

ECC among them – were banned, and key leaders of these organisations were banned or restricted as well. During the state of emergency in 1986, a quarter of the ECC activists were detained, and the organisation was banned in 1988. Richard Steele noted that “they were initially shocked and depressed by the oppression. When they recovered, they decided to step back and cultivate their roots.” After years of severe oppression, those activists who had been banned or restricted began to defy their banning orders, and in 1989 declared the ECC ‘unbanned’. By late 1989, the regime had lost the will to implement restrictions, as well as petty apartheid laws. As Richard Steel notes, ECC activists “used their down period to resuscitate themselves.”

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Humour and nonviolent campaigns

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We usually use nonviolent action in response to serious problems, so creating actions intended to be humorous might not seem like an obvious choice. However, humour can be dead serious – almost all good humour thrives on contradictions and absurdity, and nonviolent action is often trying to point out similar contradictions. Humour is never a ‘magic solution’ for an action or campaign, but can be a powerful tool for activists because it allows us to turn the world as we know it upside down, and escape the logic and reasoning that is an inevitable part of the rest of our lives.

Nonviolent actions

Sending the protest message
Tactic star

Training

Brainstorming
Role playing

Nonviolent actions

How to start

If humour doesn't come to you easily, don't despair, you can improve. Watch your opponent: If there is a contradiction between what is said, and what is done, could this be the basis for a good joke? The closer you stick to the truth about what your opponent is saying and doing, the better the humour will work. For example, almost all dictators will say their decisions and actions are ‘for the good of the people’. That kind of statement is often contradicted by their actions!

Using humour wisely

If you are making a political action then you want a political message, and you want to stick to the point. How people look, their way of speaking or sexual habits are not good subjects. Making jokes about such things may be fun within your own group, but are usually not the way to reach out to other people, and risk taking attention away from the political point you want to make.

Nonviolent
actions



CLOWNING AROUND DURING FREEDOM TO PROTEST DEMONSTRATION, LONDON, UK. PHOTO: IPPY

Why use humour?

Using humour in your actions can be useful in a number of ways. First, it should be fun for those of you who participate in the action. Laughing together helps establish feelings of belonging together. Humour can also help to prevent and counter activist burnout.

Using humour can also be one way to increase the chance of getting attention from media, potential supporters, and bystanders. Journalists who know that they will get good images and a lively story from your group are more likely to show up when you announce that something is going to happen. If you are part of a small movement that wants to expand, humour will be a way of showing potential members that although you work on a serious issue, you are still capable of enjoying life.

The power of humour

Good, humorous actions are difficult for the police, government or companies you are targeting to respond to, because the ‘absurdity’ of your actions changes both the relationship between you and your opponent, and the logic of rational argumentation. The way you can use humour to position your view of the world – in contrast to a more dominant perspective or a more powerful opponent’s way of explaining the world – can be divided in five different ways: supportive, corrective, naïve, absurd and provocative humorous nonviolent actions.”

Nonviolent
actions

Supportive

Supportive actions use irony, parody and exaggeration to temporarily disguise their critique. Instead of being openly critical, they pretend that they support and celebrate their target or want to protect it from harm. The target will know that they are being watched, and the audiences are presented with an image of the power holders’ vulnerable sides.

In Norway in 1983, a small group of total objectors organised in the group “Campaign against Conscription”, (KMOV in Norwegian) refused both military and substitute service. They wanted to create public debate and change the law that sent them to prison for 16 months. The state refused to call it “prison” and instead labelled it “service in an institution under the administration of the prison authorities”. The cases of the total objectors went through the courts only to identify the objector, and the result was always the same – 16 months in prison. Sometimes the prosecutor never showed up because the result was clear anyway, so KMOV exploited this in one of their actions:

One of the activists dressed up as the prosecutor and demanded that the total objector receive an even longer sentence because of his profession (he was a lawyer). During the case nobody noticed anything was wrong, despite the ‘prosecutor’s’ exaggerations. KMOV sent their video recording to the media; by satirising the absurdity of a court case where nothing is discussed, KMOV succeeded in getting attention from both media and the general public. By dramatising the farce in the court, KMOV cut through all rational explanations and make people understand that sending someone to prison for 16 months without calling it a punishment did not make sense.

Corrective

Corrective actions aim to transcend the inequality in power by presenting an alternative version of “the truth”. They temporarily “steal” the identity of the institutions and companies they are aiming to unmask. From this disguise, they present a more honest representation of who the target really is. The correction can for instance be an exaggeration that exposes greed and selfishness, or it might just be the facts in language that everyone can understand. The Yes Men have made this type of “identity correction” an art form under the slogan “Sometimes it takes a lie to expose the truth”. However, many others have used similar tactics.

When the agency responsible for the administration of natural resources in Greenland invited oil companies to an information meeting in 2011, Greenpeace organised a protest outside with banners stating “No license to drill”, “Protect the Arctic”, and a red carpet smeared in oil. Inside, friendly people dressed in suits welcomed the representatives from the oil companies and told them the meeting had been moved to another floor. When all were settled in the conference room, the oil companies were given an introduction to the technical difficulties and the risk of damaging the Arctic environment when drilling for oil in Greenland. Only at the end of the presentation was it revealed that the oil representatives had been tricked into attending a meeting organised by Greenpeace, and that the original meeting had not been moved at all.

Naïve

Naïve actions bring the unequal relations of power to everyone’s attention by tackling the opponent from behind an apparent naiveté. What is actually critique is camouflaged as coincidences or a normal activity. While the supportive and corrective stunts often exaggerate and overemphasise what those in power say, people who carry out naïve stunts pretend that they are not aware that they have challenged any power. An example from Denmark during the Nazi occupation 1940-45: On the back of his van with double doors a creative butcher had written: “Salted down sausages. N.S Jensen, Butcher. Delivery Anywhere. England Road 22, Esbjerg.” Apparently an innocent advertisement for his butcher shop. However, when one of the doors was opened, the words on the other door turned into the political slogan denouncing the Nazis and supporting England: “Down with N.S [National Socialism], Long Live England”.

Absurd

Absurd actions rely on total silliness and absurdity. From this position, activists mock the positions and status of those who claim a monopoly on the truth – be it governments, powerful institutions, or corporations. The absurd action shares some similarities with the naïve regarding the apparent naiveté of the activists, but whereas the participants in the naïve stunt appear not to understand, the absurd pranksters refuse to acknowledge that any truth exists. Some activists have a natural flair for this, since it reflects how they look at the world. Others might “just” recognise it as a powerful way of expressing critique where the risks of being met with violence are lower.

In Poland in the late 1980's before the fall of the communist regime, a group called Orange Alternative organised a series of absurd happenings involving elves, carnivals and distribution of candy, toilet paper and sanitary pads (often scarce during communist rule) to passers-by. The events never expressed any open critique, but all independent organising was considered a threat and the participants arrested. However, it is difficult to justify arresting people just because they dress as elves and hand out candy, and people were quickly released again. These actions played an important role in lowering levels of fear (see p104), and prepared the way for the more dramatic changes a few years later.

Provocative

Provocative actions do not pretend anything like the four other strategies. They are an openly declared challenge to claims to status and power. They include an element that part of the audience consider amusing, for instance when they manage to expose shortcomings and present the "almighty" as humans with flaws. The pranksters do not deny the unequal relations of power, as in absurd stunts, or present any alternatives like the supportive or corrective actions do: they simply appear not to care about the consequences of their actions.

In Serbia in year 2000 before the fall of Slobodan Milošević the youth movement 'Otpor' held a number of provocative actions that mocked Milošević. To support agriculture, Milošević was placing boxes in shops and public places asking people to donate one dinar (Serbian currency) for sowing and planting crops. As a response, Otpor arranged its own collection called 'Dinar za Smenu'. Smenu is a Serbian word with many meanings; it can mean change, resignation, dismissal, pension and purge. This action was repeated several times in different places in Serbia, and consisted of a big barrel with a photo of Milošević. People could donate one dinar, and would then get a stick they could use to hit the barrel. On one occasion, a sign suggested that if people did not have any money because of Milošević's politics, they should bang the barrel twice. When the police removed the barrel, Otpor said in a press release that the police had arrested the barrel, and that the action was a huge success. They claimed they had collected enough money for Milošević's retirement, and that the police would give the money to Milošević.

Be prepared for harsh reactions if you humiliate and ridicule anybody. If you make it difficult for your opponent to find an "appropriate" response (adequate from their point of view), frustration might cause a violent reaction. Remember your context. Not all examples should be copied if you want to avoid long prison terms.

Don't overdo it – humour should be used with moderation and works best if it is complemented with a serious message.

Further reading:

■ Majken Jul Sørensen, "Humour as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression" in *Peace & Change* vol.33, no. 2 (April 2008)

■ Majken Jul Sørensen, "Humorous political stunts: Speaking 'truth' to power?" in *European Journal of Humour Research* Vol. 1, no 2(1) (2013).