



Activism and the power of humour

Marty Branagan

ABSTRACT: *This paper uses Australian case studies to demonstrate the continued evolution of the use of humour in environmental, peace, and social justice movements. Drawing from literature on the topic and from personal experiences in activist street-theatre over more than 20 years, I discuss the rationale and motivations behind humorous activism, and note audience reactions and impacts on participants. The paper is reliant on non-violence theory, within the multi-disciplinary paradigm of Peace Studies, in which education is closely linked to the non-violence tenet of 'conversion'.*

The paper describes some of the ways in which activists use humour to educate and 'convert' audiences, while at the same time providing positive, enjoyable, healing experiences for them. It describes how such work can also be healing for the performers themselves, through allowing a release of emotions such as rage and frustration. Humour is used to enliven and simplify popular education, and to complement other modes of education and activism. It is inclusive, drawing in audiences and adherents, and attracting media attention. It can empower and inspire audiences, and brings a healthy balance and diversity to activism.

Marty Branagan, New
England Institute, TAFE
NSW, Armidale, NSW,
Australia.

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Historical use of humorous activism

Humour¹ has long been used to confront privilege, weaken the power of oppressors, and empower resistance. In the 1970s, for example, same-sex demonstrators noisily tested the beds in a Melbourne department store, while, in the 1980s, a seemingly official sign stating that a small lake in suburban Melbourne had been selected to house a nuclear power station caused great consternation among residents (Coxsedge, Coldicutt, & Harant, 1982, p. 144). Protests during the 1990s against an ocean sewerage outfall in New South Wales included a bobby-helmeted activist on a tripod, and the 'Big Turd', built after the manner of nearby tourist drawcards such as the Big Banana and Giant Lobster, but at the other end of the gastronomic cycle (Cooke, Fulton, Rayner, & Wallace, 2000, p. 116).

Among the best literature on humorous activism is Carole Roy's (2000) analysis of the 'Raging Grannies' of Canada. These anti-nuclear activists, who dress like caricatures of cartoon grannies and carry plastic missiles, have launched their own 'navy' of canoes, and attempted to enlist in the military, to resist war and environmental degradation, question assumptions, and challenge stereotypes about older women. This feminist-influenced, non-hierarchical group encourages dialogue to raise consciousness and political debate, and to erode the legitimacy of military violence and corporate greed. They grab media headlines, stir up public debate, express collective power, and educate: 'their unexpected avenues of expression disturb complacency' (Roy, 2000, p. 14).

Enlivening popular education

Strong connections have been made between humour and learning, in fields as diverse as nursing, statistics, and technology education. Although Ziegler (1999) is cautious about the benefits for medical education, Ulloth (2002) found that humour can be an effective, multi-purpose teaching tool to convey course content, hold students' attention, relieve anxiety, establish rapport with students, and make learning fun. Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo (2002) found that humour strengthens the relationship between student and teacher and, if relevant to the subject, may even enhance recall of the material. Flowers (2001) suggests that humour stimulates cooperative work.

It is logical to assume that humour similarly benefits activist or 'popular' education. This is why some activists have intuitively used humour to enliven popular education through a variety of creative media, and

to make messages more palatable for audiences, without detracting from the seriousness of those messages. At this time of environmental crisis, with global warming and unprecedented decline of biodiversity (see Suzuki with McConnell, 1997), this is an important direction for environmentalists to take, especially since the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program claims that environmentalism's worthy but dull image is not working, and that its often-negative message is not reaching the hearts of people (Peatling, 2003, p. 3).

Humour can complement other forms of activism, bringing creative rather than didactic elements. Although anger is an important emotion in activism (see Taylor, 1995, p. 83), it is not sustainable for long periods and can contribute to burnout. Similarly, audiences may turn off if they are continually bombarded with angry messages, whereas use of a variety of emotions (as in a good play) can create a variety of 'hooks' with which to engage people². Wes Sanders of the socially oriented Underground Railway Theatre in the US found that when dealing with 'dreadful subjects' such as the nuclear issue, 'the funnier it is and the more music you use the more likely that people are going to first of all want to come and see your shows and secondly want to deal with it' (as cited in Curtis, 2005, p. 25). Humour can balance highly critical, disturbing messages with elements of light-heartedness, perspective, and hope.

At the Roxby Downs (South Australia) anti-uranium blockades in the 1980s, women plugged a mine shaft with a three-metre tampon emblazoned with messages such as 'Women know about hidden blood—plug the shaft—stop the cycle' (Hutton & Connors, 1999, p. 200), while 'the "Sleepy Lizard" affinity group...bound themselves together as one lizard unit and flopped at the most inauspicious times under the wheels of the shift bus or police vehicles' (Cohen, 1997, p. 112). A modified version of the three witches scene from Macbeth was performed:

Witch 2: *Liver of blaspheming politician*
Make this gruel thick with fission
Witch 3: *Cool it with the people's blood*
Then the charm is firm and good
All: *Double double toil and trouble*
Uranium burn and reactor bubble.
(Cohen, 1997, p. 106-107)

Similarly, I helped create 'Hog Pork', a skit about then Prime Minister Bob Hawke, whose character ridiculed the idea of (invisible) radon gas

being released into the atmosphere, daring anyone to point it out. Later conversations I had with police indicate that the performances were listened to, enjoyed, and contemplated. We protestors were no longer seen as a faceless rabble, but as passionate, informed individuals. Theatre provided both a topic for conversation with police, and 'common ground'. As actor Lee Stetson states:

The attraction of [theatre] is that everybody is interested in spectacle, everybody is interested in costume and some disguise of oneself to present a larger image in life. It's a human condition and has been since the first storyteller put on a feather and danced around the fire. (as cited in Scarce, 1990, p. 258)

Similarly, comedian Mikey Robins notes that '[t]he primary role of comedy is in bonding both audience and performer...[T]he feeling of being in a room with others who are laughing is that of an instant community' (as cited in Freeman, 2006, p. 30). Establishing such community and common ground is vital in non-violent 'conversion' and conflict resolution, since it provides the starting point for dialogue between opponents.

Conversion

This process of conversion is closely related to popular or critical education. Both aim for grassroots change of individuals and communities; both seek to influence behavioural or consciousness change, and to create deep-seated 'emancipatory' learning (Branagan, 2005). Such decentralised changes then form the basis for long-term structural change, avoiding the backlashes of change that is purely 'top-down'—that is, emanating from governments.

Many activists have used humour to educate audiences—including police, security guards, loggers, and miners—to disseminate information (for example, about nuclear waste), and to try to convert people to eco-pax or social justice viewpoints. One of the most successful Australian campaigns—widely supported by cartoonists³—was the 1983 blockade of a planned dam on the Gordon-below-Franklin River in Tasmania, which would have inundated ancient Aboriginal cave paintings and old-growth forests. At this blockade, scores of humorous songs were composed, including 'Lurk, Loiter, Hide and Secrete', based on the bail conditions imposed on those of us arrested. Another song—'Tonka Toys', by Bullfrog Smith—lampooned the machismo of developers with 'we wanna cut, we wanna kill, we wanna bulldoze that there hill, we don't care who pays the bill, 'cause we're playing with our Tonka

Toys' (Bock, Tilley, O'Loughlin, & Brewer, 1983, p. 85). This ubiquitous humorous music was an important factor in the conversion of many police from opponents to covert or overt supporters (see Cohen, 1997, p. 73, McQueen, 1983, p. 37):

Blue lights flashing in the gathering dusk, it was a scene straight from Clockwork Orange, when three [policemen] got out of the car and, having been assured that there would be no photos, joined in the dancing which had just begun. The motley band of guitarists, violinist, flautist, banjo and tin whistle players set to, and for half an hour, a crazy, almost surreal scene of pure unforced hilarity ensued. But how could these boots fail to mince to pulp so many bare feet? (Barnwell as cited in Blockaders, 1983, p. 42)

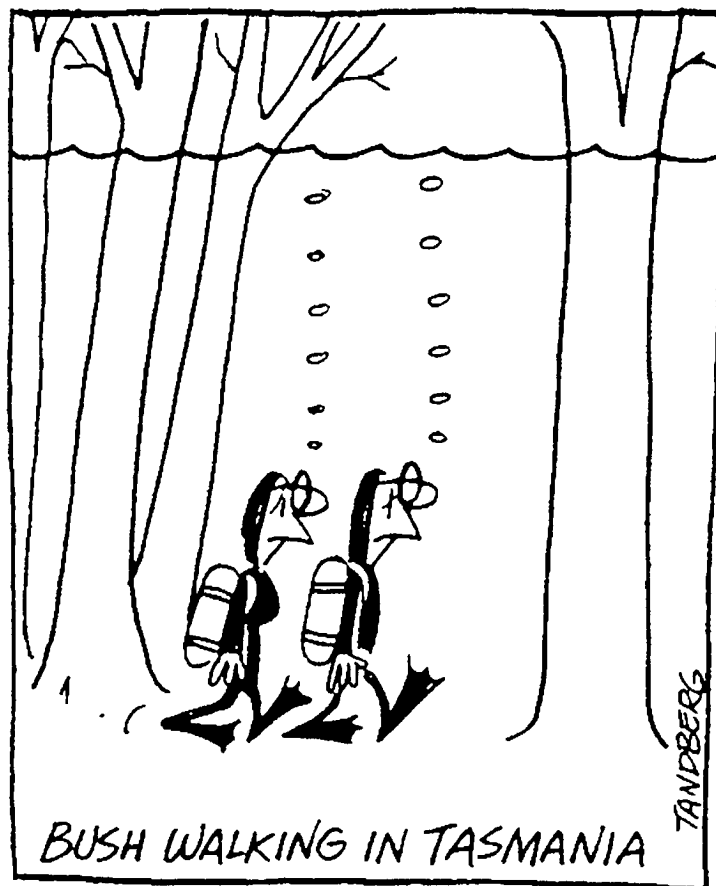


Figure 1: Tandberg cartoon supporting Franklin campaign (in Turner, 2000, p. 99)

Humorous music, along with theatre, was also an important part of the 1998 Jabiluka uranium mine blockade in the Northern Territory (see Hintjens, 2000). Again, significant instances of conversion occurred, with police affirming their support for the cause, and even feeding the blockaders with barramundi fish they had caught. I managed to sell my arresting officer a blockade t-shirt, which shows that, although he was still following orders, he was supportive. Clearly, there was still work to be done. At other blockades, police recalled (and even sang) satirical songs that they had heard at earlier blockades, with one policeman informing me that a blockade had been enjoyable to work at, but adding, 'I couldn't get that damned song out of my head for weeks'. Evidently, humorous music has an ability to enter one's psyche at a deep level, despite resistance.

Attempts to convert police are important, because such conversions can be a pivotal point in non-violent campaigns: for example, in the overthrow of Slobadan Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, when police and the army largely ignored orders to disperse protesters (Ackermann & Duvall, 2000, p. 488).

Creating holistic, liminal atmospheres

Another strength of humorous activism is that it can educate people in a variety of holistic ways—emotional and physical, as well as on several intellectual levels. As *Earth First!* musician Roger Featherstone comments:

You're never going to reach someone completely through intellect. You can speak to somebody until you're blue in the face and you're not going to get anywhere if there's not something to steer their heart. (as cited in Scarce, 1990, p. 251)

Humorous activism brings a carnival, yet simultaneously sharp, atmosphere to rallies, creating 'liminal' settings that are conducive to conversion and deep learning. In such settings, 'the usual roles in social life are momentarily suspended, and replaced with an overwhelming—even sacred—sense of collective camaraderie' (Turner, 1982, pp. 20-59). As eco-cabaret performer Wes Sanders notes, it is very difficult to assess the impact of humorous activism on populaces, and '[i]t's a slow process' (as cited in Curtis, 2005, p. 26). However, as one protester comments, you often forget what the speeches were about, but some protest scenes are so extraordinary and spectacular you never forget them (D. Westhorpe, personal communication, July 2, 2004; see also Cooke et al., 2000, pp. 108-109). They can, thus, be pivotal moments for individuals; many protesters feel that their involvement in humorous,

flamboyant demonstrations constituted extremely significant moments in their lives, often changing them forever (e.g., L. Nano, personal communication, May 12, 2004; Parkes as cited in Ricketts, 2003, p. 125; Waud, 1984, p. 260). As individuals change, so do communities, creating subtle but sustainable social transformation.

Creating inclusive movements

Humour provides a wide variety of avenues of self-expression and possibilities for inclusion in activism, involving creativity, teamwork, and different skills. Activists may engage in different activities at different levels of intensity—from starring roles in a satire to making papier-mâché puppets—and still be part of a campaign. This provides a range of options for potential activists who might be frightened off if they see 'locking-on'⁴ to bulldozers or attending rallies as the only options. Such inclusivity, which is strongly advocated by non-violence theorists (Reardon, 1990, pp. 138-139), helps to promote greater involvement in activism.

Humorous protests create events that are celebratory rather than violent or threatening to audiences. They create an atmosphere that enthral and includes audiences. Additionally, humorous activism can help activists maintain non-violence, even under enormous pressure and provocation (Branagan, 2003a, p. 53). This is important because any violence detracts from the protesters' message and from our integrity as practitioners of non-violence, and moves media focus from the protest issue to one of 'law-and-order'.

Activists at the 1998 Jabiluka uranium blockade created an enormous puppet judge from papier-mâché, and held a People's Court⁵, where we put on trial the mining company, Energy Resources of Australia (ERA). The creation of this performance involved dozens of volunteers labouring in a 'Creative Space' tent with paint, wire, and cloth. We met, wrote, planned, and rehearsed. We assembled at the mine's gates, along with a massive crowd—the jury. The judge's arms were worked by two people, and his voice came from a man inside connected to an amplifier with reverberation effects. Highly qualified scientists, acting as witnesses, spoke at length about nuclear weapons proliferation, and radioactive pollution of the Kakadu World Heritage Area, where the Mirrar Aboriginals still enjoy traditional activities. These speeches were interspersed with satirical comments from the judge. The charges were read from a 10-foot scroll, the jury erupted with giant letters spelling out 'Guilty', and we marched on the gates. A policeman warned us that

we would be arrested; in reply, a woman read out an 'Eviction Notice', which was painted on an enormous banner. Twenty-two people then entered the road to the mine, and were arrested.

The use of humour and puppetry transformed the speeches into spectacle, into something more than just words⁶. Our dedication to the cause was evident from the days of work put into the props. These preparations occurred in the camp, away from the arrestable situations near the mine, so there were fewer stresses that may have driven some people away. The performance, too, was inclusive, drawing all the protesters into the role of the jury, as well as many bystanders, who would possibly not have stopped or joined in had the action not been theatrical and, thus, relatively non-threatening. This added an international element to the protest, of ordinary tourists witnessing or supporting what then became an act of civil disobedience. With so many of the public involved, the line between who were protesters and who were not rapidly blurred, creating uncertainty among the police as to whom to arrest. Such internationalisation also probably affected police perceptions of the blockade. No longer was it just a group of strangely dressed radicals; it now included a broad cross-section of the global community.

Reaching large audiences

Humorous activism has the capacity to reach large audiences, either directly as at Jabiluka⁷, or by the attention of media outlets. The massive peace marches around the world on 15–16 February 2003 against the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies attracted prominent media coverage, much of it favourable to the protesters. This was aided by the humorous, colourful, and highly theatrical nature of the marches (see Branagan, 2003b, p. 36), while their lack of violence minimised hostile coverage. Humorous banners were prominent, reading 'Axis of Evil? Access to Diesel!', 'A village in Texas has lost its idiot', and even 'Bush is a servant of Sauron. We hates him!'. Among the 500,000 Australian marchers were polystyrene white doves, hats shaped like (US spy base) Pine Gap, stilt-walkers, and white-satin-gowned, winged 'Peace Angels', all adding to the carnival atmosphere.

As part of a 1990s campaign to save Exit Cave in Tasmania from mining, a colleague and I sent then Prime Minister Paul Keating, who had just visited the 'Holeproof' underwear factory, a pair of underpants and a request for him to '[k]eep Exit Cave hole-proof'. This simple action received widespread and good-humoured radio

publicity, largely because of its irreverent and slightly vulgar nature. Similarly, when the Sydney Rainforest Action Group styled themselves as the Bare Earth Society headed by Con Crete, called for a world free of organic matter, and welcomed ships carrying rainforest timber, they attracted prominent coverage—including large photographs—in Sydney newspapers. In my experience, this can be contrasted with more serious science-based press releases and reports, many of which gained minimal media coverage.

Communication

Communication is a vital aspect of non-violence (Martin & Varney, 2003). Art forms such as satire can encapsulate complex information and communicate it in a simple way (Curtis, 2005, p. 15). This is an important advantage over, for example, purely text-based communication, as few people in this age of 'information overload'⁸ have time to read and assimilate long tracts involving complex issues. Similarly, there is evidence that young people are increasingly getting information and formulating their political views from satirical shows and fake news comedy such as *Seriously Funny Politics* (2004). Feedback from the satirical skits that Doug Westhorpe and I perform on Tune-FM supports this claim, while more high-profile satirical programs such as ABC-TV's *The Chaser's War on Everything* and *The Glasshouse* are discussed widely in my different circles: from the academic tea room to my mother-in-law's, from art classes to my soccer team at half-time. Couched in humorous terms, they include serious comment such as on the hypocrisy of conservatives who oppose stem cell research, but not civilian deaths in Iraq.

Humour can also help expose the covert processes of elites, and promote open, factual debate. During the Jabiluka campaign, actions included mock nuclear spills (Hinman, 1998, p. 7), 'Oms not Bombs' dance parties, and protesters dressed as waiters offering water (supposedly) from Jabiluka to ERA employees. Along with humorous poems, raps, writings, music, and sculpture were placards designed like 'Wanted' posters, with the wanted criminal being Robert Hill (then Australian Minister for the Environment⁹), which brought into sharp contrast the oppressive treatment of activists by the state apparatus compared with the non-violence of most of the activists. Perceived persecution of such activists created public sympathy and increased support for the ultimately successful campaign. As one of the 20th century's greatest satirists, George Orwell, said: 'Every joke is a tiny revolution...Whatever destroys dignity and brings down the mighty

from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger they fall, the bigger the joke'(Orwell, 1945, n.p.).

Making activism sustainable

Additional to the educational benefits of humour are its effects on health. As well as being a great source of cardiac exercise (McGhee, 2006), humour's benefits are said to include muscle relaxation, the reduction of stress hormones, lowered blood pressure, heightened immune systems, and an increased tolerance of pain (Macnair, 2005):

Perhaps one of the best uses for humour...is in the psychological side of illness and in mental health problems, such as anxiety. Humour is a vital coping mechanism, enabling people to defuse stress, deal with humiliation, deflate embarrassment and mentally cope with pain and suffering. At the right time and in the right context, most people are able to find laughter helpful in examining their plight, even in the face of terrible adversity. (Macnair, 2005, n.p.)

Many activists, including myself, have suffered from physical and mental health problems, and this stress-related 'burnout' (see Shields, 1993, pp. 119-153) causes the movement to lose valuable personnel. The diversity, mentioned above, that humorous actions bring to activism is useful in providing opportunities for activists to move from stressful 'front-line' blockading or leadership roles to less stressful activities, and still contribute to a campaign. In the Jabiluka campaign, I found that moving between office work, puppet making, performance, direct action, and music made the campaign more interesting and less stressful than previous ones.

Humorous activism attempts to heal as well as teach, whereas straightforward or angry oratory can lead to depression, despair, or information overload in audiences. Humour allows its creators to express themselves and release frustrations in a way that makes others laugh, such as the Raging Grannies 'turning rage into positive energy' (Roy, 2000, p. 13). Rather than 'dumping' one's anger on others, humour involves a transmutation from negative hectoring to positive communication that others can enjoy, in an enriching process for both audience and actors. Dissidents against Milosevic used humour to contrast their positivity and commitment to truth-saying with the negativity and lies of the regime, who were 'preachers of death... [T]heir language smelled like Death... And we won because we loved life more' (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000, p. 489).

This blending of critical activism and creative presentation, of protest's negativity (or the negativity of opponents) and celebration's positivity, brings a balance to activism. It lightens highly critical or confronting work with creativity and fun, and strives towards a holistic—and thus sustainable—approach to community activism. It accords with central tenets of non-violence, including Gandhi's advocacy of constructive community development programs to balance critical protest (Gandhi, 1997, p. 128).

Humour can also empower, energise, and inspire action, through lifting spirits and creating solidarity. In the Milosevic campaign, activist Srdja Popovic stated that '[e]ach of our actions was full of humour' because it draped on non-violent practitioners the mantle of confidence (as cited in Ackerman & Duvall, 2000, p. 486). Similarly, the Raging Grannies' actions 'transform older women into people capable of a lot of playful energy who carry a very important message' (Roy, 2000, p. 13). At the Franklin blockade, I felt the power of humorous music in bonding our affinity groups, and buoying us while under arrest.

I have found that creating and performing skits is cathartic, as we laugh at our sources of frustration, and empowering, as we poke fun at those with considerable power. Audiences for the 'Little Johnny' skits—from unionists, students, and families to senior management—have been encouraging and enthusiastic, with one academic emphasising how the skits helped to lighten her despair in a bleak political and university environment. Additionally, humour's ability to create common ground was further evidenced when a member of the conservative student clique we lampooned at a rally approached me afterwards to express her appreciation, saying, '[t]here was something there for everyone'.

Conclusion

Humorous activism enlivens confronting or weighty topics with accessible humour. It establishes common ground, and creates liminal atmospheres conducive to conversion. It is highly inclusive, drawing in crowds and potential adherents, grabbing media attention, and making movements grow. It communicates widely and exposes covert processes, shifting public opinion subtly but surely. Finally, it prevents burnout by bringing balance, inspiration, and sustainability to activism. Thus, humorous activism can be strongly educative and can assist the health of activists, audiences, and, ultimately, the living organism we share, Planet Earth.

Notes

1. This term is, of course, extremely subjective. What is abhorrent or irritating to one person may be hilarious to another.
2. Appealing to the emotions through the arts can, of course, be used to foster conservative agendas (see Clark, 1997).
3. As *Sydney Morning Herald* cartoonist Alan Moir comments, cartoonists have more influence than many politicians, and their career typically lasts longer (cited in Turner, 2000, p. 114).
4. To 'lock-on' is to chain oneself to a bulldozer, gate, or similar.
5. This action was similar to the people's courts used in the fourth century BC in Athens (see Hansen, 1974), and in the early days of the Soviet Union (see McCauley, 1975, pp. 178-179).
6. Conflict resolution practitioner Val Majors (1996) argues that puppets are 'theatrically powerful—more so than any other media' (p. 302).
7. A number of films also emerged from the Jabiluka campaign, including Keith Armstrong's *Interstate Ferals for the Planet: Three Weeks at the Jabiluka Blockade* (see *Green Left Weekly*, 1998, p. 22).
8. According to Ralston Saul (1997), clouds of information emanate largely as rhetoric and propaganda from elites, obscuring the real power of corporate interests and acting as a steam-release device for the masses (pp. 45-46; see also discussion of 'data smog' in Heylighen, 1999).
9. He was colloquially known as 'Minister against the Environment'!

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