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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Exploring Humor and Media Hoaxing in Social Justice Activism

Ian Reilly

Humour and satire have figured only marginally in the recent groundswell of activist literature dedicated to the renewal of tools, tactics, and strategies. In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of humour and media hoaxing as tactics within activist communities—in a moment characterized by increased distrust in news organizations and information—this essay offers insight into artist and activist thinking on a topic rarely discussed in social justice activism circles. In drawing on the views and perspectives of individuals that participated in a weekend-long workshop held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and run by the Yes Lab for Creative Activism, I argue that humour and media hoaxing are under-utilized tactics and approaches that nevertheless inspire a great deal of discussion and reflection, and retain a distinctly positive charge in their future application to social justice struggle. More specifically, interviews culled from this one-time event point to the challenges and opportunities of integrating media strategies, humour, and hoaxing, all the while acknowledging the defining tensions and asymmetries that mark the current moment.
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In 2017, "fake news" was declared the Collins Dictionary *Word of the* Year. Not to be outdone, the American Dialect Society also selected the term as its year-end choice. Importantly, the distinction for Collins carries with it the word's inclusion in the dictionary. Collins defines fake news as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guide of news reporting." In the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, fake news has become so ubiquitous that the frequency of use and visibility of the term has pushed the concept to the far reaches of Internet and popular media discussion and debate. Popular press coverage and scholarly work on fake news has reached a fever pitch of sorts, which has led to some concern that both the concept and the phenomenon have been emptied of its broader significance and meaning. If everything is or can be reduced to fake news, this line of inquiry suggests, then all public discourse is either harmful or all too readily dismissed.

To do so, however, is to miss how fake news is manifest as misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, partisanship, hacking, and hoaxing. Not all fake news materializes in negative fashion or inspires negative connotations: in America, satirical voices such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (*TDS*) and *The Onion* were the first to capture the popular imagination with their respective uses of the term. Elsewhere, activist groups such as the Yes Men[1] have harnessed the power of fake news by way of hoaxing to generate news media coverage on social justice issues, as they did with the publication of their fake *New York Times* (2008), *New York Post* (2009), and *Washington Post* (2019) projects. The *TDS, Onion,* and Yes Men examples all highlight the uses of humor and satire in the expression of alternate forms of fake news that share very little with their more destructive and deceptive counterparts.

The creative dimensions of this project have proven so influential that groups like the Yes Men have created infrastructure for the training and mentoring of activist groups looking for opportunities to reach broader publics. Thus, hoaxing has proven an important cultural practice for thinking about contemporary activist work; what's more, the practice has also become a rich site from which to explore and measure the efficacy of activist interventionist work. At a moment where activist and social movement scholars are revisiting theories of social change (Turbulence Collective 2010; Haiven & Khasnabish 2014; Harrebye 2016; Duncombe and Lambert, 2018), devising new frameworks, tools, and metrics for measuring the efficacy of activist work (Duncombe 2016; Karpf 2016), and reconceptualizing models of what constitutes civic engagement (Banaji & Buckingham 2013; Uldam & Verstergaard 2015; Gordon & Mihailidis 2016), media hoaxing represents a generative site for exploring these ongoing and emerging concerns. With the increased scholarly attention devoted to the uneven terrain of activist training and mentorship (Whelan 2000; Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014; Harrebye 2015; Grayson 2011), exploring the efficacy and legitimacy of these tactics is both timely and relevant.

Despite the popularity and influence of groups such as the Yes Men, humor and satire have figured only marginally in the recent groundswell of activist literature dedicated to the renewal of tools, tactics, and strategies. In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of

[1]The Yes Men are tactical media artists engaged in social justice activism. For over twenty years, the group has targeted the world's most powerful institutions—governments, corporations, and influential figures—on grounds of unethical, harmful, and/or dangerous policies and practices. Their actions have been documented in three feature-length documentary films: *The Yes Men* (2003), *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), and *The Yes Men Are Revolting* (2014).

humor and media hoaxing as tactics within activist communities—in a moment characterized by increased distrust in news organizations and information—this essay offers insight into artist and activist thinking on a topic rarely discussed in social justice activism circles. In drawing on the views and perspectives of individuals who participated in a weekend-long workshop held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and run by the Yes Lab for Creative Activism, I argue that humor and media hoaxing are under-utilized tactics and approaches that inspire a great deal of discussion and reflection, and retain a distinctly positive charge in their future application to social justice struggle. More specifically, interviews culled from this one-time event point to the challenges and opportunities of integrating media strategies, humor, and hoaxing, all the while acknowledging the defining tensions and asymmetries that mark the current moment.

Creative Activism: Artists, Activists, and Social Justice

Over the past decade, artists and activists have expressed renewed interest in exploring the intersections of creative praxis and political protest in the realm of social justice struggle. Holmes (2007, p. 290) argued for increased collaboration within artist-activist collectives in the elaboration of "further constructive projects and experiments in subversion." Increased collaboration on this front, Holmes (2007, pp. 290-291) explained, would lay the foundation for artists seeking greater autonomy from the gallery/museum system and advertising industry, and for activists and social groups looking to appropriate "expressive tools from the information economy" to open up new fields of possibility. For Cruz (2012), increased gaps between cultural institutions and the public have led to a hollowing out of a shared civic imagination and political will; art must not only participate in the dramatization of the socio-economic histories and injustices of our age, it must also become an instrument capable of transcending them through new conceptions of, and alternatives to, the current order of things. To do this, Cruz (2012, p. 61) argued that "the autonomous role of artists needs to be coupled with the role of the activist. I don't see one as more important than the other because both are necessary today." During this period, arguments for increased grounded cultural activism (Irzik 2011) ran parallel with more pronounced calls for engaging art at the level of tactical activist interventions (Scholl 2011). In the latter formulation, the emphasis on activist praxis is conceived of as a concerted move toward "empowerment for tangible change," an antidote of sorts to the pitfalls associated with political cynicism (Irzik 2011, p. 154). This confluence of art and activism would serve as a much needed catalyst for bolstering creative perspectives and innovative interventions among grassroots activists (Duncombe 2013). Indeed, art and activism stand to benefit from a shared cross-pollination of activities: "In order for the emotional affect of art to have political effect, art needs to be combined with activism … In order for the political effect of activism to have an emotional affect, activism needs to be combined with art" (Duncombe & Lambert 2018, 64).

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the coupling of art and activism has seen its purest expression under two overlapping terms: creative activism and artistic activism. These terms are at times confused and/or arbitrarily lumped in with overlapping historical precursors, such as protest art, artivism, resistance art, and culture jamming, among others (Jasper 1997). Artistic activism is a hybrid practice that combines "the affective qualities of art with the effective capabilities of activism" (Duncombe & Harrebye 2016). Creative activism refers to a type of activism conveyed through artistic messages or happenings and expressed via creative means of communication (Harrebye 2011). Creative activists are perhaps best described as provocateurs, facilitators, "civic mediators," (Harrebye 2011, p. 418) "political party crashers," and "triggers of dissatisfaction"

(Harrebye 2016, p. 56, p. 66) that often act as first movers within the circular cycles of contention. Interventions of this kind are meant to disrupt the steady, predictable rhythms of mainstream media reportage, that is, the "presentation of consistent, repetitive messages to large, heterogeneous audiences [that] shape broad-based popular opinion, [and foster] mass consumption" (Lievrouw 2011, p. 151).

Creative activism also refers to a process-oriented and process-based form of praxis (Harrebye 2015) that harnesses traditional and emerging tactics with a variety of media production techniques and outputs in the elaboration 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" (Reilly 2018, p. 50). Creative activism also expresses the desire to bring media creators, artists, and changemakers together to dramatize issues and problems in a compelling fashion in the interests of presenting solutions and alternatives to the current state of affairs. More specifically, the broader goals of creative activism have been to ensure the wider adoption and adaptation of creative actions and interventions among activist groups and organizations ("Artistic Activism") and to create a framework for more self-reflexive and critical activist practices that reflect on the efficacy and viability of activist interventions. The primacy of creativity, humor, technological sophistication, and collaboration is central to the repertoires of action that have taken root over the past decade (Boyd & Mitchell 2012, p. 3).

The Ongoing Renewal of Tactics

The convergence of artist and activist work in the service of social justice has also precipitated a renewed interest in the deployment of tactics. A core consideration for any activist group or community is not only how best to articulate a vision of what one would like to achieve, but also how to reach the end point for any action or campaign. At the turn of the century, the Critical Art Ensemble (2001, p. 8) summed up the essence of tactics in this way: "The tactical media practitioner uses any media necessary to meet the demands of the situation .... Whatever media provide the best means for communication and participation in a given situation are the ones that they will use." For social movement and media scholars, the study of tactics and strategies has long held an important place in evaluating or measuring which tools enable activists (individuals, organizations, crowds) to achieve their goals (Meikle 2018, p. 3). Tactics can retain a degree of malleability, in that they can just as easily serve as the building-block elements of broader campaign strategies or materialize as the only viable options available to groups lacking strategic power (Bogad 2016, p. 86). Repertoire change is well documented, but it is clear that change evolves and materializes slowly, most often through spurts of innovation (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, p. 19). Despite slower shifts in repertoire change, activists have continued to draw on inherited tactics and strategies (demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, occupations), all the while devising news ones (DDOS, doxxing, data leaks, #s and RTs) (Meikle 2018). Easterling (2014 p. 276) has shown that alternative activist repertoires are alive and well, with techniques/tactics such as "gossip, rumor, gift-giving, compliance, mimicry, remote control, meaninglessness, misdirection, distraction, hacking, or entrepreneurialism" all informing longstanding and perhaps unfamiliar practices. Whatever the tactic, Alinsky (1971, p. 128) argued, the people must enjoy it: "*A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.* If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with the tactic." The more activists are to innovate and renew their tactics, the better positioned they are to feed a movement's evolving strategy (Bogad 2016, p. 86).

Indeed, the renewed interest in carving out space for the renewal of tactics has materialized through "keywords" literature (*Keywords for Radicals*), toolbox guides (*Beautiful Trouble*), platforms/databases (Actipedia), and training institutes (Ruckus Society, Center for Artistic Activism). As the book's subtitle suggests, *Keywords for Radicals* presents a "contested vocabulary of late-capitalist struggle," recasting both hegemonic and marginalized forms of language as fundamental sites of contestation. Two vital examples of organizing, documenting, displaying, and sharing creative actions and tactical interventions are *Beautiful Trouble* and Actipedia. *Beautiful Trouble* is a combination website and book that features dozens of case studies that provide thorough overviews of historical and contemporary creative actions, offering concrete explanations as to why actions have failed or succeeded, and what theories, tactics, and principles have proven useful. Similarly, Actipedia mirrors the Wikipedia format in offering an open-access, user-generated database comprised solely of creative activism case studies and representative actions from urban mega-centers as diverse as Damascus, Toronto, Beijing, Dubai, Sao Paolo, and Buenos Aires. Add to this the sustained efforts of training institutes such as the Center for Artistic Activism, organizations that offer a mix of education, research, and mentorship to not only bolster creative activist work, but also to make it more effective. Together these wide-ranging initiatives have served to introduce new paradigms for activist praxis and collaboration and to promote greater visibility for creative activist work, all the while exploring the efficacy and value of various tactics.

Humor and Media Hoaxing

The importance of laughter, humor, irony, parody, and fun has figured prominently in critical and scholarly discussions of media activism and media criticism (Dery 1993; Jenkins 2006; Duncombe 2007; Hynes et al. 2007; Moore 2007; Warner 2007; Day 2011; Wettergren 2009; Bogad 2016; Reilly 2018). A recent tide of scholarship has also made explicit the growing significance of humor in the realms of politics and activism (Krefting 2014; Rentschler & Thrift 2015; Weaver & Mora 2015; Sørensen 2016; Bobker 2018; Bore et al. 2018; Ringrose & Lawrence 2018; Hennefeld et al. 2019).[2] Despite the continued attention devoted to these cultural and political dynamics, the uses of humor—as well as the second key tactic explored in this essay, media hoaxing—have not attracted a great deal of scrutiny at the level of activist praxis and academic scholarship.

As a proven example of tactical intervention, hoaxing has continued to persist in the activist repertoire precisely because activists have long struggled to gain equitable access to the means of public communication (Downing 2001; Hackett & Carroll 2006). As Lim (2018, p. 12) has recently observed, "attention is unequally distributed making it unlikely for complex narratives of injustices to gain high visibility."[3] Due to the continued marginalization of activists and activist work in and across mainstream media discourse (Gitlin,1980; Elmer & Opel 2008;

[2]Of particular note is a recent Special Issue of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (Spring 2019), entitled "What's So Funny about Comedy and Humor Studies?"

[3]"The mainstream media, but also movement media and self-mediation processes are the main channels through which public visibility is achieved. Despite the increased opportunities for visibility, the fragmentation of media outlets/platforms and the rise of diverse communication technologies have fractured and reduced the possibilities of and potential for high visibility" (Cammaerts, Mattoni & McCurdy 2013, p. 10).

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Cammaerts, Mattoni & McCurdy 2013; Roberts 2014), communities and social groups have turned to producing more creative and attention-grabbing spectacles (Duncombe 2007; Wettergren 2009; Day 2011) as vehicles for bringing often-underrepresented voices, issues, and movements to greater prominence in mediated public spheres.[4] Just as the political establishment produces happenings that are "incited into existence for the purpose of being reported" (Boorstin 1961, p. 210), so too are activists creating spectacles to generate greater visibility for their causes. Examples of the practice range from outlandish to benign, but an ongoing development in the hijacking of news media has materialized in the deceptive practice known as media hoaxing.

Not all media hoaxing activities seek to impoverish the health and vitality of news and information (Walsh 2006; Reilly 2013); rather, activist groups have increasingly incorporated this tactic in the creation of ethically motivated social justice campaigns (Boyd & Mitchell 2012; Haugerud 2013). If producing a media strategy alone is challenging enough within social movements—with competing emphases on building the membership, raising consciousness among members, getting media attention, or counteracting the media framing strategies of opponents (Valocchi 2010, p. 13)—decisions to adopt media hoaxing as a viable tool in the activist repertoire should not be taken lightly. The most well-known group to adopt this strategy is the Yes Men, a cluster of activists that have impersonated the Government of Canada, Dow Chemical, Shell, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (among many others) to critique perceived flaws in their institutional and/or policy practices. The practice of media hoaxing, as deployed by the Yes Men and their growing list of collaborators, is an important site of scholarly inquiry because it complicates longstanding views regarding the negative function ascribed to hoaxing practices in general, and media hoaxing endeavors in particular. For the Yes Men, the combination of humor and media hoaxing represents the perfect cocktail of activist mischief, "the sugar-coated pill that softens one's willingness to engage difficult issues, particularly for apolitical or disaffected audiences" (Reilly 2018, p. 148). It would seem that the latter elements are simmering in a period of slow tactical evolution. A closer examination of the perceived usefulness or effectiveness of these tactics is thus meant to advance our understanding of the potential suitability, applicability, and impact such tools may have on future activist endeavors.

Description of the Study

In January 2018, our two-person research team organized a workshop facilitated by the Yes Lab for Creative Activism. This essay draws on participant observation, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with artists and activists that participated in a workshop on using humor and creativity in social change struggle. Drawing on Richardson and Hjorth's (2017) ethnographic methods, I narrate and interpret the experiences of a number of our participants to better elucidate the perceived possibilities and limitations of the tactics described. Of the 24 workshop attendees, 17 served as respondents in the study. Prior to the Yes Lab event, registered participants were invited to complete a survey to assist the workshop facilitator in catering to the interests of the prospective group. Of the 24 respondents, 67% identified as activists interested in using creativity in their work, while 33% identified as artists interested in creating positive change.

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[4]"[Self-mediation] serves an outbound purpose of mediating self-representations undistorted by mass media gatekeepers to wider publics; it serves an inbound purpose as a self-referential act of communication that can reinforce intra-movement commitment and political identities" (Uldam & Askanius 2013, p. 166).

Activists cited working on behalf of groups or organizations, most in the express interests of advancing a broader agenda of social justice and social change. Artists cited working in media arts, vlogging, writing, performance, crafts, printmaking, painting, musical theatre, and VR, among other practices. When asked to discuss issues/causes they are most passionate about, the latter described basic income, environmental protection, fossil fuel divestment, sexual assault survivor support, food security, anti-oppression, and anti-capitalism, among others.[5] Other prompts requested information on current or ongoing campaigns that could be integrated into the Yes Lab workshop, including but not limited to goals, motives, perspectives, strategies, and audiences associated with a given campaign. Information provided helped Yes Lab organizers to better situate who would be in the room, what types of activist work and social struggles participants were engaged in, and how best to serve the wide variety of people interested in attending.

Workshop Content

Just as the Yes Lab was promoted as a workshop on using humor and creativity in social change struggle, the content was designed to highlight broader currents of humor and creativity in both artistic and activist practices. The two-day workshop was divided in terms of theory and praxis, whereby participants were invited to explore activist histories (both hidden and well-known), trickster mythologies, cultural theory, tactical and strategic repertoires, and contemporary case studies—with an eye toward leveraging these elements in the creation of future collaborative actions. The event was led by comedian, filmmaker, activist, and Yes Lab facilitator, Sean Devlin. Following a warm round of general introductions, Devlin began the workshop by describing some of his own comedic and activist work (Shit Harper Did), before turning to a brief introduction of media activist collective the Yes Men and the Yes Lab for Creative Activism. The Yes Men's inclusion in the workshop content is by no means accidental; both the Yes Lab format and the organization were created by the group. To better prepare participants for the weekend's core activities, Devlin screened footage of two Yes Men media hoaxes designed to highlight the "trickster spirit in action." One hoax involving the participation of U.S. whistleblower Edward Snowden saw the widespread circulation of a fictitious data mining policy at the biggest music festival in Northern Europe (Roskilde). The festival's stated (and staged) policy of collecting and indefinitely storing any and all text and phone messages on festival grounds was the seat of controversy for both attendees and observers online. The orchestrated hoax and its accompanying spectacle served to bring state and corporate surveillance to the fore, with Edward Snowden (joining in as part of the hoax's revelation) appearing via video conferencing to a large festival crowd.

The second hoax highlighted "how an elaborate lie helped stop a $4.9 billion oil drilling project in its tracks." This tightly executed action featured a fictitious Shell Oil corporation hosting a lavish launch party to celebrate its future offshore drilling operations in the Arctic, a simulated company-led public relations fiasco on Twitter, as well as an enthusiastic user-generated online meme campaign to satirize and criticize the real company's plans. The goal was to add much needed visibility to, and raise the public profile of, Shell's poorly publicized oil extraction agenda. The U.S. government would ultimately ground Shell's operations in 2015 due in part to the mounting pressure and controversy created by environmental activists ("U.S. curbs"). These

[5]When asked to describe the degree to which they have been politically engaged, 75% affirmed they are engaged (contra *very* or *not very engaged*).

examples foregrounded key aspects of the workshop to come: the significance of the trickster spirit in action, the importance of being able to distill the essence of one's art or activism, the advantages of drawing on proven tactics and strategies (e.g., prefigurative interventions, decision dilemmas), and above all, the opportunities of collaborating with like-minded people.

The first day of the workshop was dedicated to establishing the uses of humor, creativity, and artifice in the elaboration of activist work. One segment/presentation entitled, "100 years of creative action," offered participants a unique entry point to exploring these themes through better and lesser known historical examples of activist struggle: the Suffrage Movement in Canada, the "I am a Man" labor strike of the Civil Rights Movement, the Otpor! civic youth movement to overthrow Slobodan Miloševic, and Indigenous Resistance in Nova Scotia, among many others. The cumulative effect of seeing a century's worth of struggle and creative resistance was empowering and inspiring for many of the participants, as evinced in the generative discussions that followed. The emphasis on the visual and rhetorical dynamism that underpinned these savvy media spectacles further served to reinforce the promise of adopting these tactics at the current moment.

This historical overview was also presented in the interests of introducing two overarching tactics: the prefigurative intervention and the decision dilemma. For Devlin, drawing from the *Beautiful Trouble* activist toolbox primer, a prefigurative intervention offers a "glimpse of the utopia we're working for and shows us how the world could be, to make such a world feel not just possible, but irresistible"; a decision dilemma refers to the process of designing an action so that the "target is forced to make a decision, and all their available options play to your advantage." Together, these two tactics would serve as foundational reference points for the day's case studies and activities. Trickster discussions surrounding the Norse God, Loki, musings on the theory and function of bouffon via Philippe Gaulier and Sacha Baron Cohen, activist hoaxing activities targeting Canada's Economic Action Plan (2014), as well as the aforementioned Yes Men actions all brought core creative tactics front and center. In addition to grounding these tactics in relation to successful actions, attendees were invited to pair off into groups of two to reflect more deeply on their work in order to better distill the essence of their art and activism. All of the above actions and activities prepared the way for the next day's combination of theory- and praxis- based exercises.

The second day introduced more theories and perspectives surrounding activist collaboration, with the ultimate goal being to lay the groundwork for potential future actions. Discussions were wide-ranging, but the emphasis was directed toward fostering "critical connections" among artists and activists that might lead to the cultivation of stronger ties. Another important facet of the day's activities was to highlight (and later reflect on) key tactics and strategies. For example, participants were asked to grapple with the differences between *communicative* and *concrete* tactics in order to arrive at desirable goals that are specific, measurable, activating, realistic, and time-bound (Russell 2012). The broader discussion regarding making distinctions between measurable goals with direct impact (concrete) and symbolic acts (communicative) segued into a more focused overview of audiences—both real and imagined. Through an examination of "the spectrum of allies" concept, the group was invited to dwell on how best to position their work in the lead-up to an action. For the Yes Men, humor is most effective when it brings underrepresented issues to large groups of people, "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)" (Servin 2015, p. 196). A group's ability to identify impacted communities and stakeholders will prepare the way to more convincingly persuade the latter to move closer to their position, no matter where they fall on the spectrum (Bloch 2018, p. 365). These activities were designed to inspire greater attention to the social dynamics underpinning the creation of strong ties, greater care in designing effective actions, and greater interest in broadening the spectrum of allies. Although Devlin was clear in noting that each action or campaign requires special consideration in the elaboration of tools, tactics, and strategies, (the foregrounding of) humor and hoaxing served as a constant fixture during the two-day workshop.

Analysis and Discussion

Interviews with Yes Lab participants were scheduled two months after the workshop (April 2018). The event was advertised as part of a research project about meaning making, media hoaxing, and activist learning. In agreeing to participate in the workshop, respondents were asked to share their impressions of and experiences with the workshop and its relation to social justice and social change work. More specifically, artist and activist interviewees were asked to address the importance of media strategies and campaigns in their work, the significance of humor in activist and social change work, as well as the perceived merits of media hoaxing as a social justice activist tactic.

"Without media, you're speaking to yourself"

As a group, the diversity of views on the uses of media strategies was apparent, with the only real consensus on the topic appearing in terms of how difficult it is to captivate public attention. For one activist working on basic income advocacy, media campaigns played no role in her group's current work or organizing. For one member of a student feminist collective, media campaigns were difficult to imagine, as they lacked the skill set to do this work, and were unsure as to how to bring such campaigns to fruition. For professionalized (NGO) activists, media campaigns were framed as necessary and expected in day-to-day operations (press releases, outreach), with campaign activities serving as measures of or metrics for success. The "flat and unsatisfying" professionalized practices were deemed less engaging than the more dynamic and fun meme creation activities of the fossil fuel divestment activists in attendance. Many pointed to the potential positive outcomes attached to media coverage, such as greater public awareness of civic issues and causes. As one artist succinctly noted, "without media, you're speaking to yourself." The ability to pierce through the gatekeeping apparatus was also something to be relished ("whenever the media picked up a divest story it felt like a 'win'"). It is worth noting that a vast majority did not identify as having the skills, experience, or wherewithal to carry out these kinds of interventions; despite these professed limitations, the promise of this work was perceived to be "impactful" in "garnering a public audience." Despite these hopeful claims, the public awareness and visibility achieved via media work alone were often cast as being undercut by news organizations distorting or misrepresenting core activist messages. One chorus of commentators echoed the challenges of controlling the message once it goes public or when one's words have been misconstrued. Given the very public nature of being an activist, especially of being an activist engaged in self-mediation, some expressed genuine reluctance to participate in any "outward facing media," due to the perceived risks of being an activist in the

current climate. Beyond the immediate risks of being a publicly visible activist or political artist, being precariously employed also makes participation in mediated campaigns less likely for fear of reprisal. During the workshop, enthusiasm for/about media campaign work was palpable, with many feeling energized and inspired by the works presented or discussed. In particular, well executed interventions by the Yes Men and Shit Harper Did generated a great deal of discussion, as did the campaigns featured in "100 years of creative action." The palpable mix of enthusiasm and trepidation was notable across interviews, suggesting that there are many opportunities and hurdles facing interested parties.

"Humor is important for social change"

Discussing humor in direct relation to activist work is all but rare. Responses regarding the applicability to and feasibility of humor can be divided into three sets of perspectives: the cynical, the optimistic, and the pragmatic. To appreciate the degree to which humor was deemed an important and under-utilized tactic in art and activism, we must also contend with some valid critiques made on the part of a small minority of respondents. For those espousing more cautious views on the topic, humor was described as exclusionary (only for those in the know), potentially destructive, deeply cynical (it doesn't make anyone feel better), and ultimately detracting from the seriousness of an issue or cause. According to one activist, given the current political climate, activist humor "doesn't feel quite right," and as a fellow artist-activist put it, "it's hard to use humor when the world is on fire."

Discussions surrounding the uses of humor both during and after the workshop were at once instructive and insightful. Perhaps in keeping with the above discussion regarding the challenges of being an activist today, many likened humor to a safety salve, coping mechanism, survival strategy, and empathy builder. For those experiencing burnout and despair, humor offers relief (or "catharsis") and is understood as "more of a survival strategy." Similarly, humor is cast as helping to sustain the efforts of organizers doing social justice work while combating "the depressive nature of politics and organizing." Yet another complementary perspective sought to frame humor as a tool for reaching across divides and breaking down walls between different types of people, encouraging empathy, reticence, and discomfort, and to incite people to "want to get involved in something for the collective good." Others stressed the levity that humor provides:

- Laughter is crucial in settings where activists can be angry or militant;
- The use of self-deprecating humor within an interpersonal or community dynamic enables one to laugh at how seriously one takes their activist work;
- The power of humor is described as being more readily apparent outside of the immediate context of activist work, but the pleasure it produces through laughter is powerful ("it made me feel *so* good").

Importantly, for the artists and activists attending a workshop centering on humor and creativity, the event firmly established humor's standing as a fun entry point to news media access and as a means of generating attention for critical issues. As one artist noted, the exposure to humor in this context "intensified my desire to integrate fun into my activism." Humor is not only conceived of as a "subset of fun," but also as a means to channel fun in the elaboration of serious causes. The NGO activists also noted a growing interest in integrating humor in their activist work, despite not singling out this tactic as being part of a set of campaigning goals or outcomes.

Just as some participants expressed optimism regarding the potential power of media-savvy campaigns, similar challenges of integrating these promising tactics and strategies were tied to not having (access to) the necessary resources or desired skill sets. One challenge of integrating humor in artist-activist projects is the lack of precedent for channeling fun or funny elements into serious work: "Everything is always so immediate that we don't have time to try these things … but I think that we should." Another difficult aspect of harnessing humor is carving out the ability to meaningfully "negotiate appropriate use of humor for these massive hard-hitting issues"—some issues are difficult to address via humor (e.g., white supremacy, misogyny), even for the most talented comedians or humorists. Finally, tying together two of the separate but related themes of this article, one artist argued that not only is it difficult to write good humor, it is equally challenging to execute a successful hoax.

"Creating a false scenario that forces action"

Given the workshop's emphasis on the "trickster spirit in action," as well as the broader focus on the creative and imaginative hoaxing activities of the Yes Men, participants were asked to reflect on the role and/or viability of media hoaxing as a social justice tactic. If enthusiasm for media campaigns and humor was distributed more or less evenly among respondents, media hoaxing materialized as a much thornier and divisive point of discussion. Although the merits and shortcomings of the tactic for artist-activist work were clearly articulated, no real consensus emerged as to whether this approach should be adopted. Many of the concerns about hoaxing materialized in regards to its appropriateness, feasibility, and impact in relation to art and activist work. In terms of appropriateness, some expressed concern that hoaxing could compromise or damage longstanding relationships with local media, city councilors, and community members. The angle of deception could also be cast negatively, thereby rendering hoaxing activities as less amenable to art or activist work. In the event of an unsuccessful hoax, one artist likened the latter to a bad Halloween costume: "By the end of the night you're just so tired of explaining yourself that you might as well have stayed home." The feasibility of engaging in hoaxing garnered less enthusiasm, with respondents referring to the practice as a "one trick pony" or a "one-time thing" with a very limited shelf life. On a related note, one activist posed the following question: "How long and how well can these stunts continue to be pulled off?" Skepticism surrounding the use of this tactic was thus tied to the enormous challenges of executing a successful hoax, as well as the rare opportunities to carry out such a project. In terms of impact, the degree of change was perceived to be negligible: "What do you do after you've hoaxed the people? Where does the community building come from?"

Media hoaxing also inspired a great deal of discussion vis-a-vis its potential to further various goals. As a funny, subversive, attention-grabbing tactic capable of enlightening people, hoaxing was described as being effective in exposing truths, revealing faulty logic, and pinpointing ideological fault lines. More specifically, hoaxes were deemed appropriate for artistic and activist purposes because they are intended to agitate and expose, not to cover or conceal. As a clever form of bait and switch, hoaxes are designed "with a reveal. You reel someone in on something that isn't true, and the switch is … well, here's the issue you should focus on." The use of deception (i.e., "tricking news media") was characterized as "a powerful tool to raise awareness" to destructive policies, activities, or practices, with the public embarrassment of targets serving as an important focal point and desired outcome. Practitioners of activist media

hoaxing were cast as having an excellent track record of choosing appropriate targets, rendering the tactic both useful and appropriate. Respondents were most compelled by hoaxing when it was coupled with the decision dilemma theory, the idea of "creating a false scenario that forces action." The theory of the prefigurative intervention was also of notable interest for its application to "future possibilities and imaginings for where the work might lead next." Although hoaxing wasn't regarded as a standalone solution or long-term strategy, it was cast as providing a much needed counterpoint to the idea that social justice organizing must always be in opposition to something; instead, hoaxes ask people to think about "alternate ways of living and relating."

The deployment of deception in/across news media has carried with it a distinctly negative and destructive charge, one that was addressed by all workshop respondents. When asked if they considered media hoaxing a form of fake news, clear distinctions were drawn. Fake news was likened to propaganda: communication seeking to give legitimacy to "very untrue things," and intended to spread misleading stories that intentionally deceive. These practices discredit experts across the divide, furthering "nefarious ambitions like the accumulation of profit, or [turning] people against racial minorities." Hoaxes, on the other hand, were decidedly "not fake news": they come with a grain of truth ("just true enough to exist") and "the reality is revealed." The distinction is an important one because it reinforces the notion that hoaxing retains a positive charge in the way it is characterized as an artist or activist tool. If hoaxing had been more closely aligned with fake news, the very idea that these groups might explore the concept as a useful tactic would be diminished, if not outright dismissed.

"I like what I saw in the workshop—It activated my activism"

This research project was designed in part to explore the efficacy and legitimacy of humor and media hoaxing as tactics in the artist/activist repertoire. The Yes Lab's focus on these characteristics, as well as its emphasis on creativity in the realm of social justice, created the conditions to attract interested, curious, and like-minded individuals to a local workshop in Halifax, Nova Scotia. As one respondent put it: "There was something magical about the call that drew people in." Despite a notable lack of diversity (not enough artists or people of color in attendance), participants expressed feeling validated in being treated as colleagues and peers by the facilitator; they also discussed the positive dimensions of inhabiting an empowering and supportive environment comprised of like-minded people: "The people part of it ended up being a bigger part than I anticipated." The coming together of artists and activists prepared the way for attendees to meet people on the "peripheries of communities" they know of, or, on occasion, participate in. Many described feeling energized and uplifted by meeting great people, making connections, and working with a passionate group. The workshop was also effective in encouraging individuals and groups to draw on laughter, humor, play, and creativity in the brainstorming, planning, and execution of future actions. Rather than limiting tactical work to humor and hoaxing, Devlin created room for participants to explore a wide range of relatable and applicable ideas and approaches, an aspect of the workshop that registered more broadly. These strategies were deemed effective because they introduced new approaches or opportunities for "becoming unstuck" in one's work.

In reflecting on the workshop as a whole, creative activism was described as a useful approach to "speaking truth to power in a way that is accessible." The Yes Lab model offered participants

new ideas about how to facilitate workshops, insight into how best to represent the root of an issue and to explain the persistence of a problem, and a new vocabulary for how to explain one's work to other people. The workshop inspired at least two groups to explore hoaxing and the creation of a decision dilemma, even though they didn't act on it. The Divest activists introduced the theory of prefigurative politics to its group to discuss what kind of environment they wanted to create in their meetings; in collaborating with workshop participants throughout the weekend, Divest was able to recruit new members into the fold. One artist also discussed an idea for a children's activist storybook.

Conclusion

This research project began as an exploration of fake news from the perspective of activist groups deploying artifice, spectacle, and fakery in the creation of social justice campaigns. One such group, the Yes Men, has consistently incorporated humor and media hoaxing as key tactics in the dissemination of social justice issues and sites of struggle that do not normally receive attention in dominant news media. Although the ethical and practical considerations attached to the creation of media hoaxes were central to the research questions of this study, the project would come to address the efficacy or usefulness of this tactic in the articulation of social justice activism. In addition, humor's role as tactic in activist politics would also figure prominently. Responding to the renewed interest in reinvigorating activist tactics, tools, and strategies, this essay has explored the viability of humor and media hoaxing as activist tactics. Through an examination of a two-day Yes Lab workshop centering on creative activist praxis—and through the observations of workshop participants—we are afforded the following insights: increased collaboration between artists and activists is welcome in the realm of social change work; humor and hoaxing offer a range of possibilities in the elaboration of activist politics. The greatest hurdles to incorporating these elements are tied to the lack of training, resources, and infrastructure. Despite these limitations, there is room to integrate these aspects into existing activist milieus. Organizations and initiatives such as the Yes Lab, Ruckus Society, and the Center for Artistic Activism, among others, are modelling powerful examples of "doing creative activism." With increased visibility and infrastructure, these groups may continue to extend bridges to these communities.

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