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Gotcha: What Social Activists Can Learn from Pranksters

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It is unfortunate that, even today, feminist messages too often go unread and feminist issues are too often dismissed by mainstream audiences, partly because feminists continue to be stereotyped as angry and humorless. Yet some social activists use pranks to draw attention to important issues because humor is one strategic way to send messages about sexism to those who may discount ideas presented in a more direct manner. Although there have been relatively few successful feminist pranksters, humor is increasingly being used to convey women’s issues in a growing number of feminist blogs and videos. This essay explores pranking and humor as social activism, and considers the potential of using humor to bring attention to feminist messages.

**Why does Anyone Prank?**

Despite the possibilities for humor to reach new audiences, there are surprisingly few female and feminist pranksters; the overwhelming majority of public pranksters are male, and usually relatively young. Of the thirty-nine famous pranksters interviewed in Vale and Juno (1987) only one, Karen Finley, is female. Most computer hackers—viewed by some as malevolent pranksters—are male (Olson 2012), and on-line crank call sites and YouTube videos of various pranks include few pranks by females.

Although there are many types of pranks, most share some features of the prototypical April Fool’s, Halloween, and Twelfth Night pranks. These are relatively harmless, such as putting salt in a sugar bowl or hiding an office mate’s coffee cup. Such innocent pranks merely allow the pranksters to be amused by someone else’s discomfort. Ellen DeGeneres on “The Ellen Show” uses pranks to amuse audiences, as do Betty White and her senior friends on the television show “Off Their Rockers.” Innocent pranks tend to share the following characteristics:

- The prank evokes a typical situation or frame in which normal expectations and appropriate behaviors are understood by most people.
- The prank violates normal expectations for that situation or frame with some form of inappropriate or unexpected behavior.
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- If there is a victim, the victim of the prank is initially unaware of the fact that he or she is being deceived.
- The prank may discomfort, embarrass, anger, or humiliate the victim.
- The prank amuses at least some observers who recognize that the event is a prank.

Hoaxes and pranks are similar in that both involve deception, but they differ in that pranks usually involve some type of humor or amusement, and hoaxes generally do not. Of course, it is not necessary for every type of prank to share all of the characteristics above; however, most pranks share at least some of them, particularly the first two.

With an entirely different motivation, pranksters such as the Barbie Liberation Organization and the Guerrilla Girls use pranks as a form of social activism. “Activist pranksters” with a social agenda use pranks to try to raise consciousness, change attitudes, and influence public policy. Harold (2004) calls such pranks, “culture jamming,” and considers them a “strategy of rhetorical protest.” Numerous examples of this type of pranks can be found online at the Culture Jammer’s Encyclopedia.

Feminist Pranksters

Since 1985, the Guerilla Girls have raised the issue of sexism in the art world through talks, billboards, letter writing campaigns, “awards,” as well as through their posters such as the one shown in Figure 1 (updated 2012). Using pseudonyms (usually the names of famous women), the Guerrilla Girls have publicized the underrepresentation of women in different art venues all over the world. As one representative of the activist group, Eva Hesse, admits, “Actually, our first posters weren’t funny at all, just smart-assed. But we found out quickly that humor gets people involved. It’s an effective weapon” (Guerrilla Girls).

![Figure 1](image-url)
Altering and defacing billboards, also known as “billboard liberation,” is another standard technique of pranksters. For example, Jill Posner photographed the graffiti added to the billboard in Figure 2. Needless to say, the graffiti on this billboard is a protest against the Fiat ad's normalization of street harassment.

In another example, the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) was a media savvy group of feminist social pranksters. This group received national attention when they transposed the computer chip “voice boxes” on Mattel's Teen Talk Barbie and Hasbro, Inc.'s G.I. Joe, both of which reinforce unrealistic gender stereotypes. During one holiday shopping season, the BLO surreptitiously placed the altered dolls in stores where they were sold to unsuspecting shoppers. The results were Barbies who growled messages such as “Eat Lead, Cobra!” and “Vengeance is mine!” while the G.I. Joes were exclaiming things like: “Let's plan our dream wedding!” Each hacked doll had a sticker saying, “Call your local TV news.” In addition, the BLO produced its own pre-packaged video documentaries and press releases for television stations, and, as a result, received considerable publicity (Harold, 2004, p. 199).

More recently, distressed by recent attempts to limit women's reproductive rights in a number of states in the U.S., some feminist legislators have also resorted to pranks.
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For example, in response to a “personhood” Senate bill 1433 proposed by Oklahoma legislators that stated “the unborn child at every stage of development (has) all the rights, privileges, and immunities available to other persons, citizens, and residents of this state,” Representative Constance Johnson facetiously proposed an amendment preventing men from ejaculating anywhere but in a woman’s vagina (Oblermann, 2012). As reported by Simpson (2012), other state legislators, such as Illinois legislator Kelly Cassidy, proposed that men seeking Viagra be required to watch a video showing the treatment for persistent erections, saying, “It’s not a pretty procedure to watch.”

Activist pranksters such as Reverend Al of the L.A. Cacophony Society claim that their pranks “don’t punish, they provoke. They don’t target individuals, they target ideals” (Branwyn, 1997, p. 277). Performance artist Karen Finley says she is interested in dispelling myths, such as the “entire notion of penis envy” (Vale & Juno, 1987, p. 95). CODEPINK Women for Peace (www.codepink4peace.org) say: “It’s about educating people. It’s about making an alternative version of reality visible on the streets and on the news.”

Whereas many other types of pranks may humiliate or embarrass some people, the goal of activist pranksters is to raise consciousness about issues without specifically targeting individuals. Arguably, the funniest, most effective, and most widely known activist pranksters are the Yes Men, led by Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonnano. As the Yes Men state on their website (yesmen.org), their targets are “leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else.” For example, in one prank, the Yes Men lobbied the U.S. Congress in “Survivaballs,” hazmat-like suits that they claim everyone will have to wear if climate change continues, shown in Figure 3 (see http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/survivaball).

![Figure 3](http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/survivaball)
How Effective are Pranks as Social Protest?

There are many types of social protests, ranging from letters to the editor, petitions, street theater, movies, protest songs, demonstrations, boycotts, blogs, viral videos, sit-ins, to self-immolation. Like activist pranks, these forms of protest attempt to draw attention to and correct perceived social wrongs or injustices. Successful social protests such as the civil rights movements and the suffragist movements eventually resulted in social change including the repeal of Jim Crow voting laws, school and transportation integration, and women's right to vote. These social changes did not come easily and were not the result of a single social action.

In some cases, it is difficult to know whether or not any change has taken place as a result of some activist prank or protest or whether the social protest was productive or counterproductive. For example, there is no evidence yet that the widespread Occupy Movement in the United States has made a difference in how people will vote in elections or how financial systems are regulated. At worse, social activism can have unintended consequences. For example, gay activists staged a Kiss-in day at the Chick-Fil-A restaurant chain protesting homophobic remarks by the president of Chick-Fil-A, Dan Cathy (Glickman, 2012). This protest resulted in a backlash that actually increased that chain's business and gave it a good deal of free publicity. Possibly, a touch of humor might have lessened the reaction.

Asked whether the Guerilla Girls’ pranks have made a difference, in an interview published in 1995, “Frida Kahlo” said:

Just last year, Robert Hughes, who in the mid-80’s claimed that gender was no longer a limiting factor in the art world, reviewed a show of American art in London for *Time* and said “You don’t have to be a Guerrilla Girl to know that there weren’t enough women in the show.” (Guerilla Girls Bare All)

Like the Guerrilla Girls, the Yes Men claim that humor adds to the effectiveness of their pranks. In a 2011 speech called Three Lessons, Andy Bichlbaum (2011) argued that “funny actions have a real role in activist struggles today”:

We knew this, of course, in part from talking with Serbian revolutionaries who told us that funny actions were critical in their struggle to overthrow Milosevic, and that the Egyptian activists’ primary tool in bringing Mubarak down wasn’t Twitter, but rather humor.

Humor of the type inherent in the prank staged by the Barbie Liberation Organization was likely one of the reasons the act received considerable publicity. In addition, there were few repercussions for the pranksters, who remained anonymous. This prank, funded and legally protected by “ark (pronounced Artmark), was intended to send a clear message about gender stereotyping in children’s toys. The prank was clever,
widely reported, and is claimed to have inspired similar hacks in other countries (Harold, 2004, p. 199). In addition, by providing budget-strapped local news stations with ready-made video packages, the BLO co-opted a strategy often used by corporate advertisers to inject content that the media might have otherwise ignored.

However, despite the success of this prank, there is little evidence that gender stereotyping in children’s toys has changed much as a result, as any investigation of the toy aisles of most stores reveals. This suggests that a single prank, no matter how clever and widely reported, is not sufficient. Apparently, social change requires more sustained effort.

The Yes Men and those they have trained through the Yes Lab (where people can “learn techniques for causing trouble”) not only get publicity for their pranks, but, in addition, they cooperate with other groups. The Yes Men believe that their pranks, in conjunction with other actions, have had measurable results. For example, their campaign against Chevron (based on allegations that during drilling operations, Chevron dumped 18 billion gallons of toxic waste in the Amazon) resulted in a public protest against Chevron’s actions in Ecuador. The Yes Lab reports:

Today, the perseverance of Chevron's victims, together with the longstanding assistance of RAN and AmazonWatch, is paying off. Chevron was recently ordered to pay $18 billion to clean up their mess in Ecuador, and all their appeals are failing. Chevron's assets will be seized, and there's not much Chevron can do to stop it. (Bichlbaum, 2011)

There is no question that the pranks by the Yes Men are clever, funny, outrageous, and widely reported, and probably do have some effect on their audiences. However, as the Chevron campaign illustrates, a prank was just one of a series of actions.

Are pranks then an effective form of social activism? When combined with other forms of protest and activism, they can be. Effective social protests require sustained effort, as shown by the Arab Spring protests. Part of the effectiveness of the Guerrilla Girls is due not only to their humor, but also to their efforts over time. The same can be said for the Yes Men, whose success may result partly from their humor, partly from the publicity their pranks attract, and partly from their partnerships with other groups over an extended period.

From Pranking to New Media

There are numerous possible reasons why there are relatively few activist feminist pranksters. Pranking is a form of public performance, and until quite recently, women were discouraged from many forms of public expression. Even today, it is newsworthy when a brave woman speaks out against sexism, as did Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard in her October 2012 criticism of Tony Abbott, the leader of the opposition
Complexities of Feminist Activism

(Ghitis, 2012). In addition, there can be real costs to pranking, which often involves breaking rules and even laws. Effective social activism typically requires both resources and sustained effort, and women often command fewer resources than men. Mary Lee Sargent of the Direct Action Network lists a number of other obstacles for women who want to take direct social action, including over-work, over-commitment, lack of resources and time, unwillingness to take risks, and fear of physical danger.

The best reason for the absence of feminist pranksters may be that there are now alternatives to pranking that require less risk and fewer resources yet still involve humor. In a time when anyone can post a website, a blog, or a video, feminists have increasingly been able to “go viral” with their messages, and messages that contain humor often have an advantage. Anita Sarkeesian, founder of the Feminist Frequency website, posts videos on topics such as cyberbullying and sexism in children’s toys. The Women’s Media Center teaches young women to make their own videos such as the film taken at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival to protest gender disparity in the film industry. In her blog entry, “Hunt for Equality Goes Viral—10 Feminist Videos,” Sarah Cheverton gives examples of widely shared videos by feminists. Conferences such as TEDxWomen and videos on TEDWomen by feminists such as Eve Ensler, Courtney Martin, Kavita Ramdas, and film maker Mallika Dutt have reached large audiences.

However, the lesson from pranksters that humor can effectively send a message should not be lost. Gina Barreca, Wanda Sykes, and Tina Fey all raise feminist concerns in very funny ways. Liz Donnelly draws feminist cartoons for the New Yorker. It is not only professionals who are effectively using humor to highlight feminist issues. For example, Eudora Peterson’s “Bic for Her ballpoint pens are pens for women” is a low cost, but engaging video, the type that any feminist could post. Bloggers such as Sesali Bowen on Feministing.com spread the word about these videos, as do users of Facebook and Twitter. On Twitter, “Mrs. Christ” has 46,333 followers as of November 29, 2012. She tweets messages such as, “Whenever people call me a whore, I just rearrange the letters in my head so it spells herow.”

A recent example of successful feminist pranksters are artist-duo Hannah Brancato and Rebecca Nagle, organizers of the Baltimore group FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture. The group mounted a prank last year aimed at Victoria’s Secret and more recently another one that pranked Playboy. In both cases, the group mounted a simulation of the official website and displayed professional looking images that, in the case of Victoria’s Secret, promoted consent-themed underwear, and in the case of Playboy, the “2013 Top Ten Party Commandments,” a guide to consensual partying on college campuses. Both pranks went viral and garnered considerable media attention. The FORCE website promises future pranks such as blanketing the monuments in Washington, D.C. with monument quilts dedicated to rape survivors.

Pranksters such as FORCE, the Guerrilla Girls, and the Yes Men argue that a humorous message is likely to be shared and heard more readily than an angry one, and due to
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the common stereotype of angry feminists, this is probably even more true for feminist messages. Pranking and other types of humor are just one way to deliver messages that mainstream audiences might resist, and clever humor delivered through pranks, blogs, films, videos, Facebook, and tweets can help feminist issues become visible and enter the popular imagination.

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