

# PERFORMANCE ACTIVISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SYMBOLIC AND PLAYFUL ACTIONS

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Consider how AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) fights stigma boldly, radically, and creatively in the United States. Questioning the label of “high-risk groups”, and emphasising that it is what one does, not who one is, that places an individual at risk, ACT-UP uses performance activism, guerilla tactics, and shock treatment to engage citizens and provoke responses from policy-makers. In public forums, especially when cameras are rolling, ACT-UP activists grab microphones, yank plugs, jam fax machines, and plaster stickers on public telephones that say: “Touched by a person with AIDS”. Their work involves symbolic and often “playful” protests and actions. Once while the Sunday sermon was in progress at New York’s St. Patrick’s Church, ACT-UP activists organised a mass sit-in outside of and a mass “die-in” inside the Church: Members played dead on the Church floor to symbolise the consequences of the Bishop’s apathy to AIDS (Fabj & Sabnosky, 1993). Through these acts of performance activism, known variously as “ludic antics”, “culture jamming”, and “liberatory play”, ACT UP makes injustices faced by People Living with AIDS (PLWAs) more visible, engaging both the citizenry and public policy-makers (Kramer, 1990).

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The purpose of the present article is to analyse the role of performance activism in enthusing, engaging, and mobilising a citizenry. We focus on the role of playful symbolic protests and actions, construing “performance” in the broadest terms possible. We analyse three cases of performance activism, in three different contexts: Gandhi’s symbolic mass mobilisation protests in India; Antanas Mockus’ playful civic engagement strategies in Bogota, Colombia; and the playful actions of “Billionaires for Bush” in the United States. We conclude by distilling lessons from these cases for scholars, practitioners, and activists of communication and social change.

## *Performing Symbolic and Playful Actions*

Performance can be broadly construed as a public spectacle which, depending on what is being performed, draws in a citizen audience, allowing them possibilities to engage with its multiple elements in a manner of their own choosing. Performances may be designed to create spaces for reflection, consideration of new possibilities, or sometimes even to evoke a “preferred” reading, although there is no guarantee that it would be read, or acted upon, by audiences in the manner desired. However, under certain conditions, performances that creatively include symbolic and playful elements can become visible mass movements, engendering civic participation and citizen engagement (Boyd, 1997; Duncombe, 2004).

### *How do playful, symbolic actions engage a citizenry?*

Performance activists Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe (2008) argue that playful symbolic actions provide a non-violent way to engage with power, disarming and confusing opponents through unconventional logic, and creating possibilities for new social relations between the powerful and the powerless, and between and among the powerless. The element of “surprise” in playful actions can shift the playing field, the power relation between the players, and change the rules of the game. For instance, Jan Smuts, who served as South Africa’s interior minister during the time that Mahatma Gandhi staged peaceful, non-violent protests against discriminatory citizenship laws, expressed his predicament to Gandhi: “You reduce me to helplessness. How can we lay hands on you without looking like villains?”<sup>1</sup> By peacefully defying laws that they considered unjust, and embracing prison terms without resisting arrest, Gandhi’s army of non-violent protesters built a community of upright pacifists, determined to provoke a response from the authorities. Community was created in acts of mutual support and camaraderie while resisting those in power.

Playful protests also invite people to participate without asking for much, and help build long-term commitment to the cause. Playful actions can engage and intrigue ordinary citizens and, in this sense, have a low participation threshold (Shepard, Bogad, & Duncombe, 2008). Unlike the one-time gratification that is achieved after a slow and painful revolution, in playful protests, the gratification lies in the participating. The joy experienced in solidarity with others often leads to sustained and ever-growing citizen commitment and concomitant actions for the cause (Duncombe, 2004).

Let us now analyse Gandhi’s symbolic actions in India against British colonial rule, Antanas Mockus’ playful and symbolic actions as Mayor of Bogota, Colombia; and the play and symbolic actions of “Billionaires for Bush” in the United States.

## *Gandhi's Symbolic Protests to Unite an Oppressed Nation<sup>2</sup>*

An analysis of Gandhi's mass campaigns against British colonial rule show his creative brilliance in using symbols to unite and energise an oppressed nation (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). Let's take the case of India's textile industry. Up until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, until the Industrial Revolution gathered "steam" in England, cloth production was India's premier industry, a major employer. However, the policies of the British colonial administration systematically destroyed the spinning and dying of cotton textiles in India, moving cloth manufacturing to their mills in Manchester and Leeds. The result was massive unemployment and poverty in India, and a ruralisation of India as former textile workers were forced to move back to villages (Singhal, 2008).

To protest the oppressive British colonial practices, Gandhi made hand-spun, hand-woven cloth (*khadi*) the centrepiece of his programme for Indian independence<sup>3</sup>. He spun his own yarn on a *charkha* (spinning wheel) each day, and urged the poor, the unemployed, and people from all walks of life to do the same. *Khadi* was a quintessential symbol, a daily statement and action performed by all Indians, cutting across caste, religious, region, and social class differences (Bean, 1989). Its mass symbolic appeal — especially for the poor, rural, and marginalised in India — was *swadeshi*, the production of, and pride in, indigenous products (signifying self-reliance). The Indian National Congress, at Gandhi's urging, voted to require its officers and workers to spin and wear *khadi* and to boycott foreign cloth. The spinning wheel was adopted as the symbol of the Indian National Congress, and made its way to the center of the party's flag.

Gandhi's famous Salt March (covering 241 miles over 24 days) of 1930 to protest British taxation on salt was also symbolically couched as a protest of 350 million poor Indians. Gandhi argued that much like water and air, salt was a naturally-available commodity essential for survival. Everyone needed salt and, if anything, the poor — who toiled in the fields under the hot sun — needed it more than the rich. In essence, the British tax laws on salt were framed by Gandhi as being especially unjust and unfair for the poorest-of-the-poor. Salt was thus an appropriate symbol for organising the teeming and disenfranchised masses against oppressive British colonial policies. Salt, much like *khadi*, was a quintessential communicative symbol of mass protest, a protest which Gandhi labeled as one of "right against might".

In essence, Gandhi found a way to engage a mass of oppressed people through powerful symbols of protest and action. *Khadi* as a symbol could be "performed" on a daily basis by spinning cloth on a charkha, or by wearing the handspun khadi with pride and dignity.

## *Mockus and "Cultural Ciudadana" in Colombia*

In the early 1990s, the citizens of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, were caught in a web of "rage and resentment" (Martin Barbero, 2007). Civic amenities were poorly dispensed, public distrust of municipal authorities was high, and the city was plagued by one the highest rates of traffic fatalities, violence, and murder (Rotberg, 2003). Sociologists equated the common peoples' experience of living in Bogota as no different than "living hell".

However, within a decade (1993 to 2003), Bogota became a model of unbridled civic engagement the likes of which had never been seen before (Cohen, 2008). The *Courier International* described Bogotá citizens as "full of pride" for their extraordinary civic accomplishments (Sorela, 2007). Traffic fatalities dropped in Bogota from 1,300 per year in 1993 to about 600, and the number of homicides from 80 to 22 per 100,000 inhabitants (Caballero, 2004). Bogota had shed its "hellish" reputation and was now considered as one of the most "livable" capital cities in the Americas (Espinel Vallejo, 1998; Mockus, 2002; 2007; 2008; Londono, 2005; Rojas, 2002).

What explains this transformation of Bogotá's civic landscape? The answers lie in the playful, creative, and innovative communication strategies of Antanas Mockus, two-term Mayor of Bogotá from 1995-1997<sup>1</sup> and 2001-2003. These changes were a result of "mimes", "thumb cards", and "knights of the zebra" – creative, performative interventions that fuelled citizen participation and civic engagement (Matheson, 1995; Schapiro, 2001; Rockwell, 2004). As one might guess, Mockus's communication strategies creatively employed symbols, humour, and metaphors (Caballero, 2004).

Mockus, a professor of mathematics and the Rector of Universidad de Nacional de Colombia, shot into national prominence in 1993 when, faced with a rowdy mob of students in an auditorium, he dropped his pants to calm a tense and potentially violent situation. Earning his creative notoriety in the national press, Mockus resigned from the university's top position and ran for Bogotá's Mayor position, spending less than \$5,000 (US) on his election campaign. Elected to its office, he confronted a city that was choking with violence, lawless traffic, water shortages, and public apathy.

Mockus, was the first independent candidate in Colombian history to be elected Mayor of Bogotá (Lopez Borbon, 2001). His electoral success was predicted in a magazine article titled "The Hour of the Anti-Politicians", which argued that Mockus would win hands-down on account of his playful, irreverent political style. Mockus's playful approach to engage citizens was described variously as "shocking", "brilliantly stunning", and "amazingly creative". For instance, soon after being elected, Mockus made his first public appearance on television as "Super Citizen". On camera, citizens of Bogota see Mockus jumping to tear down illegal advertisements covering a city wall. After several citizens eagerly joined the "crazy" mayor in tearing down posters, Mockus elaborated on his tactical performance: "As long as people now understand that this shouldn't be done, [pointing

to the illegal advertisements], I don't care how I have to dress" (Heliot & Lemoine, 2006).

Mockus's performance-centred approach to civic engagement was part of "*Cultural Ciudadana*" (civic culture), a social change strategy designed to promote "interpersonal self-regulation".<sup>5</sup> In the context of a playful performance, citizens use interpersonal communication channels to encourage each other to voluntarily self-regulate their behaviours. Let us illustrate with a few examples.

In March 1995, citizens of Bogotá on their daily commute to work noticed that the traffic police, who manned congested intersections, blowing their whistles, waving their hands, and issuing citations, were absent. Instead, men and women with painted white faces, mimes, took their place. A pedestrian crossing the road at the wrong place would be followed by a mime who mocked their erroneous moves, creating a teaching-learning moment in that very instant for the offender and the on-lookers (Mockus, 2004; 2005). Mimes also paused in the middle of the pedestrian crosswalk for a theatrical show of displeasure at drivers who were infringing on pedestrians' access to the "zebras," the striped street-crossing walkways. For Mockus, the mimes represented a pacifist counterweight to policemen. With no words or weapons, the mimes were doubly unarmed. Their effectiveness demonstrated the value of socio-cultural regulation over legal regulation (Caballero, 2004). Within a few months, 420 street mimes "policed" the congested intersections in Bogotá.

Paul Bromberg, the Director of the city agency charged with implementing the "*Cultura Ciudadana*" strategy,<sup>6</sup> described the traffic mimes' roles as making visible the (in) appropriate behaviour of citizens in a playful manner in order to foster mindfulness and self-regulation of one's behaviour (Botero, 1995). The "traffic mimes" soon became a regular feature in the daily newspapers of Bogotá, effectively putting pedestrian safety on the public agenda. The silent, pedagogic playfulness of the mimes served as a model for pedestrians and drivers of how to communicate disapproval of another citizen's behaviour without resorting to insults or violence (Mockus, 1999).

Some 18 months after the mimes first appeared on the streets of Bogotá, Mockus gave them centre stage during the half-time performance of a momentous national soccer championship to promote another "*Cultura Ciudadana*" campaign — the "Thumb Cards" (El Espectador, 1996). In alignment with their strategy to promote peaceful, self and other-regulation communication among citizens, the Mayor's office distributed 350,000 red and white "thumbs cards," to citizens (Sáenz Obregón, 2007). The white, "thumbs up" cards were designed for citizens to show their approval of others' actions while the red, "thumbs down" cards, modeled on the red cards used by football referees, could be used to playfully show disapproval.

Putting the cards into the hands of citizens and letting them determine when and how to use them demonstrated Mockus's faith in the judgment of citizens. Relying on the voluntary participation of citizens in the campaign

also meant that citizens were free to *not* participate, or to use the cards for different purposes. Survey results appearing in the Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* noted that almost 40 percent of the Bogota citizens who had the cards kept them in their cars. One citizen<sup>7</sup> noted that he often flashed the “thumbs up” sign to other fellow citizens, with a smile, especially when trying to charm his way into traffic. Although the general purpose of the cards was to promote interpersonal displays of approval and disapproval, citizens exercised a great degree of freedom in their use. Mockus described the “thumb cards” campaign as the result of his realisation that fear of social sanction is only one way in which social norms regulate human behaviour. Mockus (2008) argued for the other side: “People also respond to positive recognition and trust.”

Mockus’s “Knights of the Zebra” campaign was also part of “*Cultural Ciudadana*” and the belief in the role of playful, positive reinforcement to shape social norms. When Mockus became Mayor, taxi drivers in Bogotá were distrusted and criticised for flouting traffic laws, especially for not stopping on “Zebras”, or pedestrian crosswalks, or not turning their meters on. To restore public confidence in the use of taxis, citizens were encouraged to call the Mayor’s office to nominate exemplary taxi drivers as part of the “Knights of the Zebra” positive recognition strategy. One hundred and fifty drivers comprised the first “knighted” group, who received stickers and small zebra figurines for display in their taxis (*El Tiempo*, 1996). Knighted taxi drivers were then invited to recruit other law-abiding colleagues and soon the “Knights of the Zebra” went from a membership of 150 to 4,800 (*El Espectador*, 1996). Within a couple of years, some 40,000 of the 60,000 taxi drivers of Bogotá were enrolled in the voluntary programme (Mockus, 2004). The playful “knightings” associated with this citizen-centred campaign served to “make visible” the taxi drivers’ good conduct to those who once avoided and distrusted them (Mockus, 2003).

Mockus’s civic engagement initiatives took many other performative forms (Caballero, 2004).<sup>8</sup> To mobilise people against violence and terrorist attacks, he called for a “vaccine against violence”. To administer this vaccine, people drew the faces of the people who had hurt them on balloons, which they then popped with injection needles. About 50,000 people administered this vaccine. To promote driver safety, Mockus’s offices painted stars on the spots where pedestrians (1,500 of them) had been killed in traffic accidents, providing visible reminders of the needless pain, suffering, and death caused by rash and negligent driving. To address the problem of water shortage, Mockus appeared on television, taking a shower in front of the cameras. As he soaped and shampooed, he turned off the faucet, goading the citizens of Bogota to do the same. Water usage voluntarily dropped by 14 percent within eight weeks, and coupled with monetary incentives provided by the mayor’s office, water use dropped by 40 percent for the entire city of Bogota (Caballero, 2004).

Data collected by the mayor's office after these creative, playful interventions showed the impact of playful, positive, citizen-centred performative actions: Some 75 percent of car drivers and pedestrians were found to be respecting the proper use of sidewalks (Mockus, 2004). The number of fatal traffic accidents in Bogotá also dropped steeply (Lopez Borbon, 2001; Rotberg, 2003).

In essence, Mockus's performative strategies focused on fostering participatory civic engagement through artistically creative strategies that encouraged people to regulate their own behaviour and those of their fellow citizens.

### *"Billionaires for Bush" in the USA*

The promotion of voluntary participation and civic engagement is the strong suit of a US-based playful social movement known as "Billionaires for Bush". Most active just prior to the 2004 presidential election in the United States, the "Billionaires for Bush" concept was created as a media campaign rather than a traditional "protest".<sup>9</sup> During the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, the "Billionaires for Bush" website featured a schedule of activities inviting any and all interested parties to dress up in "Billionaire wear" and join the fun. The following text accompanied the events listed for Tuesday, August 31<sup>st</sup>:

*"Join Billionaires for Bush for a day of flashmobbing<sup>10</sup>.... Ruly bands of Billionaires will roam the streets of New York, stopping for three-martini lunches, spontaneous outbursts of ballroom dancing, and en-masse shining of shoes."*

The specific performative actions, promoted as "the full adventure," included ringing the stock exchange bell on Wall Street, a picnic in Bryant Park, a "privatisation ceremony" on the steps of the New York Public Library, and window shopping. Two of the final acts for the day were ballroom dancing in Grand Central station and shoe shines for "fashion conscious Billionaires". Billionaires who wanted to join the groups as they moved about town were given the phone number of Billionaire ring leader "Sir Upticious Militaryspending". Through playful actions, satire, and ridicule, "Billionaires for Bush" engaged both participants and observers to expose the nexus between the Presidency and right-wing, upper-class, neo-conservatives.

"Billionaires for Bush" co-founder Andrew Boyd, was inspired by the likes of Abbie Hoffman and the Yippees, the Provos of Amsterdam, ACT-UP, Greenpeace, and the Guerrilla Girls which gained media attention for their cause through staged public actions (Boyd, 1997). Boyd learned that the organiser's main task is to create playful, creative structures so that people can participate, innovate, and co-create.<sup>11</sup>

The Billionaires' playful and performative civic engagement activities have been extensively chronicled in the media and academic journals. Articles appeared in outlets as wide ranging as *The New Yorker*, *Anthropology News*, and the journals *New Political Science* and *Peace & Change*. Press coverage of the Billionaires' performative actions, like currency, gains force when put into circulation.

At the heart of the Billionaires' strategy is creation of the action-mediation-remediation (A-M-R) circuit to publicising action which in turn invites new action. The Billionaires' actions (A) become instrumental when converted to image via media coverage (M). The mediated actions (M) then get uploaded to the Billionaires website, where they are remediated on the internet (R). During its high profile peak in 2004, the Billionaires for Bush website got more than 100,000 page hits per day (Boyd, 2002). The availability of "Do-it yourself" (DIY) materials like slogan placards and a "Be a Billionaire" manual made available to the public on Billionaires' website resulted in the spontaneous creation of over dozens of "copy-cat" Billionaire chapters across the country.

With democrat Barack Obama as "president-elect", the "Billionaires for Bush" will now need to reinvent themselves to stay viable. Nonetheless, their creativity, playfulness and invitational media strategy offer rich insights for those interested in playful civic engagement.

### *Lessons and Conclusions*

What lessons can social change scholars and activists glean from these symbolic and playful cases of performance activism?

In his noted essay, *What Pragmatism Means*, William James contends that there "can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere" (1991). We analysed these three cases of performance activism because they provide insights that are "different" from the traditional activist approaches that include slogan-chanting, banner-hanging, and placard-waving.

Mahatma Gandhi's use of carefully-chosen symbols, like *khadi* and salt, were infused with deep meanings to mobilise one and all, restoring collective dignity to an oppressed nation while non-violently taking on the aggressor. By protesting peacefully, and not resisting arrest, the *khadi*-clad salt marchers were engaging in performative actions that made the injustice visible, building a community around the cause.

In his article titled "Carnivals against Capital", activist-scholar Stephen Duncombe (2004) argues that playful social movements go beyond highlighting what they are against; they also "use their protests to demonstrate what they are for: the collective and creative use of public space". The mimes in Bogotá and Billionaires in New York tell us that serious performative activism needn't be serious. There is room for play and fun in spurring civic engagement.



In conclusion, symbols and play, taken together, represent highly powerful tools of spurring civic engagement, building social movements, and promoting social justice.



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### Endnotes

1. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B02EFD9163CF93AA25752C1A96F958260>. Retrieved on December 1, 2008.
2. For more on this topic see Singhal (2008).
3. For more on this topic see Bean (1989).
4. Mockus resigned in 1997 from his post as mayor to run for president. Mockus assigned fellow academic Paul Bromberg to take his place for the final year of his administration.
5. Mockus's measures were informed by, among others, Nobel Prize-winning economist Douglass North, who has investigated the tension between formal (legal) and informal (socio-cultural) rules. He was also inspired by the writings of German scholar Jürgen Habermas' work on how dialogue creates social capital.
6. El Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo (IDCT), the District Institute of Culture and Tourism
7. Interviewed by one of the present authors.
8. As Caballero (2004) notes, Mockus asked citizens of Bogota to pay 10 percent extra in voluntary taxes. To the surprise of many, 63,000 people voluntarily paid the extra taxes. In 2002, the city collected more than three times the revenues it had garnered in 1990.
9. Author interview with Andrew Boyd, November 16, 2006.
10. Billionaire Andrew Boyd described this term as a misnomer, albeit one used deliberately due to its recognition value. "[Our actions] weren't really flashmobs since they lasted longer than typical flashmob events," he explained during our interview. Furthermore, he noted, the meeting points were posted on the website, not text messaged, and were broadcast ahead of time, rather than being kept secret, as is the case with "traditional" flashmobs.
11. Author interview with Andrew Boyd, July 12 2008.

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