Book Review


Founded by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos in the late 1990s, the Yes Men are an activist media organization whose work has often involved the impersonation of representatives of various corporations and capitalist institutions in order to bring about what the group has described as “identity correction.” Posing as a DOW rep in 2004 during a live BBC broadcast, for example, “Jude Finisterra” (played by Servin) apologized to victims of the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster and vowed, finally, to fully compensate the victims and restore the site. After the broadcast, the real DOW had to clarify that they were in fact not doing any of this, which led to a burst of media attention around the issue (see Bichlbaum, Bonanno & Engfehr, 2009).

Perhaps due to their spectacular and humorous approach to activism, scholarship on tactical media has pointed to the Yes Men’s projects as exemplars of progressive political communication (e.g. Meikle, 2002). However, Ian Reilly’s new book Media Hoaxing: The Yes Men and Utopian Politics is arguably the most in-depth and comprehensive account to date of the Yes Men and their influential output. In addition to offering careful analyses of numerous Yes Men actions, Reilly highlights the complicated relationship between failure and success across the group’s career, thereby examining “a stunning display of risk-taking, creativity, storytelling, collaboration, and mentorship” (p. 143).

In Chapter 1, “Hoaxing in Context: The Dynamics, Motives, and Unevenness of a Ubiquitous Cultural Practice,” Reilly sets the stage for his reading of the Yes Men by offering both an analytic framework and a brief history of the hoax, discussing key figures from Jonathan Swift to Joey Skaggs. Chapter 2, “The Intersections of Hoaxing, Journalism, and Activism,” further sets the stage; Reilly examines the relationship of hoaxing to contemporary media and activism, demonstrating how the media hoax in the twenty-first century is capable of responding to a series of political-economic and cultural transformations: “[h]oaxes] prepare the way for understanding the current state of contemporary news media; they serve as important tools for sharpening the overall efficacy of political critique; finally, they give shape to a powerful utopian imaginary” (p. 39).

The rest of the book is devoted to the explication of particular works by the Yes Men, which are organized thematically. In Chapter 3, which examines hoaxes targeting the WTO, ExxonMobil, the World Economic Forum, and Royal Dutch Shell, the theme of failure is predominant. In order to receive an invitation to a conference in Salzburg as a WTO representative, for example, the conference organizers already needed to mistake the Yes Men’s fake WTO site for the real one; live audiences of Yes Men impersonations (at conferences or on the air) have also often failed to decipher the hoax.
in progress. Because the satirical edge of a successful hoax requires a moment of revelation, Reilly observes, hoaxing as a political media practice is “an altogether unpredictable undertaking” (p. 71). Foregrounding failure allows Reilly to hone in on a crucial aesthetic and rhetorical component of the Yes Men’s work; yet failure, as Reilly explains, has also been an important driver of the group’s evolution: “As a result of these limitations, the Yes Men’s revelation of their own hoaxes has since become a deeply ingrained aspect of their signature style” (p. 71).

In Chapter 4, Reilly retreads the Yes Men’s history in terms of success. Here hoaxes targeting George W. Bush, the WTO, Dow Chemical, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development are unpacked as poignant and effective corporate-cultural critiques. As in the failure chapter, success is approached in a multifaceted manner, in terms of the degree and level of attention garnered on an issue because of the hoax, but also in terms of “documenting and archiving actions … , resources for community building … , collaborating with different activist communities and building affinity groups with organizations and larger social movements” (p. 85). Further subdividing their works into “modest proposal” and “honest proposal” types (p. 86), the former that work through biting satire and the latter through a kind of critical utopianism, Reilly’s enthusiasm for the Yes Men’s clever interventions is apparent as he unpacks some of their most notorious (and painstakingly intricate) efforts, such as when they printed and distributed utopian editions of The New York Times that announced the end of the Iraq war, among other stories (pp. 104–105). In Chapter 5, Reilly’s analysis moves to the collaborative and pedagogical activities of the Yes Men via their Yes Lab. Finally, in a short concluding chapter, Reilly succinctly argues, despite the rise of “fake news” and despite the form’s limitations, for the usefulness of the media hoax as political practice: “Activist media hoaxing offers an important lens through which to evaluate the state of contemporary news media; it comprises yet another tool with which activists can sharpen the efficacy of political critique; and it plays an important role in the articulation of utopian imaginaries” (p. 146).

Reilly’s lucid and well-structured text does justice to an œuvre that, just as much as any filmmaker or visual artist, is worthy of close critical attention. And the book does an excellent job of marshalling together clear analyses and descriptions of works that in some cases have been relatively ephemeral. One shortcoming, however, is perhaps that Reilly’s account of the Yes Men sometimes reads as too laudatory. The Yes Men are indeed “sophisticated” and “fearless” (p. 95), as Reilly claims of their follow-up WTO hoax, but one nonetheless wonders how recent critiques of tactical media in particular, or digital communication in general, might have challenged or complicated the book’s arguments. For example, to what extent are the Yes Men’s well-meaning creative acts also ensnared by the endless loops of “communicative capitalism” that Jodi Dean (2009) has described?

Still, Media Hoaxing: The Yes Men and Utopian Politics should be seen as a significant contribution to research on media activism, hoaxing, and, of course, the Yes Men. The book is short enough to assign for upper-year undergraduate or graduate-level courses in media, theatre, or communication studies (on culture jamming, tactical media, or related topics). But the book’s accessible and engaging style will also make
it a useful text for teachers, activists, would-be hoaxers, or anyone interested in joining the Yes Men in their quest to make a better world.

**References**

Bichlbaum, Andy, Bonanno, Mike, & Engfehr, Kurt (Dirs.). (2009). *The Yes Men fix the world*. [Docurama].


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