

We Are All Boat People: a Case Study in Internet Activism

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Abstract

This paper uses a detailed case study in order to exemplify some key trends and characteristics of activist uses of the Internet. It focuses on the We Are All Boat People campaign in support of asylum seekers, discussing this in relation to three main areas. First, it considers the campaign's media strategies in the context of what Scalmer has called 'the dilemmas of the activist' (2002: 41). It then discusses the campaign in the context of tactical media and its key methodology of detournement. Finally, the project is discussed as an example of what Tim Berners-Lee has termed 'intercreativity' (1999: 182 - 183).

Introduction

A number of recent books have examined activist uses of the Internet (Critical Art Ensemble, 2001; Jordan, 2002; Lovink, 2002; Lubbers, 2002; Meikle, 2002; Scalmer, 2002). This is a welcome and important development after years of cyberhype about the emancipatory and radical potential of the Net. Drawing upon some of this work in response to the theme of 'Uses of the Internet,' this paper uses a single case study in order to exemplify some of the key trends and characteristics of activist Net use. It focuses on the We Are All Boat People campaign and its website at <http://www.boat-people.org>. After a brief description of the site and the campaign, the paper discusses these in relation to three points: first, what Scalmer has called 'the dilemmas of the activist' (2002: 41); second, the influence of tactical media discourses and practices, and the campaign's use of one key tactical methodology, that of detournement; and third, the campaigners' emphasis on distributing tools for

others to make their own media interventions — an example of what Tim Berners-Lee has termed 'intercreativity' (1999: 182 - 183).

Two points should be noted at the outset. First, in his interesting argument that an analysis of alternative media allows a vantage point which rejects the inevitability of a centralised media environment, Nick Couldry acknowledges that alternative media practice is 'messy' (2002: 26). Lacking an institutional centre, and operating on diverse, often hard-to-measure scales, the impacts of media activism are difficult to establish (often for participants as much as for analysts). Focusing on just a single website, then, as this paper does, may risk distortions: after all, part of the site's aim is to connect users with other sites also addressing asylum seeker issues in Australia and overseas.¹ But with this caveat in mind, this paper uses the case study in an attempt to isolate some representative features of activist uses of the Internet. The second point to note is that while the website is used as a base for the We Are All Boat People campaign, it is only one component of this integrated media project; accordingly, this paper examines the website within the context of the campaign's broader media strategies.

We Are All Boat People

The boat-people.org website is one of many in Australia set up in opposition to the Federal Government's policies on asylum seekers. Launched in October 2001, by the time of writing in January 2003 the site has logged some 47,000 unique visitors, with 435 people signed up for its email announcements list (Gravina, 2003). Also at the time of writing, there are six or seven members involved in organising, with several others who come and go, plus still more who may participate in direct actions. Like many other campaigns, the core membership varies over time, but founders include a designer, a filmmaker and a visual artist.

The group began to come together soon after the *Tampa* crisis: this had been ignited on 26 August 2001, when the *Tampa*, a Norwegian freighter, rescued 433 asylum seekers whose ferry had sunk off the coast of Christmas Island. The Howard government's reelection was secured by their aggressive

response to the *Tampa* — including attempts to deny it entry to Australia — which in subsequent months was followed by a number of other highly divisive events (the introduction of the so-called “Pacific Solution”; the drowning off Indonesia of more than 350 other asylum seekers bound for Australia on 19 October 2001; and the “children overboard” affair, to take just three).

Several of the group’s founder members met at the Electrofringe media arts festival in Newcastle, making contact during a workshop conducted by artist and subsequent co-founder Deborah Kelly. The group was formed at the workshops in the TILT tactical media conference, which began in Sydney a week after Electrofringe (and where indigenous activist Rebecca Bear-Wingfield underlined what would become the group’s hook, by calling the non-indigenous audience members ‘boat people’). We Are All Boat People spokesperson Dave Gravina notes that a crucial element of TILT was a push for actual outcomes from the conference, for its theoretical base to be built upon in direct actions around the conference itself (Gravina, 2003). On the closing night of TILT, 20 October 2001, the nascent campaign staged what remains their most well-known action, when they projected a 15-metre high image of a First Fleet ship above the words ‘boat people’ onto a sail of the Sydney Opera House (a photograph of this event appeared on the cover of *MIA-C&P* no. 103 in May 2002).

The most consistent organising principle and main hook of the site is this simple phrase ‘boat people’ — it’s in the URL, the name of the group, the first visual image of the Opera House, the other images available for download: all are about the juxtaposition of this phrase with the First Fleet ship. The introduction reinforces this: ‘We want you to help us spread the Boat People image far and wide, as a way to remind the government and people everywhere that all (non-indigenous) Australians are in fact “Boat People”.’ This is said to be ‘lived history’, not a metaphor.

The site is very simply and economically designed. A brief introductory text describes the group as ‘ordinary Australians who have decided to get involved and challenge the border panic encouraged by the current rhetoric

of fear.’ The campaign’s goal is specified as ‘help[ing] to create a change in the Government’s policies and legislation.’ Under the headings ‘Get Your Facts Right!’ and ‘Debunking the Myths,’ the site offers a list of common arguments about asylum seekers (e.g., ‘They are queue jumpers’, ‘Asylum seekers are illegal’ and so on). Clicking on each one opens up a pithy rebuttal, sourced from the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education. There are invitations to subscribe to email updates and there is also an archive of past actions, with images of each: one, for instance, is a photo of the statue of Queen Victoria outside the QVB shopping centre in Sydney, draped in a sash reading ‘Tampa — another reason to say sorry.’ This was the signature image of the ‘guerilla art installation’ action marking the first anniversary of the Tampa’s arrival, as part of which the group placed similar sashes and black armbands on statues throughout the Sydney CBD and Hyde Park.

A key use of the Net for this campaign is to maintain a presence within the ongoing asylum seekers debate: even in periods when the group is relatively dormant, the site continues to provide continuity to their campaign, hosting their archive of past actions, and offering downloads and links. In a sense, says spokesperson Dave Gravina, it gives them the ability to exist while they don’t exist — while members may be working on other projects, the website offers a campaign memory, with the archive element a key use for the group in maintaining an ongoing presence, and in making themselves familiar to new visitors (Gravina, 2003). And as the group has both limited resources and a reluctance to organise large-scale demonstrations, the website offers a key way to both focus and extend the campaign.

A final key feature is the ‘tool kit’ of resources available to download. It includes several variations on the First Fleet image in different file formats; a street stencil template; stickers formatted for label printing; instructions on making origami boats; copies of the ‘debunking the myths’ documents; a media release; and a pamphlet of advice on drawing media attention to political actions.

Internet activists and the established media

In his history of media activism in Australia since the 1960s, Sean Scalmer points to the central problems which he terms 'the dilemmas of the activist' (2002: 41). In attempts to influence policy, events and causes must be publicised and support mobilised. To this end, political actions are staged for remote audiences to receive through the print and broadcast media — indeed, sociologist Manuel Castells has argued that for most people politics takes place almost entirely within the space of the media. 'Outside the media sphere,' he writes, 'there is only political marginality' (1997: 312). Castells contends that this has influenced political presentation, leading to an emphasis on visual image over verbal argument; to the foregrounding of individuals as accessible and simple images; and to the use of negative personal images as fuel for the politics of gaffe and scandal which, in his analysis, are on the rise in established democracies throughout the developed world.

Operating in this environment raises significant problems for activists. Scalmer identifies three as especially salient:

1. Only those actions that attain media coverage become widely public.
2. Media coverage tends to increase with the novelty, disruption and violence of collective acts.
3. Media coverage is unlikely to reconstruct the precise interactions between political actors, especially if they involve disruption or violence between demonstrators and agents of the state.' (Scalmer, 2002: 41)

One way of analysing the evolution of the Boat People campaign would be to look at how it has dealt with these dilemmas. From the beginning, the group have avoided large, disruptive actions: they work on creating images rather than gathering crowds. And they are also cautious about putting themselves in a position to be misrepresented: for the *Tampa* Day 2002 action, for example, when they added sashes and black armbands to statues in central Sydney, they took care not to interfere with any war memorials or related

statues, which would have been guaranteed to draw extremely negative coverage.

Yet while this limits the potential for their actions to be depicted as disruptive, it also risks limiting their appeal to the established media. As a small-scale non-violent action, for instance, the Opera House projection drew scant attention in the press (rating only a small mention in the back-page humour column of the *Sydney Morning Herald*). While the group did issue a media release for the event, it wasn't enough to generate interest. But by the *Tampa Bay* action, ten months later, they were targeting journalists much more directly and selectively — for this event, they invited the media along. A reporter for Triple J, the national public youth radio network, followed the early morning events, which were timed partly to provide material for the network's morning show: this coverage, and its follow-up talkback session, created national exposure to a key target audience; this time, the *Sydney Morning Herald* devoted a full-page feature to the campaign in its Saturday 'Icon' Internet section. In the Internet era, such coverage has an increased significance: it is now not only an opportunity for campaigners to make their case to a wide audience, but — perhaps more importantly — a hook to draw that audience to the campaign website. In other words, the established media now offer a means to try to draw an audience into the campaign's own story, rather than to try to force that story onto the media agenda.

In terms of Scalmer's dilemmas, what this points to is the importance of using the Internet to draw in audiences with novel images, while avoiding actions which allow reductive media coverage. Crucial approaches here have been developed throughout the 1990s under the label of 'tactical media'. As Geert Lovink, one of this discourse's key theorists, notes, 'The classic rituals of resistance are no longer reaching large parts of the population' (Lovink, 2002: 271). In an analysis that echoes Castells, Lovink questions whether there can be a politics outside the media (Lovink, 2002: 265). In part, argues Lovink, familiar protest rituals have lost their power because of a lack of imagination on the part of activists. He suggests that the now-familiar novelty of the pie-struck politician encapsulates the tactical escape route from this imaginative dead-end: 'The ritualized humiliation of power with a pie in the face. A

highly mediated practice [...] *its only meaning is as a media event.*' (2002: 271) [emphasis added].

Tactical Media

Tactical media has been both theorised and put into practice at the series of Next 5 Minutes events held in The Netherlands. The most recent of these, in 1999, offered this definition:

'The term 'tactical media' refers to a critical usage and theorisation of media practices that draw on all forms of old and new, both lucid and sophisticated media for achieving a variety of specific non-commercial goals and pushing all kinds of potentially subversive political issues' (cited in Critical Art Ensemble, 2001: 5).

Tactical media, writes Lovink, is 'a deliberately slippery term, a tool for creating "temporary consensus zones" based on unexpected alliances. A temporary alliance of hackers, artists, critics, journalists and activists.' (2002: 271). Focused around exploiting the radical potential of new media technologies, tactical media, Lovink suggests, are 'overwhelmingly the media of campaigns rather than of broadly based social movements, and are rooted in local initiatives with their own agenda and vocabulary.' (Lovink, 2002: 255). Such campaigns build on de Certeau's characterisation of the tactic, which 'operates in isolated actions, blow by blow' and 'can be where it is least expected' (de Certeau, 1984: 37). Tactical media is about 'the art of getting access' and about 'disappearing at the right moment' (Lovink, 2002: 260). Or as Eveline Lubbers writes, summing up the approaches taken by anti-corporate media activists: 'The keywords here are originality, playfulness, unexpectedness, smallness, speed, decisiveness, clarity and unstoppableity.' (Lubbers, 2002: 13).

What are the tactical uses of the Internet for the We Are All Boat People group? First, there is the campaign's adoption of the tactical principles of reinvention, temporariness, novelty — rather than continue to project the image onto the Opera House on a regular basis, this action was followed by

an event involving thousands of origami boats, which was followed by the CBD guerilla art installation, and so on. With each event, space is claimed and then relinquished: the Opera House, the QVB statue, Customs House. The actions are not monumental or strategic; rather they are temporary and tactical, aimed at creating images for viral circulation rather than consolidating space.

Second, the campaign is tactical in its use of new technologies to circumvent the agenda of the established media, to open up new channels. The website is used to distribute images: images created and manipulated using other digital technologies (e.g., cameras, digital projectors). Third, these images themselves are examples of tactical media as methodology: of the Situationist method of detournement; of taking familiar signs and turning them into question marks. This key tactic works by ripping an image from its original context and setting it in a new one, creating a synthesis that calls attention to both the original context and the new result:

‘When two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed ... The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used.’ (Debord and Wolman, 1981: 9)

‘Image has become capital,’ suggest one group of tactical theorists, ‘and on the terrain of image, communication guerrillas can easily subvert the messages of power.’ (autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe, 2002: 169). Drawing examples from advertising, autonome a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe describe how detournement ‘creates a moment of surprise and confusion in the receiver and brings out meanings other than those intended by the advertisers.’ (2002: 169). Critical Art Ensemble argue that the confusion created by detourned imagery is crucial: ‘Confusion should be seen as an acceptable aesthetic. The moment of confusion is the pre-condition for the scepticism necessary for radical thought to emerge.’ (1994: 51).

The First Fleet/Boat People image is an excellent example of all these principles of detournement. It carefully situates the contemporary dynamics of the asylum seekers issues within a longer Australian historical context. Countering attempts to paint the issue in terms of us and them — what Hartley (1992) would call the realms of *Wedom* and *Theydom* — the campaign's imagery blurs the boundaries between those two realms, forging unexpected links: the new arrivals with the First Fleet; invasion with mandatory detention; monumental colonial statues with fleeting digital images.

In this, the campaign is tapped into key activist currents from around the world. Founders of the group were inspired in various ways by key tactical media practitioners and Internet activists: by Zapatista ideas of exploiting the theatre and poetry of a political action; by anti-corporate saboteurs and pranksters [®]TMark; by the online campaign against etoys; by culture jammers Adbusters; and by members of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, who promote electronic civil disobedience to raise awareness of the Zapatistas. Perhaps the key influence of all these groups is on emphasising the spectacle, the mediation of the event, as much as (or more than) the event itself. We Are All Boat People events to date have concentrated more on spectacle than on mass participation, on creating images rather than creating crowds.²

To keep the group's Internet use within the broader context of their campaign, we should not overlook the importance of conferences, festivals and tactical media labs for its evolution. In the case of the TILT tactical media festival in Sydney from 8 to 20 October 2001, at which the group formed, leading tactical media practitioners were in attendance (including [®]TMark, Critical Art Ensemble and the Electronic Disturbance Theater), but there were also some more straightforward influences: the fact that digital projection equipment was available at the conference precipitated the improvised idea for the Opera House action; and the simple fact that the conference was on catalysed the idea and gave impetus to the event. If the tactical media approaches developed at the Next 5 Minutes events are a clear influence, similar events in Australia have been crucial stages in the campaign's evolution, including Electrofringe in Newcastle, the Art of Dissent conference

at the Melbourne Festival of Arts, and Borderpanic, which included a 'tactical media lab' in association with the Next 5 Minutes.

Intercreativity

What is the utility of the Internet for activists? Writing about the campaign to pressure Lufthansa into stopping the deportation of refugees on its flights, Florian Schneider suggests *interactivity*: 'the materiality of virtual resistance exists in an interactivity, a communication between activists who are connected to each other, who not only take part but also organize.' (2002: 179). But the meaning of 'interactivity' is often vague at best, while at worst it presents selection from pre-programmed options as a new era of unlimited agency. In a crucial move beyond this problem, Tim Berners-Lee, creator of the world wide web, defines 'interactivity' as not just being about choice, but about *creativity*:

'We ought to be able not only to find any kind of document on the Web, but also to create any kind of document, easily. We should be able not only to follow links, but to create them between all sorts of media. We should be able not only to interact with other people, but to create with other people.

Intercreativity is the process of making things or solving problems together. If *interactivity* is not just sitting there passively in front of a display screen, then *intercreativity* is not just sitting there in front of something "interactive" (1999: 182 – 183)[emphasis in original].

In the same way that the concept of tactical media works to open up the perceived dead end of the rhetoric of 'alternative' media, the concept of 'intercreativity' offers a way beyond the largely market-based limitations of the 'interactive'. Berners-Lee's concept also offers a key to analysing the effectiveness of Net activist campaigns — the most interesting aspect of the We Are All Boat People campaign is that it's about people not only interacting, but creating together. A central use of the Internet in this campaign is to distribute 'tools' and in so doing to encourage people to initiate their own actions, their own events; to become producers and distributors of their own new media and their own new meanings. It encourages a DIY approach (cf McKay, 1998). Spokesperson Dave Gravina

states that their original goal was to make an 'action-oriented' site. Acknowledging that the many other sites on the issues had already generated a lot of information, they felt they should keep their own site simple, base it around the 'boat people' hook, and try not to replicate the larger sites that already existed. Moreover, they wanted to keep the group small and avoid developing into a large, more unwieldy organisation. The way to accomplish all of these goals was to inspire others to pick up the tools — hence the downloadable tool kit, the stencils, and hence their involvement in festivals and design contests (Gravina, 2003).

How should we attempt to measure the success of this Net-centred activist campaign? By its ability to draw audiences to a degree comparable to the established media? Or by its capacity to directly change government policy? Both would be absurd, given the scale and resources available to a small, web-based project. A possible alternative, though, is to consider the significance of the site's emphasis on enabling its users to produce their own media. The essence of the site is its calls to participation: its downloadable tool kit; its pithy factsheets; its imperative voice. Rather than considering the site's impacts on audiences or lawmakers, perhaps we should consider its attempts to encourage others to experiment with their own projects.

In this regard Clemencia Rodriguez's concept of 'citizens' media' is useful. Rodriguez proposes the term as a move beyond the reductive binaries she associates with labels such as 'alternative' media (in a similar way, the term 'tactical media' was also partly intended to disrupt such orthodoxies. See Lovink, 2002: 256). Rather than defining a project such as We Are All Boat People in opposition to more established media, Rodriguez instead argues for a participant-centred approach, suggesting we examine such media projects 'in terms of the transformative processes they bring about within participants and their communities.' (2002: 79). 'Citizens' media,' argues Rodriguez, 'is a concept which accounts for the processes of empowerment, concientisation and fragmentation of power that result when men, women and children gain access to and reclaim their own media.' (2002: 79; for a participants' account of such participatory media see Cordell and de Silva, 2002).³

In this analysis, the Boat People website is significant not for its capacity to influence policy, but for the resources it offers users to create their own media, to participate in the debates, and to act as citizens as well as audiences — with citizenship thought of here as a concept defined ‘on account of one’s ability to gather forces that shape one’s symbolic and material world.’ (Rodriguez, 2002: 79).

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a single element of the diverse complex of activist uses of the Internet in relation to issues surrounding asylum seekers. In doing so, it has isolated some tactics and approaches which are both representative and key uses of the Internet in social change campaigns — in particular, the orientations towards tactical media and an ethos which can be encapsulated as ‘intercreative.’ The site is an important project which deserves further research, not least because, plugged into wider global activist currents, it exemplifies what is in many ways the state-of-the-art in Internet activism. There is also considerable scope for further research on the uses of the Net in campaigning on migration issues in particular — one line of inquiry is suggested by the fact that both migration (Hardt and Negri, 2000) and Internet activism (Kellner, 1999) have been theorised as ‘globalisation from below.’ Such intercreative, or participant-centred, media practices (‘citizens’ media’ in Rodriguez’s terms), also offer substantial potential for further research because, as Couldry puts it, such practices ‘contest (in some way) media power itself — that is, the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions.’ (2002: 15). In this way, intercreative tactics may in the long term represent the most significant uses of the Internet for those seeking to effect social, political or cultural change.

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¹ A small sample of other sites addressing these issues would include: Melbourne Indymedia <http://www.melbourne.indymedia.org>; Xborder <http://antimedia.net/xborder>; Chilout <http://www.chilout.org>; Rural Australians for Refugees <http://www.ruralaustraliansforrefugees.org>; No One Is Illegal <http://antimedia.net/nooneisillegal>; and Borderpanic <http://www.borderpanic.org>; all accessed 15 January 2003.

² Other interesting influences suggested by a spokesperson for the group are the artworks of Christo, whose temporarily wrapped public buildings and detoured environments create a sense of event that intersects with a number of key tactical media principles, and the character of Harry Tuttle in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* — a figure who operates in isolated, guerilla acts, popping up to inspire the population before disappearing again.

³ While Rodriguez's concept is useful, it is rather undermined by her efforts to 'draw theoretical boundaries' (2002: 79) between projects she approves of (such as the DIY video produced by Hispanic schoolgirls, which is her case study in that article) and those she finds politically distasteful or abhorrent. This is an unfortunate move, which needlessly limits the usefulness of the citizens' media concept. It's also a move with something of a history: see, for example, John Downing's account of alternative media, which explicitly excludes from that category groups on the extreme right (1995: 252). I share Rodriguez's abhorrence of neo-Nazis and other ultra-rightists. But unlike her I think that their media use should also be examined — not least by those who wish to counter their ideas. If the concept of citizens' media does indeed have any explanatory power, then this can usefully be turned to analysing the media use of extremists just as much as projects which Rodriguez feels merit a round of applause. For an examination of Internet activism which addresses some extremist groups, see Meikle, 2002.