

From Critique to Mobilization: The Yes Men and the Utopian Politics of Satirical Fake News

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To date, communication and media scholars have placed significant emphasis on the professionalized forms of satirical fake news currently operating within the structures of corporate media, pointing to their continued efforts to counter the prevailing attitudes and perspectives proliferated across the dominant channels of public discourse. What follows is a broader examination of how politically motivated and activist-oriented practitioners have deployed satirical fake news to call attention to various causes and sites of struggle and to create opportunities for dissenting perspectives to register with broader publics.

Satirical fake news has enjoyed considerable success putting forward a broad range of critical perspectives on the mainstream media and on the elites that give shape to the larger discourses of politics and culture. While the range and sophistication of scholarship on the subject has increased considerably in recent years (as evinced by a recent *IJoC* “Breaking Boundaries” special section), the primary texts under discussion remain those situated within the more instantly recognizable domains of corporate entertainment media. Importantly, satirical fake news has also figured prominently in the articulation of dissent among a wide range of activist practitioners; as I argue in this essay, the appropriation of ironic, parodic, and satirical forms of critique, along with the deployment of emergent mediatory and technological platforms, have facilitated the transmission of dissent for political satirists looking to gain access to broader publics. Indeed, satirical fake news has worked to significantly reframe political discourse on subjects of grave importance to the proper functioning of democracy—from questions regarding the future outcomes of electoral politics to concerns related to the ethical behavior of corporations and governments. Together these narratives and practices offer complex reevaluations of the conversations taking place in mainstream media and popular culture.

For longtime enthusiasts of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show (TDS)*, Jon Stewart’s self-characterization as being apolitical has been the source of much discussion and debate. Perhaps because of his relationship with a major media giant (Viacom), he describes himself as a comedian who benignly stands at “the back of the room throwing tomatoes at the chalk board” (as quoted in Lewis, 2006, p. 159). Perhaps a more accurate characterization is that Stewart sees himself as a political comedian who makes

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no claims to enacting social change. Despite his numerous statements upholding the veracity of this position, Stewart, along with his friend/peer/fellow satirist Stephen Colbert, have invited some nuance to these apolitical characterizations, most notably with their widely attended and much discussed "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" (2010). As Jones, Baym, and Day (2012) have shown, instances where Stewart and Colbert operate "outside the box"—that is, outside the carefully constructed worlds of their respective shows—are instructive in that they present moments for each figure to

call attention to specific political issues, ethical oversights, moral outrages, and problematic constructions of political life. . . . By holding the rally, testifying before Congress, and announcing the legal approval of the Super PAC on the steps of the Federal Election Commission's building, Stewart and Colbert engage an array of new audiences—including those attending to traditional news media—with their off-program critiques. (p. 55)

Despite these instances where Stewart and Colbert are not exclusively operating under the guise of the comedian-satirist, their explicit political aims remain at best muted under the cloak of ironic and parodic communication. Given their so-called apolitical standing, it seems altogether necessary to investigate practitioners not operating under corporate control. In this vein, the Yes Men, a loose-knit association of some 300 media activists, represent the antithesis to the Comedy Central duo's position. As an activist collective that uses political satire to level pointed critiques against corporations, governments, and news organizations, the Yes Men figure prominently in discussions of satirical fake news precisely because they have emerged as politically motivated practitioners of the form.

In thinking about the state of contemporary journalism and the role that political satire plays in reframing political discourse across the uneven terrain of popular culture, this article demonstrates that the larger project of news parody undertaken by political satirists is not restricted to the largely controlled environments of corporatized print, televisual, and Internet examples of the form; rather, this work describes how the cultural production of satirical fake news has emerged from other areas of civil society through the concentrated efforts of media activists. In appropriating the form for political uses, I argue that these actors (of which the Yes Men comprise but one example) have found an appropriate and powerful vehicle for exploiting flaws in the institutional structure, organization, and logic of mainstream news media. More than this, their construction of ironic, parodic, and satiric "news" has facilitated the dissemination of news stories that would not otherwise receive broad media attention. What follows is a broader examination of how politically motivated and activist-oriented practitioners have deployed satirical fake news to call attention to various causes and sites of struggle, as well as to create opportunities for dissenting perspectives to register with broader publics. In what is arguably the most promising aspect of this larger practice, I also examine some of the ways in which the Yes Men have worked to bridge the gap between satire as a form of critique and as an instrument of broader politicization and mobilization among everyday citizens.

The importance of laughter, humor, irony, parody, and fun has figured prominently in critical and scholarly discussions of media activism and media criticism (Day, 2008; Dery, 2004; Duncombe, 2007; Hynes, Sharpe, & Fagan, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 2010; Moore, 2007; Reilly, 2010; Warner, 2007; Wettergren, 2009). Much has been written on organizations/activist collectives like Adbusters (Haiven,

2007; Klein, 2000; Rumbo, 2002), Billionaires for Bush (Day, 2008; Duncombe, 2007), Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping (Lane, 2002; Perucci, 2008), and countless others. 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; Lecoœur & Pessar, 2006; Nomai, 2008), tactical media (Boler, 2006), political discourse (Hynes et al., 2007; Reilly, 2012), and ironic activism (Day, 2011). While the Yes Men's work readily qualifies as media activism, culture jamming, and tactical media, the goal here is to frame the Yes Men, first and foremost, as political satirists operating both outside and within the established discourses of traditional news media. It is significant to note that their work tackles similar themes explored in the more professionalized forms of satirical fake news, such as war, geopolitics, political governance, and news media performance.

Situating Nonprofessionalized Satirical Fake News

The dominant players in print, television, and the Internet—*The Onion*, *The Daily Show (TDS)*, *The Colbert Report (TCR)*—operate under the umbrella of corporate ownership, a financial structure that facilitates the production and dissemination of its texts. In most cases, these players are afforded the opportunity to circulate their work on a weekly basis, a feat that makes their work both timely and relevant, ensuring visibility across a number of different media platforms. Both *TDS* and *TCR*, for example, operate under Comedy Central, which is owned by Viacom, one of the big six media corporations in the world, with 2008 revenues reaching \$14.6 billion ("Ownership Chart," 2001, p. 99). Since *TCR*'s introduction in 2005, both shows have been consistently averaging over one million viewers nightly (Baym, 2009, p. 128) in addition to thousands of devoted online viewers. Not to be outdone, *The Onion* attracted 15.3 million monthly visitors to its website and reached more than 3.6 million readers of its weekly print edition in 2012, making it both a widely read publication and a lucrative commercial enterprise ("*The Onion* Media Kit 2012"). In an interesting financial move, Comedy Central and *The Onion* have partnered to develop *SportsDome*, a parody sports television show; elsewhere, Independent Film Channel (IFC) has announced it will pursue a third season of the *Onion News Network* television series, suggesting that the relationship among different corporately-tied satirists is becoming increasingly fluid as media companies aim to diversify their content and expand their market share. As many observers have already noted (Frank, 1997; Heath & Potter, 2004; Strangelove, 2005), the province of dissent and capitalist critique has proven a lucrative market in the culture industry; one need only point to the continued popularity of the likes of Naomi Klein and Michael Moore. What is striking about these examples—the Comedy Central fake news roster, *The Onion*, Michael Moore documentaries—is not only the degree to which they participate in a broader diagnostic critique of powerful figures and institutions but also that the "popularity of each serves to fuel the momentum of all" (Day, 2011, p. 186). It is difficult, if misguided, to downplay the significance of political satire at the turn of the new century, given the form's renewed political vitality and influence. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that political satire should reemerge as an important tool in the activist's toolbox.

In large part, corporately-owned and -controlled practitioners differ from their nonprofessionalized counterpart because they have secure financial backing to produce regular satirical content. Outside the confines of corporate media, much is left to the initiative of practitioners. While the Internet has produced numerous examples of satirical fake news in countries ranging from Britain to

France to Venezuela, these sites are consistently amateur (i.e., nonprofessional) in nature, enjoy small (if nonexistent) readerships and disappear as quickly as they surface. The success of *The Onion* and Comedy Central has undoubtedly inspired a host of imitators (some good, some bad), but due to operational costs, time constraints, the ongoing pressures of producing timely material—to say nothing of the challenge of writing good satire—one notices an uneven degree of quality in the production of these texts. That said, the noncorporatized character of these examples raises interesting questions related to the motivations behind this form of cultural production and sheds light on some of the broader implications that these practices have on public discourse. If there is little financial incentive for the political satirist to convey critique, new questions about the form emerge.

Given the nature of the Yes Men's work (traveling to conferences, creating websites, producing films, publishing fake newspapers), financial considerations do enter the frame in so far as they rely heavily on funding to carry out the majority of their projects. As they explain on their website, because the group does not rely on corporate sponsors to fund their initiatives, they have "had to rely on the generosity of friends and acquaintances in various places ("FAQ"), their massive e-mail list, documentary film productions, and most recently, crowd-funding initiatives, such as Kickstarter. Certainly, the Yes Men's precarious financial situation places a number of constraints on what projects they can and cannot pursue. Questions of distribution and access are also notable due in part to the group's limited opportunities to distribute its texts compared with the *Comedy Central* satirist's ability to disseminate his/her work on a weekly basis. But as we shall see, the organization, makeup, and execution of the Yes Men's projects provide interesting points of comparison between both variants of satirical fake news, as both sets of practitioners contribute to a larger reevaluation of mediated public discourse.

Unlike the satirical fake news created with commercial support, the Yes Men's appropriation of the form is orchestrated in two distinct ways: the first and most commonly deployed strategy hinges on the creation of a media hoax that becomes the subject of much media scrutiny; the second tactic centers on the construction of fake news stories through more traditional media like websites and newspapers. When, for example, Stephen Colbert devised his own electoral campaign, he was operating under different rules of engagement than those elaborated in his nightly broadcast (*TCR*). Instead of merely critiquing or fabricating the news, he created a media spectacle through a series of calculated "pseudo-events." Appearing in various media outlets (Maureen Dowd's *New York Times* column, *Meet the Press*) and drumming up minor controversies along the way, Colbert's strategy generated widespread coverage of his short-lived campaign. As Daniel Boorstin (1961) reminds us, the manipulation of these pseudo-events serves to amplify the notion that newsgathering is being systematically replaced by newsmaking. The Yes Men deploy similar newsmaking tactics in the construction of their media hoaxes for the purposes of (a) creating controversy, (b) generating media coverage in dominant media outlets, and (c) reframing public discourse on issues of civic and political importance. The second method deployed by the Yes Men relies heavily on the codes and conventions of traditional journalism to convey critique. As my analysis of its fake *New York Times* newspaper/website suggests, the Yes Men have found original ways to diversify both the range and kinds of political content that satirists can produce. More than this, this article sheds light not only on their success in capturing media attention through the elaborate hijacking of dominant media outlets but also on their concerted efforts to bridge the divide between consciousness-raising and political/civic participation. Thus, fake news here refers to the unwitting circulation of satiric news stories

and barbed political discourse through the clever and deliberate deceptions of mainstream media outlets. While commercial variants of fake news are sometimes charged with solely presenting dystopian critiques (i.e., what is wrong with the current situation), offering “little toward articulating what an alternative might look like” (Day, 2011, p. 189), the activist examples that will be discussed here actively deploy satire as corrective in the interests of proposing—and enabling—a “critical utopianism” (Jenkins & Duncombe, 2008).



Figure 1. Enter the Yes Men.

Enter the Yes Men: What They Do, How They Do It

The Yes Men’s adventures in culture jamming most often begin with a fake website that reproduces the look and integrity of the parent site; examples include pastiches of The White House, Dow Chemical, *The New York Times*, *New York Post*, Exxon, Environment Canada, and World Trade Organization (WTO) websites, among others. Because these websites are often mistaken for the real thing, despite the unmistakable satiric and parodic content, invitations to speak at conferences and media events are unwittingly forwarded to the group. These opportunities generally translate into outlandish performances that generate media coverage. In the absence of any media coverage, the Yes Men issue press releases to journalists and various news organizations. For example, when the Yes Men “disbanded” the WTO in May 2002 (no small feat), they sent a press release to 25,000 journalists, politicians, and news agencies worldwide (*The Yes Men*), resulting in widespread reportage of the event. Once the hoax was revealed, the story garnered international press coverage, culminating in AP/Reuters wire stories and follow-up interviews; various media outlets then covered the story in television and radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, and so on; and finally, coverage of the hoax was remediated and recirculated on the Internet, further amplifying the event’s impact.

If the sole outcome of these hoaxes proved news media’s quiet dismissal of what it deemed malicious pranking on the part of disgruntled activists, then the larger function of the spectacle would be inherently lost. However, because justification for these hoaxes is actively sought by journalists and newsmakers, the Yes Men’s tactics afford them the opportunity to clarify their position and articulate the political dimensions of their work to broader audiences. Although they become the subject of greater media scrutiny, they are afforded considerable opportunities to expand the thrust of their critiques. Due to the nature of their work, these added opportunities to explain their position are of crucial importance because their (ironic/parodic) critiques are not always readily intelligible to audiences. Importantly, this

larger process—the origins of which can be traced back to a fake website—spawns a web of critical commentary that gives the press an opportunity to report on serious issues and provides readers and audiences an opportunity to reflect on issues of great civic and political importance. For the Yes Men, these tactics are crucial to manufacturing and circulating dissenting views in mainstream media. These ethical spectacles are leveraged as valuable tools in the transmission and dissemination of dissenting forms of communication. “The goal of the ethical spectacle,” Duncombe (2007) writes, “is not to replace the real with the spectacle, but to reveal and amplify the real *through* the spectacle” (pp. 154–155). More specifically, ethical spectacles can work toward creating a better-informed citizenry, a diverse group of constituents that is subjected to a wide range of information, rhetorical platforms, visual patterns, and political viewpoints. As Duncombe insists, “We live in an age where spectacles make us stupid; [satirists] can engineer them to make us smarter” (p. 120). Within today’s mediascape, such undertakings are not without merit. Within the context of political satire, the importance of spectacle in the construction of satirical fake news cannot be understated, because it makes possible “a potent breach, break, or fracture in our spectacular mediascape that occasions a shift in our concepts of politics and truth” (Boler & Turpin, 2008, p. 398). Because the majority of the Yes Men’s work demands, if not requires, the elaboration of spectacle, the first two examples cited here will serve to unpack how exactly spectacle assists in the politicization of their work. To give the reader a preliminary sense of how these tensions come into play, this article examines two representative Yes Men hoaxes before turning to a broader discussion of how activists might effectively bridge satirical critique and civic engagement.

Performing the Corporate Spokesman: Dow Chemical, Bhopal, and the BBC

On December 3, 2004, the Yes Men generated enormous controversy with an appearance on BBC World (see Figure 2) in which Andy Bichlbaum, a member of the group, posed as a representative of Dow Chemical on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, often cited as the worst industrial accident in human history. During the interview, Jude Finisterra (Bichlbaum), the company’s public relations spokesperson, made a number of provocative, ethically-driven statements on the part of his employer: that is, Dow would 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, and finally, push for the extradition of former Union Carbide CEO Warren Anderson (“Dow Does the Right Thing”). What is clear from Finisterra’s statement—via his careful appropriation of Dow’s corporate identity—is that the Yes Men used the BBC platform for two primary reasons: first, to propose a radical new direction for Dow on a landmark anniversary of the Bhopal tragedy; and second, to “correct” what they deemed the reprehensible behavior of a major multinational corporation that has willfully ignored its responsibilities to the Bhopal victims. Through its ethical spectacle, the Yes Men dramatize how Dow could have acted in a responsible manner, if it chose to serve the public interest at the expense of its bottom line. Here, the Yes Men’s adoption of a corrective form of satire comes into sharper relief, a strategy that is meant to rehabilitate its targets through broader media scrutiny; they call this strategy “identity correction.”



Figure 2. "Identity correction" on BBC World: "Dow accepts full responsibility."

For the Yes Men, the Bhopal hoax asks us to imagine how an ethical company might have acted in the face of human suffering by liquidating its assets in one of its many corporate holdings and how this landmark moment might have also signaled a progressive shift in future corporate responsibility practices and protocols. As the onslaught of media coverage would soon after clarify, such ethical decisions were not being contemplated by Dow. The company would later go on to deny the report. To further elaborate Dow's inflexible position toward Bhopal, the Yes Men would issue an accompanying statement on behalf of Dow in its own post-hoax press release. In it, the Yes Men systematically deny all of Finisterra's claims ("Dow 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. The spectacle created by the Yes Men's identity correction of Dow Chemical here facilitates the transmission of divergent perspectives in a news media system all too quick to dismiss and disclaim alternative voices. The Bhopal spectacle also illustrates the manner in which activist-oriented political satirists hijack mainstream media as a means to disseminate dissenting views in the mediated public sphere; through its careful elaboration of media spectacle, the Yes Men present the argument that the status quo is not beyond reproach and that corporations should be held accountable for unethical actions. As such they present a utopian vision that contradicts the laissez-faire corporate politics of Dow Chemical, thereby reminding a vast audience (the 300 million viewers of the original broadcast) to reengage with a story of great geopolitical interest that had not been attracting meaningful media attention.

More Spectacular Hoaxing: Environment Canada in Copenhagen



Figure 3. The Yes Men target Canada.

The Yes Men would put forward its most elaborate spectacle to date at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The hoax began with a flurry of fake press releases and statements issued by the group: Identity correction took the form of fake websites for Environment Canada, a series of press releases to the real media, a staged live announcement from a fake government spokesperson (See Figures 3 and 4), followed by actual responses to the spectacle from the Canadian government. The spectacle was first set in motion when a fake Environment Canada website stated it was reversing the ministry's position on climate change: "Environment Minister Jim Prentice" announced that the government would enact "strict new emissions-reductions guidelines for Canada and fast-tracks financing for vulnerable countries beginning in 2010." More specifically, the Harper government announced a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 (from 1990 levels) in what amounted to a dramatic shift in its climate change policy.



Figure 4. The first round of fake press releases. See video clip at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xbu9by_yes-men-v-o-s-t-f-copenhagen-1-3-an_news

Next, the Yes Men reiterated the Ministry's position via a government spokesperson broadcasting from an uncanny replica of the UN conference stage. A second press release circulated an hour later when Canada congratulated itself on the Ugandan delegation's impassioned response to its newly-initiated action plan (also staged). 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. Meanwhile, the Canadian government's real reactions contributed greatly to the story's spectacular arc (Figure 5). Dimitri Soudas, a spokesperson for the Prime Minister's Office, publicly (and falsely) accused climate change activist Stephen Guilbeault and his organization Equiterre for these "childish pranks"; later that afternoon, the Canadian press broadcast heated exchanges between Soudas and Guilbeault, adding fuel to the growing controversy.



Figure 5. "Childish pranks," moral misfires, and heated exchanges.

See video clip at <http://www.tagtele.com/videos/voir/48147>

Within 24 hours, the Yes Men had manufactured a full-blown media spectacle that greatly embarrassed the Canadian government. The most compelling aspect of the story, however, resides in the fact that the hoax incited a number of reporters and journalists to critically comment on the Harper government's climate change policies. As the summit was heavily blogged by journalists, the story appeared in several outlets, each pointing to the government's unflattering position: "Environment Canada hit" (Taber, 2009), "Copenhagen spoof shames Canada!" (Goldenberg, 2009), "Hoax slices through Canadian spin on warming!" (Woods, 2009). The labyrinthian character of the hoax undoubtedly assisted in the construction of the spectacle, as journalists struggled to piece together various strands of the uneven story. For instance, CBC journalist Kady O'Malley's step-by-step coverage mirrored other journalists' daylong speculations as to who precisely perpetrated the hoax ("Copenhagen-anigans").

The spectacle is significant because it brought international attention to the Harper government's dismal record on climate change action at a time when new policies were being actively negotiated. As one astute blogger notes, "[The Yes Men] 'announcement' came as Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government was privately circulating a plan to permit a 165 percent *increase* in emissions from Alberta's

huge, dirty oil sands project" (Connelly, para. 4). The Yes Men targeted Canada for two primary reasons: (a) It is the "only country in the world to have abandoned the Kyoto Protocol's emissions and climate debt targets," and (b) it is home to "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions [the Alberta tar sands]" ("Goldenberg, 2009). By projecting a progressive position on behalf of Environment Canada, the Yes Men effectively forced the Canadian government's hand: The Ministry would either confirm and/or modify the group's utopian proposition by creating an amendment to its existing climate change policy, or it would merely deny the statements and continue on its current trajectory. While the Yes Men's spectacle did little to stir the Harper government to action, the hoax both confirmed and amplified the Canadian government's history of inaction on the issue, placing discussions of climate change at the forefront of public discourse. In both hoaxing examples, we see the failure to reform the target under attack, which raises an important question regarding the efficacy or impact of these tactics. In highlighting these two hoaxes, I suggest that claims about satire's ability to single-handedly cause political change inherently miss the mark. Following Day (2011), a more productive way of theorizing the Yes Men's larger political project would be to measure its impact in terms of "incremental shifts in influencing public debate and in creating or mobilizing political communities" (p. 21). To better situate the efficacy of these tactics, this article now discusses the Yes Men's *New York Times* (NYT) "special edition". This example is noteworthy because it demonstrates a significant shift from newsmaking practices to more conventional/professional articulations of news parody, but it also provides an important moment for thinking about the activist-satirist's utopian efforts to mobilize everyday citizens.

The Yes Men's Satirical Fake News: *New York Times* "Special Edition"

While the Bhopal and Environment Canada media hoaxes afforded the Yes Men the opportunity to redress timely issues across a number of media outlets, such hoaxes are not easily replicated. For this reason, the Yes Men have constantly shifted tactics in the articulation of their elaborate projects, as evidenced by their deployment of news parody. In another widely discussed media hoax, the Yes Men would amplify their media critique differently, this time through the careful appropriation of America's newspaper of record—*The New York Times*. On November 12, 2008, the Yes Men—in collaboration with a wide range of artist and activist groups—distributed a "special edition" of the newspaper to an estimated 1.2 million 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" (see Figure 6). The fake newspaper includes these stories: the implementation of a maximum wage law that would create 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. In a compelling editorial note, editors of the special issue expressed an optimistic agenda for the future: "[W]e can begin to make the news in this paper the news in every paper." Before engaging in any analysis of the newspaper, it is worth noting that the fake *NYT* puts forward a different kind of parodic and satiric critique: Whereas *The Onion*, *TDS*, and *TCR* often deliver stories using humor and irreverence to challenge dominant journalistic forms and conventions, the *NYT* parody uses an interesting mix of pastiche, irony, and sincerity as a vehicle for communicating critique. 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 fake newspaper strikes a sincere, if absurdist, note, reporting stories in a register rarely

deployed in journalistic coverage. The discussion that follows draws from the fake *NYT* to illustrate how satire need not be dystopian in nature, that it can present (utopian) alternatives, and that it can serve as a modest relay between consciousness-raising and mobilization.

The image shows a satirical front page of 'The New York Times' dated Saturday, July 4th, 2009. The main headline is 'IRAQ WAR ENDS' with a sub-headline 'Troops to Return Immediately'. Below this is a photo of a military helicopter. Other prominent headlines include 'Ex-Secretary Apologizes for W.M.D. Scare', 'Court Indicts Bush on High Treason Charge', and 'Nation Sets its Sights on Building a Sane Economy'. The page is filled with various news snippets and sections, all presented in a satirical tone.

Figure 6. The New York Times "Special Edition" fake front page.

Reimagining Satirical Expression: "What Things Are and What They Ought To Be"

It is not uncommon for satirical expression to favor fantastic and idealistic elements. Through a careful dramatization of future events, the post-dated *NYT* (July 4, 2009) "special edition" presents its readers with a utopian vision of the United States—a vision that has yet to materialize, but one that the group asks their readers to imagine. Satire here not only reframes the thrust of public discourse on timely issues (a hallmark of *The Onion*, *TDS*, and *TCR*), it also invites the reader to imagine what the future could look like if (then) President-elect Barack Obama were to keep his campaign promises. What binds satirical fake news texts together in most instances is the notion that the form readily critiques its parent genre (journalism) at the same time that it satirizes social, moral, ethical, and political spheres of culture. What separates the fake *NYT* from its professionalized counterparts is its explicit mandate to deploy satire in the interests of bringing about progressive change in the not-so-distant future.

In constructing fantastic situations and in elaborating idealistic articulations of society and culture, the satirist here depicts what literary theorist Northrop Frye (1969) calls "the comic struggle of two societies, one normal the other absurd" (p. 223). The satirist's juxtaposition of the normal (everyday) and the absurd (utopian) makes intelligible an apparent disconnect between current living conditions and future possibilities. When the reader confronts stories like "Gitmo, Other Centers Closed" or "United Nations Unanimously Passes Weapons Ban," one readily apprehends 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; and 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. The very act of publishing these stories, then, represents what Bakhtin (1984) would refer to as the dramatization of "extraordinary situations for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea" (p. 114). In presenting these fantastic and idealistic representations of society, however extraordinary, the Yes Men are engaged in the provocation and testing of philosophical ideas, with the larger intention of presenting alternative modes of governance and ways of living. If, as Pollard (1970) notes, the satirist "is always acutely conscious of the difference between what things are and what they ought to be," (p. 3) it follows that the Yes Men's conception of satire is that of a cultural practice that seeks to bridge this divide. In "Corporate Personhood Gets Real," we learn that legislation will soon abolish the notion of "limited liability" for corporations, making shareholders liable for the crimes their corporations commit; in "All Public Universities To Be Free," Congress is poised to pass a bill that would eliminate tuition fees at public universities, an initiative meant to improve access to education in the country; finally, in "Nation Sets Its Sights on Building Sane Economy," the passing of the S.A.N.E. Act effectively caps 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 reimagine contemporary issues and debates and to frame them constructively, so as to lay the groundwork for revisionary, even revolutionary, projects.

Having firmly established the centrality of fantasy to the utopian politics of the project, this article now turns to the special edition's centerpiece—"Iraq War Ends: Troops to Return Immediately." The lead story announces the complete withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from the region (including Afghanistan), citing that the United Nations will hereafter perform all peacekeeping duties and provide infrastructural aid and assistance. Putting an end to what he deemed "the most unfortunate adventure in modern American history," Department of Defense spokesperson Kevin Sites would put a human(itarian) face on the Iraq War: "Today, we can finally enjoy peace—not the peace of the brave, perhaps, but at least peace." Of course, such pronouncements would generate mixed reactions on Wall Street, in the defense industry (e.g., Lockheed Martin, the world's largest defense contractor), and within the ranks of the American military, but as an accompanying article reveals, the United States' withdrawal from the Middle East would precipitate a wave of pledges to uphold peace in conflict-ridden areas across the globe ("After Withdrawal Peace"). Following the United States' lead, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Columbia, the Kashmir, Somalia, Chad, and Belgium all pledged to uphold peace in their respective countries. In this example, the Yes Men deploy satire to create an ideal universe. To accomplish this feat, they must strike a delicate balance between an ironic edge and an authentic voice.

Displaying an uncanny resemblance to the original, the fake *NYT* depicts the end of an unpopular war, at a time when the war was receding in the background of American public discourse. Especially in the wake of the global economic crisis, the Yes Men's hoax brought the ongoing war back to the forefront of discussion. Far from simply critiquing various actors, such as the government and the news media, for failing to resolve the crisis, "Iraq War Ends" challenges the notion that a swift withdrawal from Iraq is untenable by openly framing the possibility on the front page and punctuating it in the *NYT*'s iconic Cheltenham font. Here, the explicit irony of the scene—the Iraq War was clearly not over—serves as an expression of the ironist's "resistance to a single fixed point of view" (Colebrooke, 2004, p. 80); in fact, the Yes Men's larger dissatisfaction with the war (then in its eighth year) is manifest in its dramatic refusal to submit to this ongoing reality. The fake *NYT* puts a decisive end date to the war, offering the reader a new means of understanding the issue while introducing an alternative worldview—life after war. Drawing from Wayne Booth's (1974) metaphor of two uneven buildings (each building representing a different perspective), the ironist here invites the audience to move to the more elevated, and superior, plane above; in this case, presenting the audience with a worldview that welcomes both the end of war and the beginning of peace.

Thus the Yes Men's brand of corrective satire presents a powerful critique of many ongoing social justice struggles through its explicit appropriation of America's newspaper of record. They perform a diagnostic critique of the many systemic and institutional problems that currently plague American society but, unlike their professional counterparts, they put forward progressive solutions to help eradicate these problems. More than simply identifying and correcting the *NYT*'s journalistic inconsistencies and failures, a fine print editorial in the Corrections section provides additional resources for the concerned reader/citizen. In subverting the overall import of the newspaper's corrections format, the fake *NYT* also urges the reader to participate more fully in civic life. The section's fine print is replete with information regarding civic and social justice organizations and causes. The editorial staff provide a list of resources: "If you want to 'end the war in Iraq' and prevent new wars: United Peace and Justice (unitedforpeace.org), a coalition that includes CODEPINK (codepink4peace.org), Iraq Veterans Against the War (ivaw.org), Peace Action (peace-action.org), and hundreds of others." The paper lists 12 other causes, organizations, and points of access for citizens to become active stakeholders in the transformation of society: "Join them, support them, or start your own, and we can begin to make the news in this paper the news in every paper." Thus the fictitious stories reported by the Yes Men firmly situate satire's role in moving beyond dystopian critique to explore utopian alternatives that bridge awareness and civic engagement.

"All the News We Hope to Print"

However successful the print edition of the fake *NYT* may have been in re-imagining the current sociopolitical climate in the United States, its remediated counterpart would prove equally important in the realization of its broader vision. For citizens not living in the major American cities in which the paper was distributed (myself included), the Yes Men would host all of the special issue's content on a fake *NYT* website (<http://www.nytimes-se.com>), thereby enabling a larger readership to read and respond to their work. If the newspaper constituted a brilliant (uncanny) pastiche of the original, so, too, was the website a near-perfect replica of the *NYT* website. In fact, a side-by-side comparison of both websites yields a

profitable point of entry to discuss the Yes Men's online presence. It is perhaps unsurprising that a group so familiar with and adept at using media and technology should once again return to a fake website to further its critique. What makes the fake *NYT* website such a productive space for the proliferation of critique is the open architecture of the space. In simple terms, the remediated paper is made available as a free PDF download for visitors (with or without the newspaper layout), making it particularly easy for readers to access, archive, and redistribute the work. For visitors to the site, each story solicits comments from the reader, a feature that is only enabled selectively, if indiscriminately, at the real *NYT* site. Far from merely addressing an (urban) American audience, reader comments posted to the site originate from several countries: Germany, China, Turkey, Algeria, Netherlands, Great Britain, Greece, Mexico, Brazil, Lebanon, Russia, and Canada, among others.

Remediation, in this context, allows for the expansion and democratization of the hoax's audience, all the while facilitating a larger international dialogue on issues of civic, social, and political significance. Again, the importance of this architectural function, while of growing visibility on most websites at present, should not be understated. Each commenter is required to provide a name, an e-mail address, and (an optional) website address to lend some form of accountability or integrity on the user's remarks. Given the large number of respondents to the site—from 15 to 280 comments per article—these administrative requests seem to have presented few, if any, barriers to reader participation. In fact, this simple but effective feature is noteworthy in that readers often linked to personal or political blogs, civic or activist organizations, and embedded links to other news websites, creating a clearinghouse of sorts for both interested parties and uninitiated newcomers. For readers who are content to simply recirculate the original articles, the site also allows for the easy repurposing of materials across social networking and social bookmarking sites like Digg, Delicious, Twitter, and Facebook. If the newspaper and online editions fail to capture the attention of certain constituents or demographics, the easy remediation of content across these fluid points of media access and consumption continue to expand the Yes Men's potential audience. As such, the "news" is better able to penetrate expansive online networks, making it possible to promote further dialogue in a number of different forums.



Figure 8. Keeping it real: Citizen satirists at the bogus New York Times.

Perhaps the feature that best distinguishes the fake *NYT* website from the original is the addition of a call-for-writers section on the homepage, entitled "Write for the *Times*" (Figure 8). The initial prompt reads: "Got an article from the near future? Send it to us, and we'll publish it." Following the newspaper's "Editorial Guidelines," that is, to "keep it real," describe "who, what, how," and write with sincerity and

humor, one is given the opportunity to submit one's own article for/about the future. Although it is impossible to gauge what the outcome of this initiative might be, the power of suggestion is enough to establish the overall thrust of the Yes Men's project. In its clearest manifestation, the remediation of the special edition here turns the potentially passive reader into a writer actively engaging future possibilities; in its more pragmatic, utilitarian incarnation, the act of framing readers as potential writers or thinkers is once again indicative of the project's overarching vision of reimagining what is possible within the realm of journalism—even within the ranks of one of the country's most lauded and venerable institutions. It may be unthinkable for the *NYT* to solicit its readership's help in its coverage of global current affairs, but the notion of turning everyday citizens into journalists is one that has been increasingly welcomed in recent years (Rosen, 2001; Rosenberry & St. John, 2010). To be clear, the Yes Men are perhaps less interested in creating citizen journalists as they are in inspiring citizen satirists and utopian thinkers, but the group has indicated a willingness to turn the site into "a user-contributed future news site" ("Best Case Scenario"). Indeed, by investing in its readership's ability to produce news for/about the future, the Yes Men are effectively inviting the reader to have a real "stake in journalistic integrity" (Borden & Tew, 2007, p. 310) by urging and encouraging their civic participation. The architecture of the fake *NYT* website expands the terrain of civic engagement that is outlined in the newspaper edition and introduces productive aspects missing from the real *NYT* site. In mapping these simple architectural features, the project takes on an added dimension that highlights how news organizations can simultaneously improve the dynamic between readers and journalists and instill in readers the sense that their input (however defined) is valuable to the well-being of the community. The previous examples serve as illuminating examples of the political machinations underpinning the Yes Men's broader utopian vision: to harness comedy and satire in the interests of "driving a new form of political energy and will" and thereby "transform[ing] existing discursive communities into actively politicized ones" (Day, 2011, pp. 182, 185). While the fake *NYT* example suggests, in limited fashion, the degree to which the Yes Men's tactics can facilitate and/or bridge active citizenship, two of their most recent endeavors truly crystallize what this vision might look like in the not so distant future.

The Yes Lab, Kickstarter, and the Action Switchboard

In the final section, this article discusses the Yes Men's gradual shift from being expert practitioners of media hoaxing to becoming expert trainers, teachers, and facilitators of spectacle-generating modes of media activism. Nowhere is this mandate more explicit than it is with the Yes Lab, a loosely defined center "devoted to helping progressive organizations and individuals carry out media-getting creative actions around well-considered [campaign] goals" ("What is the Yes Lab?"). Through their role as facilitators, they offer already emboldened groups the opportunity and expertise to deploy the tools and techniques of hijacking dominant news media, all the while demonstrating the tangible means through which satire can serve to bridge critique, reform, and social change.

The Yes Lab is a laboratory of sorts for experiments in the mobilization of activist groups and in the advancement of social justice issues, a way for "social justice organizations to take advantage of all that we Yes Men have learned—not only about our own ways of doing things, but those we've come in contact with over the decade and a half we've been doing this sort of thing" ("What is the Yes Lab?"). 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. To date, the Yes Lab has helped facilitate 20 actions since October 2009, most of which have generated modest coverage in mainstream media outlets. These actions include a U.S. Chamber of Commerce campaign to reverse its disastrous record on climate change policies, a fake General Electric press release announcing it would donate its \$3.2 billion "tax refund" to the U.S. government, an anti-iPhone application that addresses child labor practices, factory worker suicide, and environmental degradation, as well as a "self-deportation" website, among others. Much in the spirit of the Yes Men's impassioned politics, partnering groups such as Avaaz, Greenpeace, and the Occupy movement have accelerated the rate at which these and other timely critiques emerge in the public sphere. Indeed, for such organizations and groups to learn and redeploy Yes Men-style tactics has meant a greater degree of visibility for causes and issues that don't traditionally penetrate the gatekeeping establishment and also has led to an influx of ethically motivated pranks across mainstream news media. 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. What's more, these collaborative interventions hold much greater political impact, because these creative actions become part of a larger and more concerted strategy that includes the partnering institution's lobbying efforts, awareness campaigns, mass demonstrations, and political maneuvers. Instead of merely winning or leveraging incremental shifts in public opinion via isolated pranks and hoaxes, these tactics and partnerships promise greater visibility, impact, and traction in the advancement of social justice campaigns.

One final example warrants discussion. Although the Yes Lab has continued to give the Yes Men's work increased visibility across mainstream media, the project is currently limited to organizations that are already deeply engaged with specific issues, such as the environment and corporate/institutional reform. A solution to this issue is currently being elaborated thanks to a successfully funded Kickstarter campaign that attracted over 2,500 backers and raised more than \$146,000. The project's goal was twofold: to raise enough money to finish their forthcoming film (*The Yes Men Are Revolting*); and to build "a human-staffed platform to help every viewer of our film—or anyone at all—get involved." In addition to completing the film, the group will create an "Action Switchboard" that will enable viewers to tap into their 100,000-person database and their larger activist network. While the details are still vague at this point, viewers would have access to the database's current and ongoing projects and would be given access to Yes Men-style "Action Toolkits" that provide clear and concise guidelines for initiating creative actions and attracting broader media attention. The switchboard will allow the Yes Men (and its staff) to train, advise, and mentor remotely, thereby facilitating the mobilization of everyday citizens not normally predisposed to political action. Thus this initiative 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." Indeed, one of the most important shifts to emerge within contemporary activist circles is the current push to train, mentor, and guide future changemakers via the methods and tactics described in these pages, but instead of limiting this specialized training to those already working in grassroots contexts, the switchboard promises to enlist a larger swath of the citizenry. "What we do," Yes Men's Bichlbaum stated in a recent interview, "is galvanize people who are already on our side" (Davis). Although there are few compelling instances in which political satire tangibly moves beyond critique to galvanize individuals, social groups,

and (discursive) communities, these two recent initiatives present promising iterations of satire and activist praxis.

Conclusion

As I have argued, the force of the Yes Men's critique is leveled through a sophisticated deployment of spectacle and a dazzling display of technological savvy, a tactic that enables their work to permeate across multiple media platforms. If the Yes Men have anything to teach us, it might be that they have laid bare the gaping holes in the logic of news media and have given activists a way of regaining access to dominant channels of communication. The Yes Men have not only joined, but also gainfully contributed to a growing body of institutional critiques that questions the performance of the world's dominant institutions. Their ambitious media hoaxes are powerful, if at times jarring, reminders that satire does serve an explicit political function that can move well beyond the province of critique to encompass a larger program of reform and political mobilization. What is also clear from the Yes Men's growing oeuvre is that the politics of spectacle are alive and well, and that spectacle is here directed in the name of social change. Distinguishing itself from professionalized and commercial forms of satirical fake news, the Yes Men's political satire conveys, in very concrete terms, its ideological underpinnings and its political motivations: to recast political discourse in such a way as to invite others to imagine a more socially equitable and egalitarian society. More to the point, their work makes explicit the emancipatory potential of satirical fake news.

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