

TACTIC LIGHT BRIGADE

A method for creating visually-striking, illuminated protest messages (that work particularly well in site-specific, nighttime locations).

CONTRIBUTED BY

Lane Hall

Lane Hall is a writer, artist, and educator who blogged the Madison Uprising, where he co-founded the original Overpass Light Brigade with fellow artist and partner, Lisa Moline. They open-sourced the idea from the beginning, and are excited to see it expand into a movement.

“LIGHT BRIGADE COMMUNICATIONS MAKE TWITTER LOOK LIKE LONG-FORM NARRATIVE.”

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

Imagine you’re at a nighttime vigil to protest the latest looming war. Candles are lit, speakers share eloquent messages, and suddenly, from a nearby rise overlooking the public square where you’ve gathered, the words WORK FOR PEACE light up the night, each letter several feet tall and swaying independently of the others, because each letter is held up by a different person. This is a Light Brigade in action.

In a Light Brigade action, people hold illuminated messages composed of large, lighted letters in public spaces at night. Light Brigades are best used in thoroughfare spaces such as highways and overpasses, iconic structures such as seats of government and monuments, or solemn gatherings such as vigils and marches. Light Brigade communications make Twitter look like long-form narrative.

The letters, based on simple DIY technology developed by the Overpass Light Brigade out of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, US (with props to Graffiti Research Lab), are lightweight and portable. They consist of off-the-shelf battery-powered LED strings of holiday lights set into corrugated plastic panels, which are then framed for durability.

Once the message is decided and the letters are constructed, an Overpass Light Brigade action begins with a social media or email call to action to mobilize volunteer “Holders of the Lights.”

Because there are real humans holding the letters, the action is no

POTENTIAL RISKS

Physical bodies in public space are always noticed, Light Brigades are highly visible, and public space is increasingly contested. Therefore, it is important to know the laws governing roadways and bridges: what can be held, fastened, positioned (see: PRINCIPLE: Use the law, don’t be afraid of it) and Be prepared to respond with calm and civility to the inevitable police presence at your action — you may want to roleplay this ahead of time.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Dhawili (turn on the lights)
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation

Tactics

- Artistic vigil
- Banner hang
- Culture jamming

longer about simply communicating a message, but becomes an act of bearing witness. Similar to a human banner, but distinct from a banner hang or a guerrilla projection, the visibility and accessibility of Light Brigade participants standing together to share a message brings power to the action as well as a sense of collective empowerment for the participants.

Examples of the Light Brigade tactic in action include holding the message QUESTION AUSTERITY over a busy highway in Milwaukee as part of a coordinated Twitter campaign explaining the failures and falsehood of austerity economic policy. NO BAN was held up in the middle of JFK Airport in New York during the 2017 protest against Trump's Muslim Travel Ban. MONEY ≠ SPEECH was displayed in coordination with Move To Amend and other campaigns seeking to undo the US Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling, which gave corporations the legal status of people. Iconic sites have also lent context to messages such as WE HAVE A DREAM and JOBS NOT WAR at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., and I HAVE A DRONE in front of the White House. In front of the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin, POLICE STATE was held to protest unlawful arrests of activists.

Light Brigades can add depth and focus to vigils and solemn events, as seen with messages such as PRACTICE PEACE at the vigil for slain Sikhs in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, or WE SHALL OVERCOME at the New York City Times Square rally in support of Trayvon Martin. Environmental messages such as WATER = LIFE displayed near lakes, rivers, mountains, and shorelines can also add weight and beauty to protests of extractive industries.

While it takes some effort to build multiple letters, the recombinant potential of a collection of letters is virtually endless. It's very important to document your action (see: PRINCIPLE: Do the media's work for them), as subsequent social media attention can amplify the reach of the message through pictures, video and blog posts. Therefore, be sure to recruit photographers to your group, or get good at your own night-time photography.

LEARN MORE

Overpass Light Brigade
<http://overpasslightbrigade.org/>

Letter Making with the Overpass Light Brigade
Occupy Riverwest, 2012
<https://vimeo.com/42172384>

The Overpass Light Brigade: Art + Electronics in the Wisconsin Uprising
Nathaniel Stern, Furtherfield, 2012
<http://archive.furtherfield.org/features/interviews/overpass-light-brigade-art-electronics-wisconsin-uprising>

- Distributed action
- Flash mob
- Guerrilla projection
- Hashtag campaign
- Human banner
- Media-jacking
- Visibility action

Principles

- Consider your audience
- Create online-offline synergy
- Do the media's work for them
- Know your cultural terrain
- Reframe the issue
- Stay on message
- Take risks, but take care
- Use the law, don't be afraid of it

Theories

- Floating signifier
- Framing
- Memes

Methodologies

- Battle of the story

TAGS

Action design, Communications, Media

