

TACTIC

DISTRIBUTED ACTION

A decentralized mass protest where large numbers of people express their support by taking many small, simple, coordinated actions: banging pots, turning lights off, wearing the same colour of clothing, etc.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Andrew Boyd

Andrew Boyd is an author, humorist and long-time veteran of creative campaigns for social change. He is Wrangler-in-Chief Emeritus at Beautiful Trouble.

Phil Aroneanu

Phil Aroneanu helped launch 350.org in 2008 with author/activist Bill McKibben and a small group of fellow students. Since then, Phil has led national and global campaigns to push back against corporate polluters and build an authentic grassroots climate movement.

“A DISTRIBUTED ACTION PROJECTS THE POWER OF THE MOVEMENT AND GIVES ACTIVISTS A SENSE OF BEING PART OF A GREATER WHOLE.”

“Victory has a thousand mothers.”
—The Internet

Our default model for large-scale protest is usually the bringing together of thousands, maybe millions, of people in one central location (see: TACTIC: Mass street action). Martin Luther King’s famous 300,000-strong March on Washington in 1963, or the Tahir Square Occupation in Egypt in 2011 are classic examples of this concentrated form of mass protest. But protests can be equally massive — and sometimes more impactful — not by concentrating people together in one place, but by linking together many small, simultaneous protests across the country, or even the world. This is not a new phenomenon — just think of the coordinated protests across the US in October 1969 that were part of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam. But the advent of the Internet, decentralized “meet-up” online organizing tools, and social media, has made it easier (and cheaper) to pull off these kind of distributed actions with more precision, visibility, and sense of community.

The Internet is a radical tool for connecting people around the world in service to a common cause — not just by signing your name to an online petition, but by taking real-world action in your community in coordination with others taking action in theirs. A successful distributed action demonstrates the power of a social movement and the breadth of support for a cause (see: PRINCIPLE: Make the invisible visible), while also giving participants the feeling of being part of a greater whole. It is a particularly useful tactic when a movement is young, dispersed, and minimally networked.

POTENTIAL RISKS

Given its open architecture, a distributed action is risky — not physically, but politically. You put out a call, and people you’ve never met respond and roll into action under your banner. Some folks may go way off message or do something foolish that requires you to engage in damage control. Most things will probably go swimmingly, but the more you follow the guidelines above — a strong framework, a clear call to action, and solid tools to help folks stay on track — the less likely you are to have problems, and more likely you are to make an impact. Many groups also use nonviolence guidelines or a code of conduct that all participants agree to abide by when signing up online.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

Distributed actions generally kick-off when an individual or a group puts out a compelling call to action, that includes either a political demand or a unifying message (see: THEORY: Memes), as well as an action framework that allows far-flung participants to take a similar action at the same time in a coordinated fashion.

To pull off a successful distributed action, one should pay attention to these key elements:

A day of action. Having your many small events happen all at the same time gives a distributed action power and coherence, and ups the chances that you can break through the media fog and get the public's attention focused on your issue. Days (or weeks) of action can be highly disciplined and structured, or much looser — more like a potluck dinner, where everybody brings the dish s/he feels like cooking. Organizers might choose to invest time and energy in select flagship locations — taking things to a higher level in a few spots — to help drive the story.

A call to action. A call to action should resonate not just with your core supporters and networks, but should tell a story that the general public will understand, and motivate new volunteer leaders to take to the streets. Depending on the situation, a call to action might include a pointed demand of political leaders, or it can be a more open-ended expression of grievances, like the call to #occupywallstreet, or even an artistic gesture (see: STORY: Lysistrata Project).

Tools for action Hard work, a compelling story, and a healthy dose of inspiration are the most important elements of a successful distributed action. But it can also be very helpful to provide some extra resources for those participants who've never organized an action before, or for those who have who want to take things to the next level. This can be as simple as posting a web link to a few organizing tips, or as involved as offering in-person trainings (see: PRINCIPLE: Training for the win) and downloadable toolkits with posters, checklists, sample press releases, and more. Some kinds of actions, especially those that involve Civil Disobedience or nonviolent direct action, will require more support than others (see: PRINCIPLE: Take risks, but take care).

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

LEARN MORE

Billionaires for Bush Do-It-Yourself Manual

Billionaires for Bush, 2004

http://www.billionairesforbush.com/diy_v1_contents.php

- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Billionaires for Bush
- Brazil's Free Fare Movement
- Dump Veolia Campaign
- Earth First!
- Fees Must Fall
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Honk at Parliament
- Lysistrata Project
- Nuit Debout
- Panty power
- PARK(ing) Day
- Québec Student Strike
- Reclaim the Streets
- Round Dance Revolution
- Standing Man
- Stolen Beauty
- Stop Praver Plan
- Street Graduation
- Taxi drivers strike against taxation
- The Salt March
- #ThisFlag
- Trail of Dreams
- Yomango
- "You'll never have a home in your f***ing life!"

Tactics

- App flooding
- Artistic vigil
- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Creative petition delivery
- Critical mass
- Currency hacking
- Debt strike
- Distributed denial of service (DDoS)
- Divestment
- Flash mob
- Hashtag campaign
- Hashtag hijack
- Hunger strike
- Light Brigade
- Phone banking
- Phone blockade
- Visibility action

Principles

- Breakfast is persuasive

- Build strength through repetition
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Consider your audience
- Create many points of entry
- Delegate
- Do the media's work for them
- Enable, don't command
- Expose inequality with a viral gesture
- Hope is a muscle
- If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
- Make new folks welcome
- Simple rules can have grand results
- Stay on message
- Take risks, but take care
- This ain't the Sistine chapel
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Use the Jedi mind trick
- Use the power of ritual
- We are all leaders
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Decolonization
- Floating signifier
- Memes
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Prefigurative politics
- The social cure
- The tactics of everyday life

Methodologies

- Ladder of engagement
- Points of intervention
- SMART objectives

TAGS

Action design, Community building, Movement building