

TACTIC

IDENTITY CORRECTION

An act of activist ventriloquism in which you momentarily assume the mask of power to speak a little lie that tells a greater truth.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Andy Bichlbaum

Andy Bichlbaum (AKA Jacques Servin) got his start as an activist when, as a computer programmer, he inserted a swarm of kissing boys in a shoot-'em-up video game just before it shipped to store shelves, and found himself fired, famous, and hugely amused. Now, Andy helps run the Yes Lab for Creative Activism as part of his job as professor of subversion at New York University.

“OFTEN THE MOST REVEALING MOMENT IN A SUCCESSFUL IDENTITY CORRECTION IS THE REACTION OF THE TARGET.”

“Artists use lies to tell the truth. Yes, I created a lie. But because you believed it, you found something true about yourself.”

—Alan Moore

When trying to understand how a machine works, it helps to expose its guts. The same can be said of powerful people or corporations who enrich themselves at the expense of everyone else. By catching powerful entities off-guard — say, by speaking on their behalf about wonderful things they should do, but in reality won't — you can momentarily expose them to public scrutiny. In this way, everyone gets to see how they work and can figure out how better to oppose them.

This is *identity correction*: exposing an entity's inner workings to public scrutiny. To practice it, find a target — some entity running amok — and think of something true they could say but never would — something that's also lots of fun. What you say can either be something your target would say if its PR department went absent or berserk (modest proposal), or things they would say if by some miracle they decided to do the right thing (honest proposal). Instead of speaking truth to power, as the Quakers suggest, you assume the mask of power to speak a little lie that tells a greater truth.

The *modest proposal* approach — which the Yes Men and others have used on many occasions to impersonate companies and parody them — can be a hit-or-miss affair. It usually involves an

POTENTIAL RISKS

Getting caught by the real folks you are impersonating. Not really a risk, just a plot twist, so well worth preparing for.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Billionaires for Bush
- Conflict Kitchen
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- Ghana ThinkTank
- Mining the Museum
- Santa Claus Army
- Whose Tea Party?
- Yomango

Tactics

- Citizen's arrest
- Cultural disobedience
- Culture jamming
- Electoral guerrilla theatre

absurd and extreme — but logical — extension of the entity's current practices, like when the Yes Men suggested that executives of transnational corporations would want to remotely monitor and control workers in factories in Africa via a control panel mounted on a huge golden phallus.

In spite of the emotionally satisfying payoff of antics like those, however, it's the *honest proposal* approach — assuming the identity of a big evildoer and announcing they're doing something wonderful — that has proven to be the more effective way to embarrass a target. When the Yes Men impersonated Dow Chemical on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal catastrophe and announced on Dow's behalf that it was finally taking responsibility for the disaster (see: *STORY: Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal*); or when U.S. Uncut activists announced that GE was paying its 2010 taxes after all (see: *TACTIC: Hoax*); or when activists impersonating French officials announced that Haiti's debt — which had been imposed when Haiti won independence from France, to compensate French slave owners for their lost "property" — would at long last be forgiven; or when environmental activists impersonated Canada (in one case) or the US Chamber of Commerce (in another) and announced surprising and wonderful things . . . In all these cases, the consequences were immediate: voluminous news reports about the unlikely turn of events (and, in the Dow and GE cases, giant temporary drops in each company's stock value). These in turn provided fodder for a wave of other articles about the whole hoax, providing a media platform for the reform programs of campaigners working on these issues.

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LEARN MORE

Identity Correction: How it Works

The Yes Men

<http://www.tacticalmediafiles.net/picture?pic=1862>

- Hoax
- Infiltration
- Media-jacking
- Spoof website

Principles

- Anyone can act
- Brand or be branded
- Choose your target wisely
- Do the media's work for them
- Everyone has balls/ovaries of steel
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make the invisible visible
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Punch up, not down
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Recapture the flag
- Reframe the issue
- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Show, don't tell
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Turn the tables
- Use others' prejudices against them
- Use the law, don't be afraid of it

Theories

- Action logic
- Alienation effect
- Capitalism
- Critical multiculturalism
- Ethical spectacle
- Floating signifier
- Prefigurative politics
- Society of the spectacle
- The propaganda model

TAGS

Action design, Communications, Humour, Media, Pranks