

How false information creates ‘true events’. Persistent and recombined forms of activist communication through internet fakes and hoaxes

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Activists use fakes and hoaxes to communicate information by speaking in the name of someone else - persons or institutions invested with power. With the spreading of internet communication, this pattern of action and communicating has acquired additional power as a means of political and social protest. Within the framework of Guerrilla Communication, with its specific understanding of politics, faking develops into an efficient form of political articulation. The recent DowEthics fake illustrates how the enabling potential of the internet can be realised in this context. Speaking in the name of the chemical corporation Dow, a would-be spokesperson publicly announced that Union Carbide had finally decided to pay compensation to the victims of the 1984 Bhopal Disaster. This fake forced the corporation to make a statement about something they had deliberately avoided mentioning. The paper discusses the ways in which the internet is enhancing this specific pattern of action and communicating. The channel reduction of technically-processed communication increases the possibilities for fakers to speak in the name of political adversaries or corporations: this form of activist practice is actually helped by the poverty of context within computer-mediated communication. Activists like “The Yes Men” have developed a form of cybertheatre which successfully uses the technological circumstances of “virtual life” as a starting point for “real life” actions. Internet fakes can be used to illustrate more general patterns in the use and appropriation of new technologies. Such patterns can be analyzed in terms of persistence and recombination of social and cultural practises in a novel technological environment.

Keywords: Socio-cultural change, Communication Guerrilla, Culture Jamming, Activism, Political patterns of action and of communication

On 29 November 2004 an e-mail reaches the owners of the Web site <DowEthics.com>.¹ The British television company BBC World Television would like

¹ Available from <http://www.dowethics.com/>. [15 October 2005]

an interview with a representative of the Dow Chemical Company on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of one of the worst chemical accidents in the Indian city of Bhopal, the capital of the federal state of Madhya Pradesh. The accident occurred on 3 December 1984 in a plant of the US chemical industrial group Union Carbide Corporation (UCC), which has since become part of the Dow Chemical Company² (DCC).³

“True poison and false company spokesmen”

(Roth 2004)

Substances used in the production of the pesticide Sevin, and specifically Phosgen, leaked out in the course of the accident. Between 3,800 and 20,000 people, depending on how they are counted, died as a direct or indirect result.⁴ Beyond that, another 150,000 to 600,000 people were injured, some of them badly, or became chronically ill.

Due to low security standards, UCC had moved its production of Sevin to the low-wage country of India. In the end, the principle of minimizing cost defined even the negotiations on compensation payments between the Indian authorities and UCC. Eventually UCC paid the amount of USD 650 million in compensation to the Indian government, of which only a marginal part (about USD 500 per person) was paid out to the victims. In view of this, UCC or DCC, respectively, are still being criticized for not having compensated the victims adequately. Besides this, DCC is not inclined to decontaminate the site.⁵

These are the events leading up to the request by the BBC mentioned above. For the BBC the problem arose when the BBC journalist believed that <DowEthics.com> indeed represented some sort of technological impact assessment website of the Dow corporation. This assumption turned out to be false in the end. Rather, the website is operated by a group named “The Yes Men” who - apparently with success - managed to suggest, with the appropriate corporate identity design and content editing, that Dow is in fact “speaking” on this website.

In answer to the request to <DowEthics.com> the Yes Men decided to use the opportunity to make a declaration in the name of Dow:

² On the Web site of the UCC there is a link to the topic of Bhopal. Available from <http://www.unioncarbide.com/> [15 October 2005]. The DCC is a multinational corporation with headquarters in Midland (Michigan), USA, and is regarded as one of the largest chemical corporations worldwide.

³ ‘What happened in Bhopal?’ Available from <http://www.bhopal.org/whathappened.html>. [15 October 2005]

⁴ The Web site of arte television mentions the figure of 20,000 people who “died of the direct or indirect consequences of the catastrophe”, and 500,000 people of the first and second generation who continue to suffer from the consequential damage”. Cf. ‘Bhopal. To this day the victims are waiting for compensation.’ Available from http://www.arte-tv.com/de/geschichte-gesellschaft/Vorsicht_20giftig_21/709236.html. [15 October 2005]

⁵ The point of view of Union Carbide on the disaster is available from http://www.bhopal.com/pdfs/statement_german.pdf. [15 October 2005]

“Knowing Dow’s history of gross negligence on this matter, we think it unlikely they will send a representative themselves - and if they do, he or she will likely only reiterate the old nonsense yet again, which will be depressing for all concerned. Yes, we’d better just do their PR for them.”⁶

Since one of the activists of the Yes Men lives in Paris, they agreed with the BBC to have the interview in Paris. They also announced that a Dow spokesman named ‘Jude Finisterra’ would give the interview. On the day of the interview, the Yes Men dressed up in their suits and drove to the BBC studio in Paris. Eventually, the “BBC World Service” broadcast the interview with the alleged Dow spokesman with the Eiffel tower as a backdrop. The false Dow spokesman proclaimed on BBC that the company would strike a completely new path. It would now take complete responsibility for the Bhopal disaster. In order to mitigate the consequences of the worst industrial accident in history, Jude Finisterra announced a USD 12 billion plan through which the victims should be compensated and the site cleaned up. Besides this, Dow was to work towards the extradition to India of the former responsible UCC manager, who had fled India in order to abscond from justice.⁷

True, Untrue, False?

After the original broadcast of the interview, the Yes Men did not wish to wait for the denial by Dow, but rather wrote a fake denial in which they invented such plain language as to anticipate, albeit somewhat more explicitly, the position that would later be taken by Dow:

“Dow will NOT commit ANY funds to compensate and treat 120,000 Bhopal residents who require lifelong care.... Dow will NOT remediate (clean up) the Bhopal plant site.... Dow’s sole and unique responsibility is to its shareholders, and Dow CANNOT do anything that goes against its bottom line unless forced to by law.”⁸

Their assumption at first was that the fake would be exposed immediately after it was originally broadcast. In actual fact, on the same morning the BBC broadcast the interview a second time in its full length on television, and excerpts of it on several of its radio stations. After two hours, Dow Chemical published a denial of its own. For another two hours the denial remained the top news item on Google news <news.google.com>, and remained the top news of that day. On the Frankfurt stock exchange Dow shares took a dive by 3.4 percent to 37 Euro (which

⁶ Quoted according to the entry “Dow. December 3, 2004” on the Web site of ‘The Yes Men.’ Available from <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/>. [15 October 2005]

⁷ The BBC interview is published on the Web site of ‘The Yes Men.’ available from <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/video.html>. [15 October 2005]

⁸ The full text of this denial, itself also a fake: ‘Dow “Help” Announcement Is Elaborate Hoax’ available from <http://www.dowethics.com/r/about/corp/bbc.htm>. [15 October 2005]

corresponded to an approximate loss of two million dollars).⁹ The fake denial drew some attention in its own right, and in the media was in some cases taken at face value.¹⁰

The BBC itself denied its own report after it had become plain that Jude Finisterra was by no means a spokesman of Dow Chemical:

“The individual was contacted by the BBC and, during a series of phone calls, claimed that there would be a significant announcement to be made on behalf of the Dow Chemical company. He gave no further detail until the live interview, broadcast from the BBC’s Paris bureau this morning. (...) This interview was inaccurate, part of an elaborate deception. It is now clear that the person did not, in fact, represent the Dow company and we want to make clear that the information he gave was entirely inaccurate.”¹¹

The BBC apologized to Dow and to viewers who had been misled by the coverage. Dow itself declared to the BBC: *“Dow confirms there was no basis whatsoever for this report. We also confirm Jude Finisterra is neither an employee nor a spokesperson for Dow.”¹²*

The main focus of the media coverage was on the BBC’s having fallen victim to a “hoax,” a fake. This can be explained chiefly by the journalistic reputation the BBC enjoys and the respectability it stands for:

“The BBC’s worldwide reputation for accuracy took a blow yesterday after it broadcast an interview with a hoaxer who claimed to offer a \$12bn settlement to the 120,000 surviving victims of the Bhopal disaster.”¹³

A further explanation for the line of attack of the coverage may be sought in the conflict between the BBC and the Blair government over the Gilligan/Kelly case. In connection with the Iraq war the BBC lost a judicial contention against the government. Regardless of the fact that it is most likely that *“‘Aunt BBC’ was*

⁹ ‘BBC apologises for Bhopal hoax’ *Times Online*, 3 December 2004 [online] available from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,3-1386431,00.html> [15 October 2005] and *The Yes Men* ‘acceptable risk’ [online] available from <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/> [15 October 2005]

¹⁰ For instance, the denial invented by the Yes Men is still featured without comment on the pages of the politically quite far right “Men’s News Daily” available from <http://www.mensnewsdaily.com/archive/newswire/news2004/1204/120304-dow-chemical-bhopal-hoax.htm> [15 October 2005; update 12 June 2005: page no longer available]

¹¹ Press Office ‘Press Releases. Statement on BBC World Bhopal interview’ 3 December 2004. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/12_december/03/world.shtml [15 October 2005] Cf. also the Reuters story on: <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6643459/> [12 June 2005]

¹² Holder, M. (2004) ‘BBC caught out in Bhopal Hoax’ BBC-NewsWatch, 3 December 2004 [online]. Available from on: http://news.bbc.co.uk/newswatch/ifs/hi/newsid_4060000/newsid_4065600/4065673.stm [15 October 2005]

¹³ “BBC reputation hit by Bhopal interview hoax” *The Guardian*, 4 December 2004 [online] available from <http://media.guardian.co.uk/site/story/0,14173,1366411,00.html> [15 October 2005] Cf. also Wikipedia: “The BBC World Service is one of the most widely recognised international broadcasters of radio programming, transmitting in 43 languages to around 150 million people throughout the world.” Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_World_Service [12 October 2005]

closer to the truth than the spin doctors of the British government” (Krempf 2004b), the Dow Chemical fake provides yet another occasion to state that *“There are once again doubts about the reliability of the BBC.”*¹⁴

From a cultural science perspective, the interest is not so much in the question of the journalistic tools of the trade, but rather in the pattern of action and of communication underlying the fake, and its socio-technical fundament.

Apparently true and un-true: “Identity correction”

The Dow Chemical fake was not the first time the Yes Men used this method. Their political aims can be located in the proximity of movements critical of globalization. Their attention is focused on the “big corporations,” the multinational companies whose power they wish to confront with their actions. Andy Bichbaum and Mike Bonnano, the two central actors of the Yes Men, come from the surroundings of “RTMark” (pronounced “ArtMark”), a project and network that had chosen “Corporate America” as its opponent. RTMark raises funds in its own right for actions like the Dow Chemical fake.

For some time now, the Yes Men have used the Internet as a means for corporate identity design and the corresponding content editing in the sense of faking existing Web pages, be it of the World Trade Organization WTO, or of US President George W. Bush. They succeeded in giving the impression that the ones “speaking” on the Yes-Men Web pages they run are indeed those to whom they create a proximity with semantic means.¹⁵

Such an action may also be termed a hoax or a prank. Regardless of the exact terminology, the fake can be seen as one of the central techniques of so-called guerrilla communication (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1997: 65; cf. also Kleiner 2005).¹⁶ Guerrilla communication is a generic term covering a wide range of action forms, such as culture jamming, invisible theatre, graffiti, happening, pie-throwing or cross-dressing, i.e. intervening publicly with symbolic means:

“The concept of guerrilla communication is a mix of ideology critique and a theory of the appropriation of the media based on action theory, whose reference points are the works of Eco and de Certeau, but also

implicitly the theses of cultural studies on a creative and wilful comprehension of the media.”

(Kleiner 2005: 358).

In the context of guerrilla communication, a sentence of Barthes’ is being quoted time and again: *“Is not the best subversion to distort the codes rather than destroy them?”* This designates a political self-conception in which hegemony and power are not being criticized through enlightenment (“knowledge is power”) and counter-public discourse. This means that the ‘truth’ should not be defended by the ‘right’ facts, the ‘real’ information, but rather, the aim is to subvert and delegitimize the “cultural grammar” (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1997: 14 ff.) of the staging of power and authority.¹⁷

What is central here are the advanced cultural techniques of camouflage, imitation, distortion, detournement, reframing and exaggeration of “dominant linguistic forms”. A fake *“mimics as perfectly as possible the voice of power in order to speak in its name and with its authority as undiscovered as possible for a limited period of time.”*¹⁸ In this context, the Yes Men speak of “Identity Correction” (The Yes Men 2004: 11 ff.). This may include forging official communications. The aim *“however is not primarily to attain an immediate material effect”* or to *“obtain personal advantages”*. Rather, it is all about triggering a communication process¹⁹ for which the discovery of the fake constitutes a precondition. More often than not, the effectiveness of a fake unfolds only in the process of its being discovered. Besides this, it is often noted approvingly that numerous fakes are often actions at the limits of or outside legality. The political aim in its turn provides the fake with that ‘higher’ legitimacy that leads many a victim of a fake to abstain from pursuing prosecution.²⁰

The opportunity to *“speak in the name of power”* (*ibid.*: 67) arises from the use of signs *“reserved for power”*. The Yes Men created an Internet site, <DowEthics.com>, which in the professionalism of its graphic handiwork as well as its linguistic profile was already aiming to generate the mix-up that eventually

¹⁷ This sentence may be understood as the credo of an understanding of communication specific to this type of protest and actions: *“The aim of guerrilla communication is therefore not the interruption of the channel of communication, but the hijacking and distortion of the messages transported through it. Guerrilla communication is a certain form of political communication that does not primarily try to transport plain text, as is usually done with fliers, slogans at demonstrations, and banners.”* (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1998).

¹⁸ *“A good fake owes its effect to the interaction of imitation, invention, distortion and exaggeration of existing linguistic forms. It mimics as perfectly as possible the voice of power in order to speak in its name and with its authority as undiscovered as possible for a limited period of time (e.g., by faking official communications). (...) The fake deploys its effectiveness in the course of the process following the exposure, in a chain of true and perhaps also false denials, perhaps complemented by yet other fakes or forgeries.”* (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1997, 65)

¹⁹ *“Just like in Umberto Eco’s “semiological guerrilla warfare” the idea of guerrilla communication is the deviant, dissident use of signs! It is a concept linking principles, methods, techniques and practices through which one can intervene in social communication processes, through which one can zestfully intervene on a symbolic-cultural level.”* (Jahrmann 1998).

²⁰ On fake theory cf. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe (1997: 66 ff.).

¹⁴ *“With some likelihood it may have hurt the credibility of the institution BBC even more than the Kelly case.”* Süddeutsche Zeitung 4. December 2004 [online] available from <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/ausland/artikel/139/44095/> [15 October 2005]. On the term “spin doctor” cf. Krempf (2004a).

¹⁵ Cf. the Web site www.gatt.org/ on which they create the impression that it is in fact an official World Trade Organization (WTO) site (cf. also URL: <<http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/wto.shtml>> [15 October 2005]) as well as www.qwbush.com/ which appeared as an official George W. Bush website (cf. also URL: <<http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/bush/qwbushcom.shtml>> [15 October 2005]), and also The Yes Men (2004, 15ff.).

¹⁶ Cf. also the “Blogchronik der Kommunikationsguerilla” (blog chronicles of the communication guerilla) in which current examples are discussed and referenced as they come up. Available from <http://kommunikationsguerilla.twoday.net/topics/Fake/> [15 October 2005]

happened. Confusing the BBC journalist was the precondition for the TV interview with the non-existent spokesperson for Dow Chemical, Jude Finisterra. A further example is the website <www.gatt.org> which bears the old name of the World Trade Organization WTO. Back in 2000 it opened up the opportunity for the Yes Men to appear as false representatives of the WTO at international conferences. In this way they enacted on multiple occasions the activist philosophy of guerrilla communication,²¹ which says that the aim is to create ‘true events’ through false information:

“We find ourselves in a field in which all these fictions are constantly being spun. And so we ourselves end up becoming a bit imaginative in terms of how WE create fictions in order to get closer to a truth. Just like in our concept of the ‘identity correction.’ Taking up someone’s identity - which entails falsifying information - and passing yourself off as someone with the final aim of revealing something about these people. The aim is thus to get hold of a truth while using the very weapons of fiction used continuously by the people IN power.”

(Willmann 2004)

Thus the political aim of their fake can be summarized as follows: just before the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal catastrophe, the Yes Men’s main intention was to force Dow Chemical to make a public statement about the consequences of the disaster.

“Instead we settle on having the impossible Jude announce a radical new direction for the company, one in which Dow takes full responsibility for the disaster. We will lay out a straightforward ethical path for Dow to follow to compensate the victims, remediate the site, and otherwise help make amends for the worst industrial disaster in history.”

After the broadcast of the fake interview Dow Chemical was left with two options for its response. Either to deny or to take up the path of ethical action sketched out by the Yes Men and to continue on that path.²² Dow denied and had to put up with yet more damage to their image.

Context and text

‘Guerrilla communication’ is a form of activism and protest that existed even before the advent of the Internet (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1997), but

²¹ Cf. autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1997: 70 f.; 156; also: Gruber (1989: 139).

²² The Yes Men explain this technique as follows. “By correcting identities we either show the true face of an organization like the WTO or we adopt the identity of a representative and make him do what we deem appropriate” (quoted according to Brendel 2005). Since the Yes Men did not believe that Dow Chemical would depart from the hard line they had so far taken towards the Bhopal victims, very soon after the broadcast of the interview they disseminated a denial as an “identity correction”, itself faked, already anticipating the tone with which Dow was to react.

received another boost by the continuing diffusion of net-based communication as well as the appearance of transnational social movements (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 2003: 95).

“Guerrilla communication differs from traditional action forms in that it consciously exploits the density of meaning of images and narrations.”

(autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 2003: 97)

This is why actions of guerrilla communication deal specifically with the conditions of reception of (oppositional) political content and the (im-)possibility of counter-public presence. It is not the practices of such actions that are new. What is innovative is an understanding of counter-public presence in which it is not assumed that it is enough to present the subjects with the facts in order for them to act “reasonably” or “rationally”. Bearing this in mind, it is precisely the conditions of communication on the Internet, and specifically the contextual poverty of net-based communication, which provide opportunities for distortions of all kinds, and which constitute a central principle of these patterns of action and of communication:

“In a way the Internet currently provides very good initial conditions for certain types of fakes because some of the possibilities for re-assurance available in face-to-face communication are missing, and other forms have yet to be developed.”

(autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 1998)

The contextual poverty of net-based communication resulting from the “channel reduction” is hereby used in order to speak in the name of another or of a political opponent, and to provoke events which are not in the interest of the one in whose name one is speaking, to expose or discredit them.

The underlying semantic context lies in the fact that the use of the Internet relies mostly on labels and names. They provide orientation. The World Trade Organization WTO is found in the Internet not because its building in the Internet is impossible to miss, but because the well-known acronym WTO points the way to the virtual place of the organization and establishes - or only promises - a relationship to the contents of the WTO on the corresponding Web site <www.wto.org>. One of the key preconditions for the visibility of and the ease of finding large and well-known institutions and organizations on the Internet is the marking of signs and symbols. At the same time the space of signs and symbols in the Internet is not unambiguous. Whereas in ‘real life’ smaller groups and organizations could hardly hope for a mix-up based on their own building, the situation is entirely different in the case of a semantic proximity to mighty institutions on the Internet.

This is why activists like the Yes Men search the Internet for semantic points of contact in order to articulate criticism of powerful organizations and institutions. Due to the relative lack of context (with regard to the sensuous characteristics of the act of communicating) of the Internet, they deliver their own information to unsuspecting net users like the BBC journalist:

“Activists can achieve in the multidimensional space of signs of the net what would be unthinkable in the real space of the streets - for instance, to build a wagon fortress (Wagenburg) a hundred meters high in the vicinity of the towers of the Deutsche Bank.”

(autonome a.f.r.i.k.a.-gruppe 2004).

In this sense, actions like the Dow Chemical fake again and again force net users to ask themselves the question of whether all this is legitimate, and thus implicitly contribute to the increase of media competence and the development of media education:

“While in the field of literature they proclaim the end of a pop culture deemed as apolitical as self-staging, there is in the Internet a polit-pop working good deeds with bad means. Web sites are being forged, false reports are being circulated, and artists are passing themselves off as politicians. But the stage-managing is not an end in itself. The imposture is taking place in the service of enlightenment and serves to impart media competence. The point is to educate to mistrust.”²³

(Simanowski 2001)

This mistrust towards the context of text will in the future become key for collecting, viewing and filtering information, the founding cultural technique of the digital age.

Socio-cultural change

Regardless of whether this interpretation does indeed do justice to the actual intention of activists like the Yes Men, the media cultural technique of the fake is for sure more than a prank, a hoax or even a “falsification of documents.” The fakes of the Yes Men refer both to the current technical communication conditions of political activism and social protest, and to the increased importance of (not only) political symbolic practices. The practices of the Yes Men also underline that the socio-cultural change with respect to the political patterns of action and of communication do not consist in the substitution of ‘real life’ by ‘virtual life’, but should rather be understood as the intertwining of various spaces and “regions of meaning” (Schütz/Luckmann 1979: 49) in the sense of a “culture of real virtuality” (Castells 2004: 376 ff.).²⁴

The guerrilla communication actions that have increasingly made their appearance over the past few years are also more than a “porting” of existing political patterns of action and of communication from ‘real life’ to the Internet. Rather,

²³ Cf. also Plake/Jansen/Schumacher (2001: 129), who discuss the question of media competence with regard to rumours and unauthorized information.

²⁴ In the actions of the Yes Men, for instance, Internet, TV and cyber-theater performances are intertwined. Cf., as an additional example, the description of the performance of the Yes Men as representatives of the WTO in Salzburg in May 2000. Available from <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/salzburg/> [15 October 2005] as well as *The Yes Men* (2004: 23 ff.).

the Internet and its technical context facilitate a recombination of the fake under modified technical conditions of communication. (Schönberger 2005). The Yes Men represent a type of net activism that makes use of the technical conditions of the Internet to develop new or broadened (recombinant) protest forms. At the same time, they conceive of the Internet as of a political organic space with a specific political understanding. Another condition for the increased significance of such actions in recent years is the existence of a critical mass of those “symbol analysts” which have the necessary cultural capital, and which are capable of carrying out such sophisticated forms of protest. The growth of the IT sector and corresponding services constitute the social condition for this.

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