightful, and despite attracting significant media traction with the BLO, WTO, and GWBush campaigns, the RTMark model of collaborative DIY activism did not prove an outright success. One of the major shortcomings of the RTMark model connects with the explicitly stated goals of the Yes Men. In a moment of candid reflection, Servin expresses lingering disappointment about the goals he had imagined for the project:

> We promoted [RTMark] 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. (as cited in Reilly, 2014, p. 130)

Note the DIY character of the call-to-action, the collective vision, and the inclusive nature of the project. As far as Servin 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 RTMark was the promise that it "would result in a profusion of thousands of actions all over the place," but the message, Servin notes, was "totally lost in translation."

RTMark'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 RTMark 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 regularly receive from their admirers, goading them to hoax just about any multinational corporation with a (golden) skeleton[4] to hide. The Yes Men's earliest foray in collaborative media activism is deemed a failure due to the project's lukewarm record of inspiring others to contribute to on- and off-line activist projects (Giannachi, 2007, p. 31).[5] For Servin, a successful iteration of RTMark would have sparked a tidal wave of infectious activity, stimulating both online and embodied forms of activist praxis. Much like the case studies described in the next three chapters, the RTMark story represents the challenges and opportunities of examining notions of failure and success within media activist endeavors. RTMark is instructive as much for its successes with WTO and GWBush campaigns (discussed in the following chapter), but the seeds and recognition of failure ingrained in the Yes Men's earliest foray is useful in situating how failure has shaped and informed their evolving hoaxing practices. As Servin makes clear, "it never did really inspire new actions, but we did use it to publicize actions that were already happening" (Servin, 2015, p. 195). Failure sets the stage for how the group would respond to its own activities, temper its expectations, channel its energies, re-direct future actions, and re-inscribe its politics and imagination.

FIRST CONFERENCE: SALZBURG!

As a duo, the Yes Men mark their early beginnings as esteemed conference presenters. To date, they've attended numerous elite international conferences, assuming the identities of some of the largest and most influential institutions on the planet: WTO, Halliburton, ExxonMobil, and Shell, to name a few. While conferences are generally conceived of as a meeting ground to simultaneously reflect on and push forward an industry, field, or body of knowledge, the Yes Men invoke the conference presentation format

as a platform for challenging prevalent ideas through hyperbolic modes of ridicule, dystopian worldviews, and/or utopian pronouncements. How exactly a group of anti-globalization activists were afforded the opportunity to impersonate the WTO can be explained through the core organizing concept of this chapter: just as one organization's failure would open the door for the group to participate in a conference on international trade, so too would their audience's failure to critique their performance propel them to continue their work as media hoaxers.

The Yes Men story begins in Salzburg, Austria. In May 2000, the group receive an unexpected invitation to participate in a conference on International Services, organized by the Center for International Legal Studies (CILS). The email, addressed to Mike Moore, Director General of the WTO, inquires as to whether the latter might serve as a moderator or panelist for a session on international trade. Unbeknownst to the conference organizers, the invitation 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 proves 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: the WTO is the organization responsible for administering and enforcing GATT—the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—the international free-trade agreement negotiated in the aftermath of World War II, an endeavor that proved the single-most influential means of expanding corporate power across free and open markets (Zeiler, 1999). Far from being benign or neutral in its role, the WTO mandate is to ensure that free trade continues unabated and unchallenged. This is 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. (as cited in Levin, 2014, p. 166)

In November 1999, the Yes Men begin posting content to their fake WTO website (a pitch-perfect replication of the original) and almost immediately

begin receiving email from prospective WTO partners, lawyers, ministry officials, and academics, all mistaking GATT for the real thing. The website would go live a week prior to the now infamous Seattle WTO protests (the "Battle of Seattle") and with a stroke of luck, the parody site comes to the attention of real WTO officials who kindly devote a full press release to the Yes Men's cause. The WTO deems the site deplorable, accusing its creators of breeding unnecessary confusion and of "undermining WTO transparency" (as cited in Giannachi, 2007, p. 31). Not a group known for its reticence, the Yes Men not only publish the press release on its website, they also send the notice to their mailing list (comprised of 10,000 journalists). With the WTO's help, gatt.org soon comes to the attention of dozens of journalists, who go on to publish accounts of the Yes Men's outspoken criticisms of the organization.

This public relations misfire lends 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 decipher its satirical tone. 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" (as cited in English, 2004). And yet Google and Yahoo search engines continued to promote gatt.org in its rankings, giving the site even greater visibility and notoriety. 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. The Yes Men's first attempt to publically impersonate the WTO warrants special attention here because it would set the tone for the first string of interventions that would define them.

The design and practice of the Yes Men conference hoax is instrumental in a number of ways: hoaxing here represents the rare opportunity to ridicule, critique, and subvert the exercise and expression of power in what constitute decidedly closed elite forums. In an age characterized by deepening conflict between public interest and private/business interests, the desire for greater transparency and accountability on the part of decision-making entities and institutions has grown, but access to these sites of deliberation has become increasingly remote.[6] Elite business conferences do not invite broader public scrutiny; in fact, they are routinely cordoned off from public view.[7] This makes the Yes Men's subterfuge all the more illuminating because it provides access and visibility to things that are far out of range and reach for the everyday citizen.

In his twenty-minute address ("Trade Regulation Relaxation and Concepts of Incremental Improvement: Governing Perspectives from 1970 to the Present"), Dr. 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 labor 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."[8] 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 suggests, or rather, the WTO proposes, 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 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. For the Yes Men, the lecture in no way deviates 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. No matter the examples given, efficiency and economic liberalization inform the core of the WTO's policies, all effectively conveyed through the Yes Men's appropriation of "contemporary managerial rhetoric."[9]

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 or 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.[10] Despite having produced a litany of shrewd and tactless comments, Bichlbauer had barely incited a reaction; in fact, the general thrust of the audience's response 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.[11] 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" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 43). International trade lawyers, it would seem, were less shocked by the material. Perhaps violence, local customs, workers' rights, and democracy were acceptable pawns in the larger arena of global free trade.

The Yes Men have entered virtually all of their speaking engagements thinking they would be quickly unmasked as imposters and swiftly removed or arrested. Much to their surprise they have neither been found out nor arrested[12]: their audiences either fail to recognize the absurdity of their position or they implicitly embrace the logic of their proposed courses of action. For the power elite—the audience to whom the Yes Men most consistently address themselves—hyperbole acts on the same plane as reality. Mills (1956, p. 14) describes the power elite as groups that define themselves as "inherently worthy of what they possess; they come to believe themselves 'naturally' elite; and, in fact, to imagine their possessions and their privileges as natural extensions of their own elite selves"; Mills also refers to the power elite as the "history-makers of our time" (p. 20). It is precisely this mix of entitlement, privilege, and epoch-defining decision-making power that continues to provoke the Yes Men to challenge and reform their targets.

Their first hoax as the WTO wouldn't prove successful for the Yes Men in that they had failed to entice their audience to challenge the hegemony of WTO policy. What they had effectively shown is how to inject a desirable degree of drama, entertainment, and spectacle into a tired conference format that places a premium on straight managerial rhetoric and on the proven monotony of text-based PowerPoint presentations. The Yes Men left the Salzburg conference decidedly perplexed and troubled that no one had challenged the expression of harmful and downright ridiculous ideas.[13] And this constitutes a core concern for the group: if the world's elites do not take issue with the WTO's dominant logic or ideology, its policies will go unchallenged without ever having come up against even the slightest hint of dissent. For the world's populations currently under the thumb of the WTO's practices and policies

(especially 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 publicly on account of his professional ties to the world's most powerful trade organization. It was precisely this failure to openly critique the reprehensible views of the WTO that pushed the Yes Men to continue as mouthpieces of the organization. Here's how Vamos summarizes the first round of failure and disappointment the group felt following the Salzburg hoax:

> 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. (Smith, Ollman, & Price, 2005)

Failure here cuts in two directions: first, the group identify WTO policies and its supporters as abject failures in Cocker's sense of "all that is errant, deficient, or beyond the logic and limitations of a particular ideology or system" (as cited in the Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 160); second, they attest to their failure in not effectively communicating the full extent of WTO policy impact. Thus, this first instance of identity correction does not yield the kind of response they had hoped for, thereby illuminating how hoaxes can fall short of producing desired outcomes.

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, Italy (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 gathered 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 on network television.

When asked what the WTO is doing to ameliorate the conditions on the ground for the poorest countries, Hulatberi states 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."[14] 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" (Smith, Ollman, & Price, 2005).

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" (Smith, Ollman, & Price, 2005). 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, poor countries providing 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 arrogant remarks afford Coates the opportunity to articulate precisely what is wrong under the WTO's order of things: the rich and powerful G8 nations capitalize 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 Hulatberi's self-sustaining logic (powerful people, thinkers, and institutions all coincide with his neoliberal views), Coates affirms 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* is notable in that they depict the WTO in the most ruthlessly honest way possible; as they put it, "We think the ethical thing to do is to represent the WTO more honestly than they represent themselves" (as cited in Feder, 2001). 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 shine a light on 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*). The presentation of an overly earnest and truthful WTO proved a constructive adaptation of their first conference hoax. These first two instances of impersonation shed some light on the politics enacted through their performances: on the one hand; the group is clearly critiquing WTO trade and labor policies, using irony and hyperbole to clarify the organization's devotion to increasing global trade at any cost; on the other hand, their use of ironic and parodic inflection in these settings is not easily detected unless the conference or television audiences are already privy to the hoax. As with most cases of public performative deceptions, the ironic, parodic, and satiric elements of a hoax are almost always discovered after the fact. Not even Coates was made aware of the hoax until the Yes Men approached him to divulge the news that everyone (including the CNBC producers and its audience) had been had. What's more, the show's associate producer saw nothing objectionable in Hulatberi's comments, arguably due to the fact that the show is "aimed at retail investors, providing advice as well as up to the minute data about their investments."[15] The limitations of hoaxing a live network broadcast can only be redeemed or remedied if the hoax is revealed or the satire or irony is deciphered. The Yes Men hope that the audience will evaluate Hulatberi's inflated and absurd claims from a critical perspective but, as Duncombe (2012, p. 366) points out, "in order to figure out the ironist's message, the audience needs to supply the mirror image—the positive image—themselves," an altogether unpredictable undertaking. If hoaxes of this kind aren't detected, to what extent are these interventions generative? Both of the above hoaxes are revealed in their first feature documentary and an accompanying book, with four years separating the hoaxes and their broader circulation. The Yes Men would go on to address these shortcomings in two ways: first, they would reveal their complicity in the hoax in their documentary, making it clear that the WTO is the primary target of their critique; and more importantly, they would integrate a firm policy of revealing their own hoaxes to create more transparency around the motivations underpinning their actions. As a result of these limitations, the Yes Men's revelation of their own hoaxes has since become a deeply ingrained aspect of their signature style.

EXXONMOBIL IN ALBERTA

In June 2007, Vamos and Servin 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. Servin has gone so far as to label it the Holy Grail of conferences because the audience is precisely the kind of group the Yes Men wish to reform: "These people are wrecking the Earth and they're quite conscious of it" (as cited in Myers, 2007).

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 Canada-U.S. energy policy, commissioned by the Department of Energy. Repeating a tactic they'd used to fool another group of conference organizers, Raymond would withdraw at the very last minute, sending a replacement in his wake. The audience would once again inspire the Yes Men to revert to its 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 produce 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 espouse 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);[16] and finally, they marvel at the failure of governments and corporations to meaningfully intervene in the area 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 present 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 later called a modest "flesh-to-fuel proposal" (Keim, 2007), the Yes Men extend market logic from the perspective of an oil company seeking profit in a world marked by depleted petroleum reserves. Understanding that these natural resources

are finite, they develop a contingency plan to simultaneously secure and bolster their profit margins.

"I Think I'd Like to Be a Candle"

In their second documentary film, *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), Vamos and Servin 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. In their wickedly satirical GO-Expo speech (delivered by Lee Raymond assistant "Shepard Wolff"), the Yes Men announce a new pilot project to offset future problems precipitated by climate change. They call it *Vivoleum*, a new biofuel to be made from the victims of climate change. During their presentation, they circulate candles to the audience in the hopes of holding an informal vigil for a former Exxon employee. They then proceed to screen a short video tribute featuring the recently deceased Reggie Watts, a terminally ill Exxon janitor who volunteered to be turned into fuel. In the larger Watts narrative, he is said to have died from cleaning a toxic spill caused by the company. The video features the happy-go-lucky Watts (a real-life celebrated comedian and actor) discussing his time at Exxon while his managers and co-workers praise him for his generosity and good sense of humor. During the short screening, over two hundred candles are 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 crude smell. Based on the audience's reaction, it would seem that *Vivoleum*, the human flesh-derived fuel source, is a disgusting proposition. As Wolff suggests 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" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009).

To the audience, the idea of capitalizing on calamities seems 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 250,000 people already die from climate-change related effects every year.[17] While it would be misguided to accuse Big Oil of initiating *Vivoleum*-like projects, 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 presenting a scenario as shockingly inhumane as *Vivoleum* biofuel, Servin and Vamos ask those assembled, as well as those who would read about the hoax in the weeks to follow, to reevaluate oil companies' environmental records, actions, and policies because they continue to do great harm. The Yes Men thus engage the public to consider what future scenarios may come to fruition if big oil companies' agendas go unchecked. The ethical inclinations of the group appear clear-cut, but the tactics deployed often produce contradictory outcomes.[18] While sympathetic viewers may relish the public shaming of a much maligned corporation or public institution, stunts of this kind may also have the adverse effect of pushing these interests toward lesser and lesser compliance to the ethical ideals proposed. The use of ridicule can also leave potentially destructive marks in its wake; as McLeod (2014, p. 271) suggests, "the pleasure of pranking can sometimes override its underlying purpose."[19]

These indirect approaches to ridiculing their targets effectively opened the group up to exploring new ways of formulating their critiques. In all of the above examples, the Yes Men ask their audiences to participate in Einsteinian thought experiments, or to imagine worlds that are either slightly or significantly different than the one we currently inhabit—a feat made possible via hoaxing. The irony-heavy scenes are filled with carefully measured and "common sensical" depictions of more "efficient" business practices, but the radical alternatives imagined in these settings are cast in a dystopian future where elite figures and institutions alone have the necessary resources to navigate uncertainty. In falling short of achieving their desired ends of generating critical dialogue and debate surrounding the unchecked power of these institutions, the group would increasingly come to rely not on the audience privy to the live performance, but on the imagined audiences that would later discover their hoaxes via news reports and their documentary films (Rhodes & Lilley, 2012). Based on the limitations of their conference presentations, Servin and Vamos would also turn to enacting a utopian politics that expresses a more direct and honest approach to corporate governance. As they recount, "We were used to being funny, abject, and meddlesome; 'systematic' and 'constructive' were just not in our vocabulary" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 152). The final two examples contextualize this crucial change in direction.

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 hoax (discussed in the next chapter), the group would roll out another timely intervention in January 2010, this time criticizing the World Economic Forum (WEF) in the lead-up to its fortieth anniversary meeting in Davos, Switzerland. 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.[20]

Portello 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"[21] consistently falls short in bringing about meaningful changes to the structures she 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" (Kilkenny, 2010). 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) (Pigman, 2007). As we'll see, the Yes Men integrate these two areas of critique in the orchestration of the 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 leverages the web to mark its fortieth anniversary, presenting a bold new vision for "eradicating poverty by the simplest, most obvious means possible." Rather than infiltrate the event as conference speakers, Servin and Vamos would join forces with thirty-four collaborators, a number of anti-poverty film directors and producers, Hollywood voice actors, and one disgruntled member of the World Economic Forum (Bichlbaum, 2007).

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"[22] by WEF impostors. These phishing attempts, visitors would 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 readers 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 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."[23]

"We can no longer endanger the world for the benefit of the few" (WEF)

The comprehensive website 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. (http://www.we-forum.org/)

For an esteemed scholar that champions the work of government, business, and civil society in establishing relationships 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 candor and honesty (Demetrious, 2013). 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 certainly 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[24]), casting some initial doubt over the authenticity 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 percent) 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.[25] 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 viewers the impression that they are witnessing authentic statements. For example, in a one-on-one interview with *CBC News* anchor Peter Mansbridge, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen 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 each year of poverty; 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 on their 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!" (as cited in Delevingne, 2010). Monck's statement is fascinating because the 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 pure fiction. In other words, 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 (Smale, 2010). Common sense, it seems, doesn't always prevail.

And hoaxes don't always achieve their ends. This project in particular required a great deal of resources, collaborators, and labor power to accomplish. However sophisticated, this web-only stunt generated very little attention in the run-up to the Davos summit.[26] If the group was unable to drum up interest on the part of journalists, bloggers, and mainstream media, 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 their agenda-setting narratives? Might they have garnered greater attention if they had 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. The WEF hoax offers substantive and incisive critique of a powerful global organization on a landmark historic anniversary. Failure here can be conceived of in terms of metrics (how few people encountered the hoax), the organization's overt disavowal of the satire, and the overall difficulty of finding information regarding the hoax. This hoax speaks to Duncombe's (2016, p. 123)

contention that "in the case of activist art as an experiment, what doesn't work is as valuable as what does." Despite the hoax's failure to capture broader media attention, the hoax represents a clear manifestation of the Yes Men's efforts to collaborate with a diverse and wide ranging group, thirty-plus activists already working on anti-poverty campaigns. In addition, this robust and multi-layered hoax would sharpen the group's ability to formulate and sharpen their utopian politics.

"SOMETIMES THINGS DON'T WORK OUT EXACTLY RIGHT": THE AMSTERDAM ZOO HOAX

The notion of failure is explored in all three of the Yes Men's feature documentaries, with the greatest exposition on the subject appearing in *The Yes Men Are Revolting* (2014). The latter film delves deep into the failures and setbacks the group has experienced since its early beginnings, presenting a rare and nuanced account of the personal and political turmoil activists confront in their everyday lives. Failure is addressed in relation to two overarching themes: the failure of governments and corporations to meaningfully address climate change (one of the Yes Men's core causes), and the failure of the group to contribute to social change on this front. Monbiot's recent book, *How Did We Get Into This Mess?: Politics, Equality, Nature* (2016, p. 176), highlights the first theme explored in the film: "The inescapable failure of a society built upon growth and its destruction of the Earth's living systems are overwhelming facts of our existence. As a result they are mentioned almost nowhere. They are the twenty-first century's great taboo, the subjects guaranteed to alienate your friends and neighbors." Given the difficulty with which activist groups and social movements have had in bringing about binding legal, economic, and environmental policy changes to the growing problem of climate change, failure is foregrounded as our collective inability to reject notions of progress as inextricably tied to the destruction of the Earth's living systems. To represent human failure on this front, the Yes Men target the destructive activities of multinational oil companies that have sought to exploit the most fragile of ecosystems—the Arctic region. Despite their efforts to draw attention to these activities, and in keeping with this chapter's emphasis on failure, the group's attempts to hoax powerful oil companies do not always yield the desired results.

In terms of the film's chronology, the Yes Men had just orchestrated an invigorating hoax (discussed in chapter 5) that widely publicized Royal Dutch Shell's plans to expand its drilling operations in the Arctic. Following the U.S. government's subsequent decision in 2012 to ground Shell's oil extraction activities in the region, the company swiftly secured a partnership

with oil giant Gazprom to drill in the comparatively unregulated Arctic waters in Russia. Just as they had done in the previous campaign, the immediate goal was to stage a hoax that would add visibility to Shell and Gazprom's plans to drill in a fragile ecosystem, and to appeal to public opinion to put an end to such practices. In August of 2013, the Yes Men created a media campaign in Amsterdam that dramatized the union between both companies through the symbolic exchange of a polar bear. The spectacle was an elaborate one, featuring many different actors and encompassing several moving parts. Imagine the scene: "a barge filled with Russian and Dutch officials, a marching band, a young Russian child singer, and a giant cage containing what appeared to be a drugged up polar bear, wound its way through the canals of Amsterdam to the city's zoo. Gazprom held a ceremony presenting the bear to the city as a gesture of goodwill and partnership, launching the Polar Partners initiative, including an interactive website and video."[27] Both the scenario and scene are outlandish, constituting an irrefutable comedy of errors. Indeed, the hoax's inclusion in the film is meant to highlight the absurdity of this particular action, and is also used to underscore how activist failures can be dealt with humorously.

At every stage of its development, the multifaceted hoax seems ill-conceived and doomed to fail. For example: they were quickly removed from the zoo, frustrating their plans to perform the scene in their desired location; the key actors failed to grasp the overall objectives of the hoax; adding insult to injury, they also had difficulty performing their parts on camera and to a public audience (breaking character and visibly chuckling throughout the scene). Onlookers appear totally confused and/or mildly amused. Based on the film footage alone, the hoax resembles more a poorly scripted amateur theatre production than a polished signature hoax from the Yes Men repertoire. A visibly befuddled Servin offered the following comment on the heels of the debacle: "Sometimes things don't work out exactly right [laughter] . . . Afterwards you wonder, 'How did I not realize that was not going to work out quite right?' [Gesturing to Vamos] Doesn't it seem pretty obvious now that that wouldn't work?" Failure here adds a touch of empathy, pathos, and humor to the struggles inherently part of contemporary activism.

Naming Failure

The above actions illuminate the unpredictable outcomes attached to the practice of media hoaxing. Each action raises a number of important questions regarding the uses of failure within the Yes Men's evolution as media activists. Of course, the popular press has also contributed to our understanding of how the Yes Men are perceived as both hoaxers and activists, with failure figuring as a defining feature of their work. They are

the purveyors of juvenile, "childish pranks" (Geist, 2010) and "one-off jokes" that distract from very real sites of struggle and contestation (Yeomans, 2012). They have been criticized for raising false hopes and deceiving victims (Wiegmink, 2008), of failing to effectively shame companies like Shell and Dow Chemical (Holden, 2009), of ridiculing corporations without leading people to meaningful action (Donadic, 2010; Yeomans, 2012). Despite being lauded for their ability to dramatize the failures of activism in creative ways, the Yes Men are also cast as being unable to "effect real change in the system that produces these social problems" (Kelty, 2014; Schuler, 2008). Objections to this line of inquiry have been articulated (e.g., dismantling the WTO[28]), but pronouncements of this kind hold a powerful sway in debates surrounding the impacts activists and movements have on social change. The group's ongoing deployment of humor has also resulted in their work being dismissed as mere entertainment (Kenny, 2009), pure instances of when "reason is overruled by emotion and sound judgment suffers" (Platt, 2011), earning the Yes Men the "well-deserved reputation as 'protestors in Nike tennis shoes'" (Cray, 2011). Their corporate targets (the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for example) have deemed their work to be deliberately unlawful, motivated by commercial self-interest, and "destructive of public discourse"; under no circumstances, they argue, should their activities be tolerated under the law (Dwyer, 2009). As their targets profess, they unfairly call into question the credibility of corporations, journalists, and news organizations (McBride, as cited in Mulkern & Kaplun, 2009). Scholars have also suggested that their tactics are problematic because there is no guarantee that any given hoax will be covered in a favorable light, or at all (Nomai, 2011, p. 551). Finally, the act of having to account for, or make sense of, an intervention of this kind through a direct statement may undermine the intrinsic power of the hoax (Harold, 2004).

In this chapter, I have explored the concept of failure through the multi-faceted actions of the Yes Men. In *The Yes Men Are Revolting*, the group vacillates between unfailing optimism and sober dejection: in moments of elation, they feel that their actions have the capacity to change everything; in times of disappointment, they express reservations that their work "doesn't result in anything concrete" and that "all of [their] efforts had been failures." This is akin to what Haiven & Khasnabish (2013) have called dwelling in the hiatus, that is, the process of navigating the lived realities of "not-success" and "not-failure." In their view, activists and social movements don't achieve pure transcendent forms of success, nor do they dwell exclusively in the realm of failure. Rather, in dwelling somewhere between "not-success" and "not-failure," activists may create the space needed to move beyond failure to create new utopian horizons (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 489), and to cultivate a "radical imagination" that fosters "the ability to dream of different worlds" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010). In the remaining chapters, I explore

how the Yes Men have consistently recalibrated their deployment of hoaxing to gain a greater foothold in the mediated public sphere, and how the group has firmly articulated a compelling model of utopian politics via media hoaxing.

NOTES

1. Fenton, 2016, p. 99.
2. J. Servin (personal communication, February 22, 2012).
3. "How to become a Yes Man" (2014).
4. In April 2005, the Yes Men posed as Dow Chemical spokesmen at an international business conference in London, England. During his presentation ("Risk, Reality, Reason: End-to-End Standards and Acceptable Risk"), Erastus Hamm (Servin) introduces new Dow software called *Acceptable Risk*, "a market-smart risk calculator" that allows the entrepreneur with a product that is potentially dangerous to human life to "find out what risks are or are not acceptable from a bottom-line business perspective" (as cited in Middleton, 2014, p. 90). To add even greater interest to the presentation, Hamm and his associate (Vamos) would also unveil the project's mascot, Gilda, a human-size skeleton spray-painted in gold. With *Acceptable Risk* software, they assured the enthusiastic audience, even the worst skeletons in a company's proverbial closet could be transformed into gold.
5. Both Servin and Vamos are said to have contributed greatly to RTMark's broader activities.
6. One such example of clandestine meetings with major global policy implications is the Trade-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement the Government of Canada under Stephen Harper has called "the largest, most ambitious free trade initiative in history." The five-year long TPP negotiations were widely protested for closed-door policies that left the general public in the dark on major bargaining issues and fronts.
7. The force with which public expressions of dissent have been routinely silenced is well documented. For the clearest distillation on the subject, see Elmer & Opel's *Preempting Dissent: The Politics of an Inevitable Future* (2008).
8. The scene is a hallmark of the Yes Men's irreverent presentations at conferences. See Smith, Ollman, & Price (2005).
9. For an excellent discussion of the group's deployment of managerial rhetoric, see Harold, 2007, pp. 87–92.
10. 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" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, p. 37).
11. Lawrence Lessig has since tackled the subject in *Republic Lost* (2011), a work that illuminates how money and corporate interests have overshadowed the political will of the citizenry.

12. In the hours or days following the (initial) conference presentation, the Yes Men will routinely reveal the deception and offer, when/where possible a clear rationale for carrying out such a hoax.

13. In an absurdist turn that recalls Swift's Bickerstaff hoax, the group would later inform the CILS that Bichlbauer is gravely ill, having contracted a serious infection from having been pied on the conference grounds. In a final stroke of absurdity, Bichlbauer is pronounced dead in their final email, in which they reveal the hoax (the troupe in attendance proving to be part of "anti-trade cabal called the Yes Men").

14. The scene is captured in the group's first documentary film, *The Yes Men* (2005).

15. See "Might Makes Rights: Emails" (2001).

16. The Alberta Tar Sands have been called "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions" (Goldenberg, 2009).

17. See "WHO | Climate change and health" (2017).

18. Fenton's (2016, p. 99) conception of the fruits of radical politics as ever incomplete, open-ended, tacit and experiential are applicable to the Yes Men's output. The latter's expressions of radical politics function in "an endless dynamic of experimentation and search for synthesis." The fact that their work is subject to ongoing change and reconceptualization brings this insight into sharper relief.

19. For viewers of *The Yes Men* (2005), the hoaxes deliver a powerful dose of comedic mischief, particularly with the addition of the group's retelling of events.

20. See "Scurrilous Videos Besmirch, Enrage Forum, Leaders, World" (2010).

21. See "Scurrilous Videos Besmirch, Enrage Forum, Leaders, World" (2010).

22. See "Alert on Fictitious 'Forum' E-mails" (2011).

23. See "World Leaders Pledge Strategy To End Poverty Now" (2011).

24. From the fake WEF homepage: "Sometimes in history, political and business leaders are pushed to make momentous decisions—decisions that mean real change, and have great impact. Such decisions are never made lightly, but rather because the alternative is too dire to contemplate. Today, we are at just such a crossroads, a moment of true societal crisis when dramatic change is inevitable. The only question is: will we help to usher in that change, or will we be its victims? The theme of this year's World Economic Forum is *Rethink, Redesign, Rebuild*. And for our own sake, and the sake of the future, we must do nothing less."

25. Not to be outdone, the WEF outlines other key issues, including food sovereignty, capital flight investment, taxation regimes, and the management of climate debt.

26. Even I was hard pressed to track down press junkets and write-ups of the hoax—and I was intently searching for them. The simulated interview between Prime Minister Stephen Harper and CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge generated coverage by CBC News and The Globe and Mail. While the latter article praises the Yes Men for pulling a very good prank, the bulk of the article is devoted to the war room tactics of the Liberal Party (Taber, 2010), a far stretch from discussing the larger WEF critique.

27. This excerpt is taken from the Yes Men's press release following the hoax ("The Gazprom/Shell Polar Partnership").

28. See Hynes et al. (2007).

Chapter 4

Notes on Success

"It's Not the Way Most People Protest"

Having grappled with failure throughout their twenty-year history, the Yes Men have also experienced a great deal of success through their innovative media hoaxes. How success is defined in the realm of media hoaxing is dependent on the goals, objectives, and outcomes of a given hoax. For famed twentieth century 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."[1] Building on Abel's observations, success is also measured by the level of attention or notoriety a hoax receives, by the degree to which a hoax is convincingly staged, by the extent to which the target has been identified as the object of ridicule, by the (real or perceived) impact a hoax generates through scrutiny and debate, and by the capacity with which a hoax may delight or enlighten its audience (Hancock, 2015). Success should not, however, be limited to these criteria alone. For media activists participating in process-oriented modes and models of social change activism, success may also refer to documenting and archiving actions (via documentary film or the web), sharing resources for community building (newsletters, social media, workshops, lectures, conferences, books, print/television/radio interviews), collaborating with different activist communities and building affinity groups with organizations and larger social movements. Vamos has recently stated that although media attention is a key metric for measuring success, he also pointed to other ways of being effective; namely, through the use of humor as a mechanism for helping journalists to write about important issues and through the strength of ideas to communicate alternative and utopian ways of living (as cited in Delaure & Fink, 2017, pp. 419–20).[2] This chapter foregrounds the Yes Men's most successful interventions to contextualize how media hoaxing can produce (the conditions for) critiques of powerful institutions to be articulated, disseminated, and debated; more

than this, these instances offer useful points of departure for exploring media activist work in transition, as process-oriented action that absorbs failure in the reformulation of ethical, aesthetic, and political maneuvering.

As the Yes Men have argued, the repeated practice of catching powerful entities off-guard can momentarily bring to light unethical actions, policies, and general wrongdoing. They've labelled the practice of impersonating governments and corporations as "identity correction: [the act of] exposing an entity's inner workings to public scrutiny" (Bichlbaum, 2012, p. 60). The group has consistently practiced two kinds of identity correction: the *modest proposal* approach and the *honest proposal* approach, both of which entail the impersonation, appropriation, and/or parodying of a figure or institution. The former refers to the process of taking an idea (say, free market economics) and pushing that idea to its most extreme and illogical conclusions (selling American vote ballots online); the latter involves assuming the identity of an ethically suspect target and announcing they have done something uncharacteristically wonderful[3] (Dow Chemical accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal industrial accident). Once these kinds of identity correction have been made visible through an attention-grabbing hoax, the corporate entity is forced to respond publicly by negating the preceding statements. The rhetorical entrapment created by the hoax places added pressure on the target to openly confirm and/or defend its questionable record. In so doing, activist groups like the Yes Men are afforded a momentary opportunity to push the discussion and debate forward.

In their conference hoaxes, the honest approach is designed to remind conference-goers (themselves constituting part of a larger stakeholder community) that progressive avenues can still be explored and created through the exercise of power; the modest approach is meant to seem obvious to attendees, pushing a highly educated and expert audience to see the shallowness, crudity, and short-sightedness of the organization's position. The latter technique is heavily utilized in their conference appearances, and is punctuated by heavy doses of irony and ridicule. If Billig (2005, p. 236) is correct that humor in the form of ridicule lies at the heart of social life, and that it is through ridicule that embarrassment is learnt, the Yes Men's chief tactic is to produce a moment of pause and reflection for their targets through fear of public embarrassment.

ENTER THE YES MEN: THE GWBUSH.COM HOAX

In 1999, 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.[4] As such, those with a basic grasp of the web's back-end

functionalities and standards (coding, graphic interface, software development, operating systems, open source principles) were in a unique position to make provocative statements through the simple act of creating and hosting a website. 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 (the first incarnation of the Yes Men) were creating a website on Bush's behalf—without his campaign team's authorized consent. The website, GWBush.com, was conceived of 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 less prevalent and far less pervasive than it would become in the years following Bush's election.

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.[5] While a select group was earning handsome sums 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 RTMark. 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."[6] 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 an illuminating 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 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 extremely limited.[7] 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 transgressors, but before the weight of these counter-tactics could materialize, RTMark were handed a brilliant and unexpected offering from none 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]!" (as cited in Meikle, 2002, p. 126).

Within the next news cycle, the story had gained an international audience and Bush was left backpedaling 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" (as cited in Rainey, 1999). Adding insult to injury, 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 wouldn't end there either: in a move designed to preemptively silence any future negative commentary, the Bush campaign would later purchase over sixty domain names, including such gems as bushbites.com and bushsux.com, a move made public in accompanying news reports (Kriz, 1999). 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 massive audience that visited the fake website (the site received six million hits), Bush proved a wonderful target for the satirists (Giannachi, 2007, p. 28). Immediately following Bush's untimely statement, the fake 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."[8] 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.[9] 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 of the spectacle. For example, here's how RTMark's Bush frames his sensitivity toward multinational corporations in one of the site's clever and 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."[10]

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 send-up 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'"; it makes light of his alleged cocaine and drug use (while pointing to his harsh record of incarcerating individuals for "non-violent drug offenses"); and it 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."[11] 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 now most commonly called "Bushisms," that is, "grammatically atrocious bastardization[s] of the English language as delivered by our 43rd President."[12] 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.[13]

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 timely and biting political 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 among a select group of people? Were they hoping to gain some notoriety or fame from the hoax? Does the prank ultimately fall short of building a generative platform for political discussion?

Questions of this nature serve as an entry point to ascertaining the complex motivations underpinning hoaxes and 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 working template or shorthand 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 (even more) 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. Success is conceived of in these broad terms, but this campaign is especially important because it marks the beginning of the Yes Men's trajectory as innovators of activist media hoaxing, setting the stage for a range of hoaxes made possible through sophisticated forms of Internet mimicry and/or real-world impersonations.

"I'M VERY EXCITED TO BE HERE": INTRODUCING THE MANAGEMENT LEISURE SUIT

In August 2001, over a year after their very first conference impersonation of the WTO in Salzburg, the Yes Men would participate in another international conference, "Textiles for the Future," in Tampere, Finland. In their presentation, "Towards the Globalization of Textile Trade," the group would expand the fake WTO's previously stated concerns with protectionism, violence, and open markets by introducing cutting-edge labor management practices. In what is meant to be a palpably odd introduction, "Hank Hardy Unruh" (played by Servin) conducts an Einsteinian thought experiment in which he argues that remote labor (the practice of monitoring foreign labor forces

from domestic corporate headquarters) shares some resemblances with Civil War-era slavery: if the market had dictated the flow of progress throughout and after the American Civil War, slavery would have naturally transitioned into remote labor. Despite this historical oversight, Unruh suggests, remote labor has become a global force in the structuring of labor, and workers in places like Gabon, Rangoon, and Estonia now enjoy greater freedom and quality of life as laborers. 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 unveils is the Management Leisure Suit (MLS), a tool that will facilitate interactions and communications between managers and distant workers, and allow managers to increase their leisure activities.[14]

It is precisely at this moment in the presentation that Unruh, helped by his WTO assistant (Vamos), reveals the futuristic textile garment hidden under his traditional business (read: thrift store) suit. The MLS prototype is unmistakably outlandish—a tight-fitting, gold-colored 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 labor forces in real-time. A CGI video tutorial is simultaneously projected behind Unruh to demonstrate the suit's functionality and potential uses. The video depicts a manager type with a nicely groomed mustache, 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" (Smith, Ollman, & Price, 2005).

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 "Textiles for the Future." Is this really what the WTO envisions as the solution to systemic management problems? Is this truly the most efficient way to regulate labor 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's "modest approach" did not provoke a single rebuke during or following their talk. Either no one reacted for fear of reprisal or because they were purely unmoved by the presentation. In the worst case 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 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 Servin and Vamos, 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 the WTO for expressing some deeply unsettling ideas is appalling. If these business elites are willing to give the Yes Men's WTO a pass, it begs the question: "What can't corporations get away with?"

In an interesting turn of events, the incident would earn 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 inflated 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, Servin and Vamos found comfort in seeing Unruh serve as the embarrassingly ridiculous face of the WTO in an image that would later travel far and wide. The critique embedded in their conference presentation 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 foolish. From the very beginning, the Yes Men have positioned themselves as "honest people impersonating big time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them" (Hynes, Sharpe, & Fagan, 2007, p. 117). Unlike in their WTO appearance in Salzburg, they are able to visibly and markedly embarrass their target. These prankish moments form a crucial part of the Yes Men's early hoaxing efforts, as they can be seen to generate what Shifman (2007, p. 205) calls a distinctive kind of "scornful laughter" that allows them to gain symbolic power over their target. The hoaxes also serve more explicitly as vehicles of ridicule and shame (Hynes, Sharpe, & Fagan, 2007, p. 115) that are meant to embarrass the target, all the

while making their perceived shortcomings public. To borrow a phrase from Billig (2005, p. 195), if the hoax succeeds in this regard, "the shadow of ridicule remains."

What escapes us, however, is a better understanding of the work these hoaxes perform. This instance of impersonation sheds some light on the politics enacted through their performances: on the one hand; the group is clearly critiquing WTO trade and labor policies, using irony and hyperbole to clarify the organization's devotion to increasing global trade at any cost; on the other hand, their use of ironic and parodic inflection in this setting is not easily detected unless the conference audiences are already privy to the hoax. As with most cases of public performative deceptions, the ironic, parodic, and satiric elements of a hoax are almost always discovered after the fact. Case in point: the Yes Men's revelation of their own hoaxes has become a deeply ingrained aspect of their signature style. Indeed, the playful and prank-like dimensions of these performances do not effectively communicate the thrust of their critique. These failures to meaningfully communicate their position are only remedied retroactively, most notably with the appearance of their 2005 documentary, *The Yes Men*, in which they create the space to explain themselves in detail. Following the film's release, their public profile would continue to rise through countless interviews, mainstream news reports and activist/indie media accounts of their work, enabling them to streamline and polish the rationale and politics underpinning their actions. The Tampere hoax is successful inasmuch as they are able to effectively ridicule their target, sharpen their grasp of how to harness media hoaxing as a tool to communicate critique, and re-orient their politics toward more constructive and utopian ends. The remaining hoaxes in this chapter explore notions of success through the utopian spirit that has best defined their work.

CODA: SHUTTING DOWN THE WTO

Having spent the better part of eighteen months impersonating the WTO, the Yes Men saw fit to move on to other worthy targets. Rather than build upon their more outlandish impersonations of the organization, 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 officially disband the WTO. In a special luncheon organized by the Sydney Accountants' Association, public relations officer Kinnithrung Sprat (Servin) 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."[15] 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 percent of the world's income and the poorest fifth have 1 percent;
- The gap between executive and worker salaries has never been bigger. (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, pp. 162–67)

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 percent in the U.S., 176 percent in Western Europe, 278 percent in Japan. In Uganda the rate is 25 percent, and they are being asked to lower it more" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Spunkmeyer, 2004, pp. 162–67). Trade 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 construct 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 conception of this hoax next to its predecessors is its emphasis on sincerity and utopian politics. Rather than limiting its critique to irony and ridicule, this hoax presents a sincere desire to transform its target from an object of derision to one of progressive possibility.

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 (Baxter, 2002). To its credit, the WTO responded to the hoax with a good-humored deflection, effectively neutralizing any future communications on the part of both activists and journalists: "While we can appreciate [the Yes Men's] sense of humor, we would not wish for reputable news organizations like yours to be counted among those duped" (as cited in Baxter, 2002). WTO public relations staff had clearly learned its lesson following their original gaffe in dealing with the "deplorable" gatt.org website. 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. As Lambert-Beatty (2009, p. 64) suggests, "if a group of Australian accountants can suddenly find it thinkable—even credible, even actionable—to realign world trade to the benefit of indigenous people and the global poor, then something like a new distribution of the sensible has, at least temporarily, been brought into being."[16] As far as the WTO hoaxes are concerned, success is articulated through a series of impersonations and adaptations, beginning with the unpredictable deployment of hyperbole and ridicule and materializing with a critical utopian vision of how the world's most powerful institutions should define themselves. The Yes Men's next venture would truly bring media hoaxing to an international audience by bridging Internet mimicry 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.[17] 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.[18] 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 (Wells, 2014). 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.[19] 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'" (as cited in Polgreen & Kumar, 2010). Adding insult to injury, the plant site is still home to 350 tons of hazardous waste that has yet to be cleared (Wells, 2014), 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 GWBush hoax, the group would refine their web-based approach even further in what has proven their most well known media hoax to date.

"Dow Accepts Full Responsibility"

On December 3, 2004, the Yes Men generated enormous controversy with an appearance on *BBC World*, in which Servin 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[20] (Servin) 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.[21]

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 behavior of a major multinational corporation willfully shirking its responsibilities to the victims. The implications of this announcement are enormous: not only will Dow 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.[22]

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.[23] Much to their dismay, however, Dow continued Union Carbide's laissez-faire policy in India, as evinced in a 2002 company memo: "What we cannot and will not do . . . is accept responsibility for the Bhopal accident" (as cited in Battistella, 2014, p. 156).

Exactly two years prior to the BBC hoax, Vamos and Servin 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 site also carefully pierces through the veil of Dow's greenwashing campaigns and PR-speak, reinterpreting its "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 promise. 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 Servin and Vamos have two primary reservations: first, they are concerned that the stunt will create false hope for a people that has already suffered greatly; and second, they worry the hoax will create unwanted backlash against the BBC, a news organization they respect (particularly for their Bhopal coverage) (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009). 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

Vamos explains, "we wanted to make sure they had to say that they weren't going to help the victims."[24]

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 BBC 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 Servin 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 U.S. press that resulted from the event. (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009)

In what might have otherwise been reduced to a soundbite recording of a Dow spokesperson 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.[25] 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 (Reilly, 2013, p. 1247). 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 Servin. 'It's an honest representation of what Dow should be doing'" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009). Once again, the catalyst in initiating these debates in the public sphere is simple

and straightforward in its ubiquity: a hoax spawned from a fake website. Success in this instance can be tied to the global attention generated by the controversy, the shame and forced accountability it expressed, the two-year commitment this hoax demanded, and the originality with which the group constructed and responded to their own ethical spectacle. During this period, their experiments with utopian public discourse would appear with even greater frequency, prompting the group to shift their sights on new targets.

SAME EMPHASIS, NEW TARGET: "WE WOULD BECOME THE GOVERNMENT"

Having refined the sophistication of their conference addresses through their WTO impersonations, the Yes Men would later make a lateral maneuver to hoax government entities. In the summer of 2006 (almost four years after their final WTO hoax), the now seasoned conference hoaxers 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 tenants 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 favor of privatization and so-called "mixed-income neighborhoods." 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" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009).

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 HUD. 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. Vamos and Servin were invited to the conference because they had posed as HUD-affiliated PR professionals from Hill & Knowlton.[26] 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 address) and would generate interest on the part of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin. Jackson, of course, would withdraw at the last minute, only to send his assistant deputy secretary René Oswin (Servin) 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 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. (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009)

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 expose him for the impostor he was. Servin 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. Following Nagin's lead, Oswin would deploy well-dressed lies in the interests of uncovering naked truth.

In a move not unlike their decision to dissolve the WTO, the Yes Men here 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" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009). Oswin first 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 states that after much deliberation, Wal-Mart will withdraw its stores from low-income housing to "help nurture local businesses to replace them"; major economic players like Exxon and Shell have committed to earmark $8.6 billion "to finance wetlands rebuilding from $60 billion in profits this year" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009).

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. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 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" (Simmons & Neuman, 2006). 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 displaced 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 (Simmons & Neuman, 2006). 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, Servin had this to say: "This is actually truth-telling where normally there would only be lies" (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009).

For those they had fooled, the hoaxers 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. 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 willfully 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. In the end, the impersonation of a powerful government entity offers a short-lived period of decision-making ability and offers a mix of gravitas, institutional support, and authority (centralized power that disenfranchised groups and communities almost never wield). Interventions of this kind—engineered through utopian-oriented hoaxes—have the capacity to inspire like-minded communities to seek out changes that are not currently being considered. Building on Dutta's (2011, p. 221) insights on performing social change, the Yes Men's reimagining of government policy in their impersonation of HUD can be likened to performances that articulate "new imaginations by weaving in narratives that connect cultural symbols in sharing a collective story of social change; as they work through these new imaginations and emancipatory possibilities, they negotiate the fragmented sites and terrains of resistance that come together in articulating a resistive hegemonic presence." Success here denotes the dramatization of "emancipatory possibilities" through imaginative models of collective resistance, both real and imagined. In addressing conference delegates, local and national media outlets, and invited parties to the Lafitte Housing Project, the Yes Men ask their disparate audiences to reflect on current housing policies and how government and those involved in the reconstruction process may improve the conditions on the ground for those most affected.

"CREATING HEADLINES WE'D LIKE TO SEE": THE YES MEN'S FAKE *NEW YORK TIMES*

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[27] 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." This hoax had the distinct ability to elevate news discourse to new heights, adding much needed flair, humor, and sincerity to conversations and debates that simply weren't occupying much of a place in American news media. For Yes Men collaborator 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" (as cited in Wallace, 2008). The fake *NYT* demonstrates how media hoaxing can be leveraged to express a brand of utopian politics and critical humor that rarely finds its way into print or Internet journalism.

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 CEOs), 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. 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" (a subtle 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 be in on the joke. As 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."

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 note, reporting stories in a register rarely deployed in journalistic coverage. In a post-hoax interview on *CNN*, the "liberal comedy group" labeled the intervention a glimpse into what life in America could look like under President-elect Barack Obama's administration. When asked why they created the hoax, Servin 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 actually have 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.[28]

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 fruition.

"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" (Lambert, 2008). 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 materializing—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. This was a hoax meant to be deciphered in the interests of reanimating discussion, debate, and struggle over the unwritten future.

Fake News in the Service of 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 (Alvarez, 2016); 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 disparity 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 (1984, p. 114) refers to as the dramatization of "extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea." 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," the reader learns 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 CEO 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.[29]

Why Hijack the *NYT*?

As discussed in the preceding two chapters, access to mainstream news media and reporting on marginalized issues across news organizations is both difficult and hard-won. With the fake *NYT* hoax, the Yes Men bypass the

gatekeeping establishment entirely in the act of creating their own newspaper. This strategy foregrounds the struggle over the representation of pressing issues, affected communities, and key societal challenges across various arms of the news media. A successful newspaper hoax not only exposes the flaws and tendencies of contemporary news media, it also has the capacity to interrogate the system's routine deference to officialdom (Day, 2016, p. 515). Rather than reproduce the *NYT*'s traditional methods of recording reality, the Yes Men choose the *NYT* template to radically reimagine the future of journalism. This intervention demonstrates that media hoaxing can be used effectively to subvert established journalistic codes and conventions, and 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[30] 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."

Although these corrections of *NYT* editorial and business practices do not come close to accurately reflecting the organization's current state of affairs, 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. The corrections serve as powerful correctives 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. Ultimately, the hoax can be read as a form of incitement to communicate that the "paper of record should be held to an even higher standard than the rest of the publishing industry."

The decision to publish a fake *NYT* as both print and Internet phenomena also assisted in the successful execution of their goals. The online version—a tantalizing replica of nytimes.com (see nytimes-se.com)—made it possible for those living outside the major American cities in which the print edition was distributed 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. 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. Each visitor willing to post comments to the site is asked to provide a name, an email address, and (an optional) website address, requiring some form of accountability 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. The project's international visibility may have also made another notable contribution possible, in that it 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. The fake *NYT* was such a success that the group would create an equally successful fake *New York Post* the following year.

The Yes Men's continued experimentation with media hoaxing via news parody is yet another vital instance in their elaboration of constructive, generative and utopian ideals. Through this spectacle-inducing action, the group reinforces their understanding that deceptions of this kind can contribute to a broader public good, here through a dramatic reimagining of North American journalism.

Situating Success

This chapter has explored notions of activist success through the lens of the Yes Men's diverse media hoaxing efforts. Such endeavors have not gone unnoticed, inspiring remarkable traction in/across traditional and online news media. Competing ideas abound in the exercise of defining success in the realms of activism and hoaxing. Perhaps the most reductive vision attached to media hoaxing belongs to the *National Post*'s Peter Shawn Taylor, who has argued that "a Yes Men success is, by definition, a failure of good journalism" (Taylor, 2016). That said, the group is celebrated as peerless innovators who have shown remarkable longevity and adaptability. As one journalist contends: "You watch what they do with deference simply because there's no one else who can do what they do a) as well as they do it b) as successfully and c) for as long" (Dupuy, 2011). Success is consistently regarded as the group's ability

- to draw attention to corporate malfeasance on major communication platforms, and to attract media coverage that casts a shadow on the public images of multinational corporations (Donadic, 2010; Engler, 2009; Goodman, 2004; Nolan, 2004; Owen, 2011; Rhodes & Lilley, 2012);
- to push news media to proclaim their real messages (Steinbrecher, 2015);
- to solicit and challenge public statements, produce dilemma actions, demand accountability, and "force their nemesis' hand" (Beckett, 2010; Montgomery, 2011; Robertson, 2012);
- to foster a "utopian media practice" that urges people to stop and wonder in their everyday news media consumption (Harrebye, 2016, p. 108);
- to bridge the divide between consciousness-raising and civic/political action (Nomai, 2008; Reilly, 2013).

Finally, success is also framed as the renewal of tactics, but more precisely, as the deployment of exciting and innovative interventions in the realm of media activism (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 10; Kramer, 2015). For example, a successful hoax channels humor as the hook needed to give journalists the opportunity to write on important matters; this approach allows for certain stories to fly under the radar of editorial protocols that routinely keep social justice issues from making the news (Delaure & Fink, 2017, p. 418).

Whereas the group has traditionally measured the success of actions based on visibility, attention, and coverage in mainstream media, of late they have questioned the validity of this model as the proper benchmark to measure impact (Delaure, 2017). In their most recent film, Vamos and Servin reflect on success in relation to existing social movements and sites of struggle. They argue that they are most effective when they function as little cells working in concert with activist groups, organizations, and social movements that have already created inroads to bringing about change (Bichlbaum, 2015). Having firmly established the Yes Men's experiences with failure and success, I now turn to the next iteration of their trajectory as activist media hoaxers: The Yes Lab.

NOTES

1. A. Abel (personal communication, June 1, 2012).

2. In this regard, a successful intervention can be judged as you would a good poem, a text that powerfully communicates its ideas and provokes others to embrace them.

3. Bichlbaum, 2012, p. 60. The group's reference to a *modest proposal* approach puts the Yes Men's ethical concerns front-and-center, firmly aligning them with those enacted by Jonathan Swift (as discussed in chapter 1).

4. See Hardy (2014), especially chapter 5, "The political economy of the Internet and digital media."

5. At the time of writing, the so-called cottage industry of domain names generated $3.3 billion in 2013 and is now growing at 6 percent a year. See Sathian (2015).

6. See "Limits to freedom."

7. Before algorithm-based search engines and link analysis (circa 1998), Internet search was both frustrating and time-consuming. At this time, search was mostly conducted by sorting through hierarchies of topics (Yahoo!) or by sifting through thousands of webpages returned by the search engine (Langville & Meyer, 2011, p. 4). Without specialized knowledge, finding appropriate, relevant content was akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. Not only did you risk alienating your entirely family by occupying the sole telephone line of the household for long periods of time, you also stood a pretty good chance of yelling and cursing at the computer monitor for lack of a more intuitive search engine.

8. See "Presidential Exploratory Committee" (1999).

9. Bush's rhetoric is examined in brilliant detail in Mark Crispin Miller's *NYT* Bestseller, *The Bush dyslexicon* (2001), a scholarly work that was often mistakenly placed in bookstores' humor section (p. xxi).

10. See "Presidential Exploratory Committee" (1999).

11. See "The frat boy ships out" (2009).

12. See Kucitizen's (2004) entry from *Urban dictionary*. Consider the following three statements as representative examples (Miller, 2001):

> "Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?" —Florence, SC, January 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., August 5, 2004
>
> "We are resolved to rout out terror wherever it exists to save the world from freedom!" —Atlanta, Georgia, January 31, 2002

13. One need only revisit Jon Stewart's presidency-long takedowns of the president on *The Daily Show* or Will Ferrell's recurring Bush caricature on *Saturday Night Live* in which the latter comes across as one of the dimmest half-wits in American political history.

14. The *Management Leisure Suit* (MLS) arguably represents a welcome addition to the Frederick Winslow Taylor school of "scientific management" whereby the labor process is effectively streamlined to introduce new implements that enable laborers to work faster and managers with greater ease. Under this formulation, of course, the MLS is only a viable tool until it has been superseded by a more generative implement. See Taylor (1998, p. 62).

15. In terms of rhetorical delivery, one of the real strengths of this hoax is that Sprat is presented as a loyal ambassador of the WTO who has very recently had an epiphany about feeling betrayed by the "free trade methodologies" espoused by his organization. In framing Sprat in this way, the Yes Men lend an even greater degree

of sincerity, truth, and clarity to the statement they are about to make. It also renders Sprat a plausible, believable speaker.

16. Lambert-Beatty (2009, p. 64) interprets the Yes Men's interventions through the lens of Jacques Rancière's theory of the "distribution of the sensible: the system of inclusions and exclusions that determine what can be sensed; the literally common sense about what can be said, thought, seen, felt, and who can say, think, see, and feel it."

17. See "Chronology" (2014).

18. See "1984: Hundreds die in Bhopal chemical accident" (1984).

19. See "1984: Hundreds die in Bhopal chemical accident" (1984).

20. Never content to merely choose commonplace names, Vamos and Servin always infuse their character names with symbolic importance. Here's how Servin describes Jude Finisterra's larger meaning: "Jude Finisterra is actually a made up name. Jude is the patron saint of impossible causes, and Finisterra means 'end of the earth,' which kind of represents the situation [in Bhopal], I think, in some way" (as cited in Goodman, 2004).

21. See "Interview of Jude Finisterra" (2004).

22. See "Interview of Jude Finisterra" (2004).

23. See "Dow Chemical just say 'yes' to Bhopal" (2006).

24. See "The Yes Men" (2005).

25. The *BBC World* hoax was broadcast live to 300 million viewers; various clips of the segment have also been generated hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and other video sharing websites.

26. See "Oops: Impostor scams Louisiana officials" (2006).

27. Relying on their trademark brand of hyperbole, the group's stated 1.2 million copies would create near-instant exposure, given the perceived scale of the project. In reality, they printed and circulated 80,000 copies of the fake paper, a venture that cost roughly $13,000 (Dupuy, 2011).

28. See "Steve Lambert & Andy Bichlbaum (the Yes Men) on CNN" (2008).

29. 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.

30. 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."

Chapter 5

"All We Needed Was a Whole New Approach"

Expanding the Yes Men Brand

One of the most important shifts to emerge within contemporary activist circles in the last decade is the push to train, mentor, and guide future changemakers in using an emergent repertoire of forms. These changes have precipitated what Harrebye (2016, p. 180) has called the "systematic professionalization of training of creative activists." There are two overall kinds of "activist education centers": those established by experienced activists who offer workshops and consult with organizations regarding campaigns and actions, and those course-work based initiates established by NGOs (Harrebye, 2016, p. 181). Recent examples of the practice abound: Coventry University's student-activist-oriented open course in creative activism[1]; the School of Creative Activism's mandate to work with professional advocacy and activist groups in the interests of enabling greater social change[2]; *Beautiful Trouble*'s training program that features partnerships with social justice organizations and groups (Boyd, 2013).[3] Organizations and groups like the Center for Artistic Activism, School of Creative Activism, the Leading Change Network, Alliance of Community Trainers, Center for Story Based Strategy, CANVAS, and Escola de activismo round out a representative list.[4] Together, these groups have built pathways to creating fluency in organizing, strategy, direct action, creative communications, community outreach, and general disruption.

TRAINING AND MENTORING FOR A BETTER WORLD: THE YES LAB FOR CREATIVE ACTIVISM

One of the most interesting facets of the Yes Men's work to date is their evolution from celebrated media activists to trainers and facilitators of

activists and everyday citizens. 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. Nowhere is this mandate to train, mentor, and facilitate more explicit than with the Yes Lab for Creative Activism, the group's loosely-defined center "devoted to helping progressive organizations and individuals carry out media-getting creative actions around well-considered [campaign] goals."[5] 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[6]), the Yes Men's vision for training and mentoring others in their identity correction practices is now firmly established. Whereas Yes Men projects have consistently tackled a well defined trajectory of issues and topics—namely, globalization, the environment, neoliberalism, and capitalism—their recent collaborations with established and grassroots organizations have facilitated broader public debate on a number of other social justice issues. To date, the Yes Lab has helped facilitate more than forty-three actions since October 2009, most of which have generated modest coverage in mainstream media outlets. Actions include a U.S. Chamber of Commerce campaign to reverse its 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 labor practices, factory-worker suicide, and environmental degradation, a "self-deportation" website, and so on.[7] 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. 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.

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 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 humor 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. (Reilly, 2014, p. 133)

The Yes Lab first emerged in 2012 with institutional support from NYU's Hemispheric Institute (Hemi). The partnership delivered the physical space and resources needed to conduct 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 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 (in Canada and the U.S.). The idea behind the lectures is for the Yes Men to briefly describe 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") (Skinner, 2011). 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.[8] 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" (as cited in Reilly, 2014, p. 134), 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 labor, and maintain enthusiasm for the cause. The guiding imperative behind the Yes Lab 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."[9] 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 (Gitlin, 1980). 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 activist precursors.

In this chapter, I introduce a representative sample of Yes Lab collaborations to highlight this new wave of media hoaxing and to signpost the Yes Men's ever-evolving trajectory. Discussion of the Yes Lab is here 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 forty-three actions performed under the Yes Lab banner, some reference to the scope of these hoaxes is warranted. These actions explore familiar territory and new targets: colonial economic injustice, coal/fossil fuel industry malfeasance, factory labor 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. As Kristeva (2002, p. 54) writes: "In our period of transition and endemic crisis, what counts is rather the questions than the answers." 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 lab, 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.

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. In October 2009, the Yes Men collaborated 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., Servin) addressed a dozen reporters, stating that the organization had decided to cease its opposition to the Kerry-Boxer Bill[10] (then making the rounds in Congress) and would support the adoption of a carbon tax, a surprising turn of events 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 mid-term elections, 94 percent of which went to candidates who are on record as being climate change deniers.[11]

Recent changes in the Chamber's membership would, however, introduce a wrinkle in 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" (as cited in Fahrenthold, 2009a). This unflattering drop in the Chamber's membership, as well 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 Servin] is a fraud! He's lying! This is a stunt that I've never seen before."[12] As it turns out, a journalist looking for the press conference mistakenly phoned Wohlschelegel'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 Servin/Sembra engage in an uncomfortable exchange wherein:

- the real spokesperson accuses the speaker at the podium of being a fraud and of misrepresenting the Chamber;
- the fraud at the podium challenges the real spokesperson's authenticity ("Can I see your business card?" asks Wohlschlegel. "Can I see yours?" counters Servin.) (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Nix, 2015)

In the most tantalizing aspect of their brief exchange, Wohlschlegel affirms to the audience of confused journalists and planted shills 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 you 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? Servin, to his credit, remains calm and collected throughout, arguing that he is in fact speaking on behalf of the Chamber and that Wohlschelegel's disruption is in poor taste. "Who are you really, sir?" asks Sembra. "You can't barge in here and interrupt our press conference." 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 Wohlschelegel's surprising appearance; *Washington Post* journalist David

A. Fahrenthold (2009b) 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 (2009) put it, and the stunt did force 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. The Chamber would accuse them of "commercial identity theft masquerading as social activism" (Montgomery, 2011). 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" (McSherry, 2013).

The Yes Lab's first hoax is instructive: first, the key theme is readily identifiable (corporate malfeasance); second, the motivations are clearly expressed (corporate policy reform/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 (Goodman, 2004). 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.[13] 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 unfavorable characterizations of their business operations. For the Chamber to sustain its pursuit for four years also suggests that the divide between activist organizations and corporations has grown, leading both sets of actors to an impasse. Here we are 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 policies. What is evident through the many Yes Lab actions to have materialized since the first 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 hold up in our exploration of other Yes Lab hoaxes.

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. In this iteration of the Yes Lab, the group would partner with "a group of concerned Canadian citizens, the 'Climate Debt Agents' from ActionAid, and art students from Denmark."[14] As with any of their hoaxes, the group chose what it deemed 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,[15] 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"[16] and it's home to "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions [the Alberta tar sands]" (Goldenberg, 2009). Hoaxing Canada brought international attention to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's dismal record on climate change action at a critical moment when new policies were being actively negotiated at the Summit. As one astute blogger notes, the hoax came as "Harper's government was privately circulating a plan to permit a 165 percent increase in emissions from Alberta's huge, dirty oil sands project" (Connelly, 2009). To redress this state of affairs, the Yes Lab presented a progressive vision on the part of Environment Canada. Here's how they spun their 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 hoax on behalf of 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 duration 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 Guilbeault 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 Lab 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 Lab 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" (Boyd & Russell, 2012, p. 166). This principle informs many of the Yes Men's major hoaxes. 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.

This action would produce a similar outcome. In this instance, the Yes Lab'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"[17] (*Globe and Mail*), "Copenhagen spoof shames Canada!"[18] (*Guardian*), "Hoax slices through Canadian spin on warming!"[19] (*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 (2009) 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, as well as a "Lifetime Unachievement Fossil Award" in Warsaw in 2013 (McSorley, 2011; Holz, 2013).

Hoaxes can also 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 (2010) 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 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 (2010) 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" (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 298). They have the power to initiate important dialogue within even the most elite groups (the G8 at Copenhagen), but things like progress or social change are never guaranteed and seldom achieved. The hoax is successful in that it serves as a powerful example of collaborative utopian expression and as a media spectacle that highlights the disparity between the world as it is (forever stalled on binding climate change legislation), and how it could be (progressive, fair, and equitable).

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 in reparations to Haiti to aid the country's reconstruction process in the aftermath of a series of catastrophic earthquakes.[20] 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[21] 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 (Macdonald, 2010). 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[22]), 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 signaled 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 spokesperson confirmed that the press release, video, and website were all fake" (as cited in Mackey, 2010). Real Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero's comments—that the hoaxers were "spreading false information and fraudulent[ly] copying the [Ministry's] site"[23]—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."[24] 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 decisively 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 (Williams, 2003). It is precisely this historical past that is often missing in accounts of Haiti's crippling poverty,[25] 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" (Fabre, 2012). 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 Lab 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, 2012), and as such, the tone of the critique preemptively favors the hoaxer for proposing an ethically driven statement on the part of an already embattled nation (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 unfavorable 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—no single action ever

could—but the hoax raises awareness, produces multiple opportunities for public discussion, and advances a critique of government oppression and inaction.

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 (then) $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 (Mackey, 2010). 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 ongoing 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" (Fabre, 2012). 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.

CHEVRON (THINKS YOU'RE STUPID): ANATOMY OF A GREENWASHING CAMPAIGN

Some Yes Lab collaborations are provoked by important world events (Copenhagen Summit) while others are prompted by serendipitous opportunities. In 2012, multinational oil corporation Chevron allocated a reported $80 million to roll out a publicity campaign meant to improve public opinion of the corporation. Before the campaign launch, Chevron hired street artists to wheat paste their posters in urban centers (an industry practice pejoratively called "guerilla marketing"). As it would happen, they selected artists with ties to the environmental movement who quickly entrusted the materials to a group of activists looking to re-orient the campaign's message. Thus was born

a counter-publicity campaign preemptively launched by the Yes Men and a throng of activists, including the Rainforest Action Network and Amazon Watch. This hoax would prove yet another fascinating case study for the evolving practices embedded within activist hoaxing activities.

We Agree: The Multi-Million Dollar Pitch

For the Yes Lab collaborators to formulate an effective counter-campaign, they would have to swiftly decipher the tone and emphasis of the original ad materials. "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 overlap exists between the two sides. And in a now standard 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 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." By framing these seemingly benign statements 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 reduced.

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 was embroiled in the world's largest environmental lawsuit—facing *$27 billion* in potential damages—for its massive two decade-long toxic dumping in Ecuador (Romero & Krauss, 2009). 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.[26] As *NYT* reporters Simon Romero and Clifford Krauss (2009) 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."

The desired result of the *We Agree* campaign is to foster goodwill between oil corporations and society at large through a cleverly crafted greenwashing campaign. At the time of writing, Chevron has solicited almost 600,000 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 and the accompanying rhetoric rarely match the record (Berger, 1972). It is precisely for this reason that the Yes Lab collaborators chose to openly undermine the campaign by way of satire and parody; indeed, 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. This hoax reinforces the notion that individuals and activist groups are weary of corporate public relations activities, especially when they co-opt average-looking citizens to do their bidding. Far from bolstering their image, these greenwashing 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. For Chevron, the backlash would materialize quickly and spread widely.

The Yes Lab's "We Agree" Counter-Campaign

The Yes Lab hoax begins with its 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. The bold truths alluded to in the press release are 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 also seem plausible enough to pass as faithful pronouncements on the part of the oil giant. As Steven Mufson (2010) 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 decipher 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" (Zax, 2010). Having already attracted early media attention from *Ad Age*, *Fast Company*, and *The Consumerist*, the Yes Lab 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 Zygocki, 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. (as cited in Villarreal, 2010)

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 announcement with an allusion to the company's controversies in the Amazon. This double tactic of impersonating and hoaxing Chevron worked to advance the Yes Lab's critique in two swift moves, while forcing Chevron's hand to respond to its claims regarding corporate malfeasance. Chevron's anticlimactic 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" (as cited in Villarreal, 2010). 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 (Daily, 2010).

Toward a Participatory Internet Hoax

In the days that followed, the Yes Lab 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 130,000 views and inspiring a number of remixes and adaptations. In the original ad, a teacher (Iris) is asked to offer 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 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 expression, 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 unsavory 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 Lab 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 favor 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 or 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 anonymous 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 and/or participatory

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 Lab 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 Lab'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 Lab 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 as 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 a collective, participatory hoax on full display.

#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.[27] 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 (Goldenberg, 2013). 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 *Xena: Warrior Princess*) (Joling, 2015). 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 (over seven 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."[28] Despite the short-won success of its initial action, Shell moved swiftly to secure a legal injunction that prohibited anyone from going within one kilometer of Shell's main drilling vessels.[29] 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 Arctic activities. James Turner, head of communications of the Greenpeace 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-wracking for me because I understand that this is also the first time the Yes Lab have taken on anything like this, too.[30]

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 oil 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 oil rig (or *kulluk*). In a ceremonious act, the host invited one of the

guests of honor (the 84-year-old widow of the kulluk's designer) to receive the first honorary drink from the fountain. It is 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 center of the frame. To make matters worse, they were momentarily unable to stop the steady stream of diet cola 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.[31] 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 alone. 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 capitalize on the stunt for maximum publicity.

Recall that Greenpeace's initial foray into the "new school of environmental protest" (Sterling, 2012) 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 be 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."[32] Just as the users were falling for/over the disaster, so too were journalists temporarily swayed by the "juicy social media 'fail'" (Carey, 2012), translating into even more news coverage.

"It's like in *Spinal Tap* where they turn the amp to 11"[33]

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 is 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 habitats. 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 (Hill, 2012). 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? Based on this hoax, here are some of the most instructive lessons to be gleaned: first, hoaxes of this nature will not do anything to deter Shell's future plans or to alter its views on so-called corporate

social responsibility; second, 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 seven million signatures for its Arctic "global sanctuary" petition. The ongoing efforts of organizations such as Greenpeace—in collaboration with the Yes Lab—contributed to greater public awareness regarding prospective drilling in the Arctic, with the Shell hoax assisting the campaign to reach a critical mass.

IF YOU (AND THE YES LAB) OWNED 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 major 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.[34] 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" (Taibbi, 2013). 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.' Big 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 Bank of America CEO, 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 repay $8.58 billion to borrowers and to settle $324 billion in fines and sanctions, amounting to huge declines in the company's shares spurred by 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 Servin 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,"[35] and to inspire people to talk about banking and 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 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" (as cited in Quinn, 2012). 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 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 equitable 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) (Douglas, 2014).[36] 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) (Yousuf, 2014), 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" (as cited in Quinn, 2012). 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 critique of B of A are difficult to trace, even when one is 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 present an 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, humor, and insights of creative and dissatisfied big bank customers. Although the parody site has been dismantled, B of A has continued on its current trajectory, and the divide between activists and corporations continues to deepen, the hoax successfully united disparate groups and individuals in the service of re-imagining 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.

Pushing Forward

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, humor, fun, and entertainment within the political realm. 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 activist 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 was introduced thanks to a successfully funded Kickstarter campaign in 2012 that attracted over 2,500 backers and raised over $146,000. The project's goal was twofold: to raise enough money to finish their third documentary (*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" (Reilly, 2013, p. 1259).

In addition to completing the film, the group has since created an "Action Switchboard" (essentially an online version of the Yes Lab), that enables viewers of the film to tap into their 100,000-person database and their larger activist network. More specifically, the platform allows users to propose or join direct action projects, and receive continued feedback and support from seasoned activists throughout the process (Servin, 2015, p. 196). The switchboard has the potential to bring everyday filmgoers into a broader activist fold to "create fun, meaningful, movement-building projects around the issues we all care about" (Reilly, 2013, p. 1259). Put another way, the creation of the Action Switchboard makes possible the mobilization of everyday citizens not normally predisposed to political action. "What we do," Servin suggests in a recent exchange, "is galvanize people who are already on our side" (as cited in Davis, 2012). The idea behind the switchboard is to generate a deeper level of engagement on the part of their audiences. 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."[37] With the Yes Lab, success is defined not in terms of social change but rather in the cultivation of collaborative endeavors, the continued application of public pressure on unethical targets, and the expression of utopian ideals. These experiments in cross-collaboration have translated into more sophisticated activist projects, slicker media campaigns and, at times, increased media attention for marginalized issues.

NOTES

1. See "Creative Activism: An Open Class Exploring Creativity and Social Change" (2011).
2. See "#creativeactivism" (2011).
3. *Beautiful Trouble* is a combination book and website project that evocatively touts itself as "a toolbox for the next revolution." The training sessions are engineered to translate the book's insights into successful campaign actions and interventions.
4. For a more comprehensive list, see Harrebye (2016).
5. See http://www.yeslab.org.
6. See "The Yes Lab" (2011) for their original pitch in *Wired*.
7. For the full/up-to-date list, visit http://yeslab.org/projects.
8. The vote mobs were significant because they inspired a number of other flash mobs (35 in total) to materialize across the country and in the process generated a great deal of media coverage. The actions began in Guelph, Ontario, caught the popular imagination via a series of cleverly produced YouTube videos and were attributed in part to the influence/direction of the Yes Men (vote mob co-organizers Gracen Johnson and Yvonne Su went so far as to refer to themselves as the "Yes Women").
9. See "Yes Men 2.0: May a Thousand Yes Men and Women Bloom" (2010).
10. The Kerry-Boxer bill, or the "Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act," an 821-page document, began with "a mandate by 2020 to curb the nation's greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent from 2005 levels" (Samuelsohn, 2009).
11. See "US Chamber teams up with Big Oil to promote pipeline" (2013).
12. The scene is captured in their most recent documentary, *The Yes Men are revolting* (2015).
13. See "Yes Men 'Mourn' U.S. Chamber's dropped lawsuit against them" (2013).
14. See "Canada freaks out the world" (2009).
15. See "Raise a flag: Canada ranks third in rich-nation index of world's best places to work and live" (2013).
16. See "Canada can be leader in climate change battle: Harper" (2007).

17. Reguly & Taber (2009).

18. Goldenberg (2009).

19. Woods (2009).

20. The 7.0 magnitude earthquake would ultimately claim 220,000 lives and leave 300,000 injured (Knox, 2015).

21. In other accounts, the indemnity to be paid to France was said to be even higher, an estimated 150 million francs (roughly $3 billion in today's currency) in exchange for formal recognition of Haiti's independence. This impossible sum was meant to be paid within five years (Dubois, 2012, p. 7; Lundahl, 2015, p. 366).

22. In the five years since the earthquake, that number would multiply to $13.5 billion through a flood of humanitarian aid. For a greater sense of how these funds were leveraged, see Knox (2015).

23. See "France considering legal action on '$21 billion' Haiti hoax" (2010).

24. See "M. Sarkozy, rendez à Haïti son argent extorqué" (2010).

25. Recent scholarship on the subject is illuminating on these and other fronts. See Fass (2004), Dubois (2012), and Sepinwall (2012).

26. See http://chevrontoxico.com/.

27. See "Department of the Interior Releases Assessment of Shell's 2012 Arctic Operations" (2013).

28. See https://www.savethearctic.org/en/pages/faq/

29. See "Shell granted legal injunction against Greenpeace" (2012).

30. See "#ShellFAIL: Viral Campaigners Revealed" (2012).

31. Adapting a broader cultural trend of circulating controversial and spectacular footage from CCTV cameras and digital cameras, it is now all too common for mobile phone footage to find its way to mainstream audiences: the execution of Saddam Hussein, police brutality in the U.S., the London Bombings, the Egyptian uprising, to cite but a few examples.

32. See https://twitter.com/lexcanroar/status/225619472009007105/

33. Hill (2012).

34. One study conducted by Duchin & Sosyura (2014) attests that, following the bailout, bailed banks have increased risk-taking across three main channels of activity: retail lending, corporate lending, and financial investments. They estimate that the risk of default of bailed banks increased by 24 percent post-bailout.

35. See "Whose bank? Our bank! The Yes Men explain their prank on BofA" (2012).

36. In 2011, the Justice Department announced a $335 million settlement with Bank of America over discriminatory lending practices (Isidore, 2011).

37. See "You can also define creative intervention as a real move" (2013).

Conclusion

The Yes Men's activist media hoaxing serves as an important vehicle for simultaneously criticizing and drawing attention to the abuses of corporate and state power. The overriding purpose of their activities has been to expose wrongdoing, force accountability, and propose alternative frameworks that challenge the current state of affairs (e.g., dangerous capitalist/neoliberal hegemony, short-sighted/regressive state governance). In modelling and refining innovative approaches to media activism, the Yes Men have moved from early forays in pranking to more deliberate experiments in utopian thinking and politics. The result has been a stunning display of risk-taking, creativity, storytelling, collaboration, and mentorship. The group has been most notably successful in its ability to adapt its tools, tactics, and strategies over time, a feat that has enabled them to produce a rich and varied body of work. Through their efforts, they have shown that failure and success are so deeply interwoven in the fabric of contemporary activist work that continued attention to these tensions will offer greater insight into the challenges and opportunities of doing twenty-first century activism.

WHY MEDIA HOAXING?

The Yes Men's media activist work offers a critical lens through which to explore a number of powerful ideas, discourses, problems, dilemmas, and courses of action currently defining the contemporary moment. In examining media hoaxing as a potentially generative tactic for twenty-first century media activism, I've shown that there is much to learn about the social, political, and ethical dynamics embedded in these modes of deception. 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[1] 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. More recently, fake news stories became a focal point in much mainstream media discourse following Donald Trump's election win, with many journalists expressing concern that sites like Facebook all-too-easily facilitated the dissemination of bogus articles (Wong, 2016).[2] While deceptions that willfully mislead the public into making poor decisions about self-governance are of great concern[3] (going to war, allocating funds for local and national infrastructure, implementing legal and public policy), 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.

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 moment to ponder how most people gain access to information. While the dominant broadcast model of the twentieth century has been uprooted (albeit not entirely transplanted) 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 outposts—those capable of consistently reaching mass audiences and publics—are controlled by five giant media corporations.[4] As Fairclough (1995, p. 40) affirms, media output remains "very much under professional and institutional control, and in general it is those who already have other forms of economic, political or cultural power that have the best access to the media." That is not to say that alternative media clusters 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, health, poverty, the environment, immigration, 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,[5] 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 largely impossible.[6] Whereas it may have once been conceivable to introduce local issues to one's community via community access programming on radio and television,[7] 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 percent of the videos have fewer than 500 views and about 30 percent have less than 100 views (Frommer & Angelova, 2009).[8] 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 online publications.

It is precisely these activities that have fueled the Yes Men's oeuvre, making their work an exemplary case study for thinking about why so many community actors and activists are committed to exploring these fronts. By engaging in these kinds 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,[9] they are also expressing the larger frustration that journalists and their employers have not chosen 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 more profitable venture for advertisers and media companies, there would be less incentive for groups like the Yes Men to hoax news media. 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 group's deceptions serve as the necessary hook for bringing less popular stories and perspectives into an already crowded information ecosystem.

Hoaxing for the Advancement of Social Justice Activism

For the Yes Men, the hoax has served as a constant fixture in their struggles for social justice. To be sure, they have drawn inspiration from the eighteenth century ethos of hoaxing as a virtuous cultural practice capable of mending or improving the human condition, as a tool to entertain and educate audiences, and as a means to lay bare individual and institutional folly. They most closely resemble Jonathan Swift in their creation of modest proposals regarding corporate and state personhood, and in the elaboration of ethically-motivated hoaxes that produce noteworthy, albeit unpredictable outcomes.

With nineteenth century showman P. T. Barnum, the Yes Men share the savvy and sophistication of presenting deception and entertainment as enjoyable modes of spectatorship; what's more, they inculcate the desire among various publics to see greater and greater spectacles that blur the line between fantasy and reality.[10] Alongside twentieth century hoaxers such as Alan Abel and Joey Skaggs, the group would, over time, conceive of hoaxes as welcome deceptions that deliver their message through the skillful use of humor, parody, and satire; in addition, their hoaxes would simultaneously exploit and draw attention to flaws in the gatekeeping practices of mainstream news media. Activist media hoaxing offers an important lens through which to evaluate the state of contemporary news media; it comprises yet another tool with which activists can sharpen the efficacy of political critique; and it plays an important role in the articulation of utopian imaginaries.

Activist Failure and Success

In their over twenty-year history, the Yes Men have earned widespread critical praise *and* criticism. This book has approached the group's failures and successes, and more generally the possibilities and shortcomings embedded within activist media hoaxing practices, in a concerted effort to (1) trace the evolution of the group's work and (2) to evaluate the efficacy of media hoaxing as a viable form of activist praxis. In *The Yes Men Are Revolting* (2014), the group readily admit to their failure as activists, specifically in relation to their inability to make real social change happen. The fact that they themselves are unmoved by and uncertain about their contributions to broader social movements' purchase on social change suggests that a closer examination of the interstices of activist work is not only warranted but sorely needed. Two observations: activists are never the best judges of their own activities and concrete social change is almost always an impossible yardstick from which to evaluate activist impact. Just as social movements neither succeed nor fail and inasmuch as activists navigate the lived realities of "not-success" and "not-failure" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 489), so too do the Yes Men occupy a nebulous in-between realm where victories and failures go hand-in-hand.

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 criticized for raising the false hopes of the very communities they wish to bolster. The example that continues to draw the most attention 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 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 fully discount the 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. In a memorable example, they visit Bhopal to ask the people most affected by the tragedy if the hoax had contributed to their suffering; much to their relief, the community was energized to see their lives back at the forefront of public discourse (Bichlbaum, Bonanno, & Engfehr, 2009). 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 the target's unwillingness to act any differently.

The group's failures have as much to do with not reforming their targets' policies and ways of operating in the world as they do with the difficulties of inspiring the next generation of changemakers to follow in their footsteps. With respect to media hoaxing, failure is perhaps best conceived of in terms of when a given action fails to generate media coverage. According to this criterion, actions such as the World Economic Forum or the Amsterdam Zoo hoaxes, which generated very little media coverage, may be deemed a failure. Other actions that are not effectively revealed as hoaxes (such as their early WTO conference presentations and their appearance on MSNBC *European Marketwrap*) can produce a range of responses on the part of audiences and onlookers, from confusion to blind acceptance of the proposed ideas. These instances have all worked to delineate the contours of how failure has shaped the evolution of a media activist group forever adapting to the changing contexts of *doing* contemporary activism. I have attempted to trace the group's consistency in adapting or re-orienting their efforts to achieve better outcomes. Fenton's (2016, p. 99) conception of the fruits of radical politics as ever incomplete, open-ended, tacit, and experiential are applicable to the Yes Men's output. The latter's expressions of radical politics function in "an endless dynamic of experimentation and search for synthesis." The fact that their work is subject to ongoing change and reconceptualization brings this insight into sharper relief.

Although the divide between failure and success is a difficult one to breach, the group's frequent integration of changes to their strategies, tactics, tools, and approaches has served to map and highlight important progressions in their activist work. According to Vamos and Servin, successful media hoaxes are seen, discussed, and debated as widely as possible. The Yes Men have shown themselves to be particularly effective on this front, especially given the longevity of their project. Success on this front would have been limited were it not for their ability to innovate and expand upon existing

repertoires of activist praxis. For example, their web hoaxes that punctuated the end of the 1990s and their conference hoaxes that energized the beginning of the 2000s offered exciting new directions for political critique and social justice activism. After the Yes Men, conferences, press releases, public announcements, and even websites would never be the same, especially for activists. Through these approaches, powerful targets would gain even greater visibility in the public sphere as much maligned figures and institutions (e.g., George W. Bush and the WTO).

The next waves of success would come via the creation and distribution of three documentary feature films, an endeavor that would build the group's visibility, notoriety, and fame. The latter films have provided an indispensable vehicle for the group to document their media hoaxing activities, to explain their selection of targets, and to expound upon their broader ethico-political project. The Yes Men's carefully engineered spectacles have generated news media coverage that has facilitated the broader circulation of alternative and dissenting perspectives. Through the films, they have created greater awareness of underrepresented issues and communities, coupling consciousness-raising with real-world activist struggle. For Vamos and Servin, the use of humor is the sugar-coated pill that softens one's willingness to engage difficult issues, particularly for apolitical or disaffected audiences. As Baum (2003) and Prior (2003) 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. Humor can also have a galvanizing impact on the already-converted, cultivating a powerful bond between activists and their like-minded publics (Day, 2008; Day, 2011). Finally, they have shown that creative activists assume the overlapping roles of "political party crashers," provocateurs, facilitators, and "triggers of dissatisfaction" that operate as first movers within the circular cycles of political contention (Harrebye, 2016, p. 56, p. 66).

Success may also materialize in goading their targets to action. Although the group has pressed politicians, governments, and corporations to be more transparent, accountable, and ethical in their actions, the latter have responded negatively by engaging in corporate monitoring practices[11] of activist groups and organizations. For example, in 2012 the Yes Men 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 insulate themselves from a larger and more concerted critique of corporate power (Goodman, 2012). 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 (Horn, 2013).

Even if we were to discount the severity of the surveillance tactics espoused by Dow, corporations are also beginning to respond with softer, gentler, PR-approved tactics. For example, a 2012 *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" (Levick, 2012): first, resist the urge to fight; second, strengthen media ties; and third, take ownership of the issue. Public relations 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 (2012) frames the issue in 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" (as cited in Hill, 2012). 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 than respond to or propose changes based upon public criticism, they seek at all cost to protect the brand's corporate image (Baskin, 2012). Although the targets have shown no signs of responding to external pressure, they have had to increase their familiarity with activist practices and maneuver more carefully in relation to broader activist campaigns.

The group's success has also materialized through their efforts to cultivate collaborative actions internationally as a means to advance awareness and instigate action surrounding social justice causes. Rather than restrict group collaboration to an exclusive in-house venture, the Yes Men have made great strides to increase cross-collaboration among activist/community groups, NGOs, students, and concerned citizens. The creation of the Yes Lab for Creative Activism in 2009 has inspired a wide array of mediated campaigns (over forty-three to date). The Yes Men's turn to training, mentoring, and assisting in the elaboration of these campaigns has certainly expanded the limits of what is possible in terms of the group's output, but it has also served to foster short-term collaborations and partnerships that may not have ever seen the light of day. When the Yes Men partnered with Greenpeace for its "Save the Arctic" campaign, neither group had collaborated before in this way. The result was an elaborate two-month campaign that successfully raised Shell's public profile vis-à-vis its proposed drilling operations in the Arctic. This creation of a virtual and material site for training and mentoring

activists and organizations has produced brief and impactful "living spaces of encounter, possibility, and contestation" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 479). 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.

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. Humor, 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, the Yes Men's work has evolved considerably since their early beginnings. Indeed, since 1999, Vamos and Servin have shown great versatility and range in the elaboration of their hoaxes: fake websites, conference impersonations, documentary films, viral videos, false press releases, fake newspapers, media appearances, private events, public service announcements, and even pseudo product launches (Survivaball). In this regard, they have produced important and innovative activist work that serves as a highly adaptable template for future action. Their openness to experimenting with various cultural forms and practices has afforded them the opportunity to consistently refresh and renew their approaches to media activism.

Another key element of this book has been to reinforce the notion that media hoaxing can function in the interests of putting forward a broader ethical and progressive vision of the future. Although the use of humor is a defining feature of their oeuvre, their work has evolved to integrate the latter in pushing forward an activist-centered agenda for social change based on the cultivation and expression of utopian politics. The Yes Men can be regarded as responding to Duncombe & Lambert's (2017, p. 258) call for activists to not only "examine the present with a critical eye, *but also* to imagine and create a new world, and help others do the same. To conjure up Utopia or utopias." At almost every turn, the Yes Men have carefully dramatized radical departures from, or alternatives to, this current historical juncture. In so doing, they have firmly critiqued the conditions, policies, and structures that cement the world into place; they have enlisted onlookers to join them in their reappraisal of powerful institutions; they have generated dialogue and debate on some of the most pressing issues of our time; they have staged and performed, for a brief time, progressive visions of social change that inspire individual and collective forms of imagination. Far from merely accepting the world as it is currently fashioned, the group position themselves to ask both "What if?"

and "Why not?"[12] in their call to reimagine the world as a progressive, just, and egalitarian place. Their work represents a powerful display of utopian thinking that seeks to inspire, motivate, or orient others to imagine worlds that do not easily enter the popular imagination at a moment when dystopian fantasies and narratives have witnessed unparalleled visibility across popular culture. Just as envisioning alternative worlds (or worldviews) may be difficult for many activists living in the dystopian present, these interventions lay the groundwork upon which future re-imaginings may be possible.

The Limits of Media Hoaxing

Like all political organizing, media hoaxing can be a thankless, tedious, labor-intensive, and anxiety-inducing endeavor. 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, labor, 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 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 elements 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 realm of activism. 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 labor power. Haiven & Khasnabish (2014, p. 20) call this the "routine, banal and often heart-wearying labor of reproducing the radical imagination." 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 (2012) 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 means to address wrongdoing or to create awareness. Even the Yes Men have expressed their reservations on this front: "A lot of people approach what we're doing as something totally new and unique and that we are changing the face of social protest, but no, it's not actually new and it's not necessarily better" (as cited in McLeod, 2014, p. 271). Activist groups may enjoy greater traction through more traditional channels: letter-writing campaigns, petitions, public talks, film screenings, rallies, and marches—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, friends, and allies (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 their 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.

"If it sounds too good to be true, it's probably the work of the Yes Men"[13]

In July 2005, Australian journalist Andrew Denton interviewed the Yes Men for his program, *Enough Rope*. During the interview, Denton poses a generative 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?"[14] Vamos' 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 culture.

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 humorous, playful, sincere, ethical, and unapologetic. "Progress," Oscar Wilde (2001, p. 141) famously wrote, "is the realization of Utopias." Hoaxing represents one such possibility for bringing this world into sharper relief.

NOTES

1. For accounts of Facebook, see Dashevsky (2015), Meyer (2015), Wohlsen (2015), and Silverman (2016); for Twitter, see Dewey (2014), Stinson (2014), and Vigna (2015).
2. It became such dominant fixture following the election that talk of a fake news media empire circulated; at the time of writing, BuzzFeed reported on a network of 43 websites responsible for publishing more than 750 fake news articles (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016).
3. Even President Obama issued a statement regarding the severity of the issue: "If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems" (Solon, 2016).
4. Bagdikian (2004); Hardy (2014).
5. See Gitlin (1980), Herman & Chomsky (1988), and Tuchman (1978).
6. As Fairclough (1995, p. 40) states: "There is no technical reason why communities of various sorts (trade union branches, people living on an inner-city housing estate, people belonging to a minority culture) could not produce their own [media content] and have them broadcast [. . .] But this rarely happens."
7. See, for example, Howley (2005), Rennie (2006), and Squier (2003).

8. A more optimistic analysis of these metrics appears in Marshall (2015), whereby view averages rise according to specialist/niche categories such as How-to and Style, People and Blogs, Science and Tech, to cite but a few examples.

9. Rucht (2004, p. 27) presents the issue matter-of-factly: "from the local to the global levels, movements struggle for public visibility as granted (or refused) by the mass media."

10. It is worth noting that, unlike Barnum who greatly profited financially from his mass spectacles, the Yes Men (much like RTMark before them) have always sought cultural profit (i.e., social and political change).

11. While it is beyond the purview of this section, the most compelling (and disquieting) discussion of this shift appears in Hansen & Uldam (2015), in which the authors describe these "risk-based policing" activities as attempts to neutralize corporate resistance.

12. These generative questions are explored in Duncombe & Lambert (2017).

13. Kilkenny (2011).

14. The Yes Men (2005).

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