

# Webolution Wow: Who Needs Posters?

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## **Abstract, Webolution Wow: Who Needs Posters?**

*The paper examines the changes in activist imagery and design during the past two decades exploring the impact of new technologies and the Internet on both design strategies and the social organisation of oppositional groups. The author proposes that design strategies have polarised into two distinct schools. On the one hand there are artist activists who are rooted in real-world campaigns, employing traditional technologies of image production to represent, visually and metaphorically, the people with and for whom they work. This group uses the Internet as a means of distributing its 'hand crafted' products to wider audiences. The alternative strategy, he suggests, draws its principle resources from the Internet's visual archive and from the symbolic and representational systems of corporatism, which it seeks to subvert via a strategy of visual derailment. The paper proposes that, despite its extensive engagement in global communications systems, the field of activist graphics is seriously deficient in developing, and widening the availability of the critical tools necessary to seriously evaluate its own potential.*

In the spring of 2008 I organised *Agitpop* an exhibition of activist graphics at londonprintstudio (Phillips, 2008). Timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of Paris '68 it sought to reflect the changes and continuities in oppositional, and socially engaged, printmaking over four decades.

The exhibition's overarching structure was a historical timeline that began with photos and posters from the early counterculture and 'Summer of Love' in London's Notting Hill, swept through late 60's Cuban Pop, Atelier Populaire, and 70s punk, before opening up to street posters from the UK, and other European centres in the 70s, 80s and 90s. The show's final section contrasted the web-distributed anti-Gulf-war graphics with posters created from within the contemporary American West Coast Chicano community, and works of social and political commentary by artists from the former Soviet Block.

In compiling the show two other, less obvious, topics emerged. One theme concerned space (physical and virtual) and the ways in which social relations and cultural products are symbiotically linked to the place in which they are formed. The other theme concerned graphic strategies and styles, and the influence of 'media' on the 'the messages' they carry.

The illicit occupation of a prohibited space is a powerful portent of social crisis, and hallmark of rebellion. From the storming of the Winter Place (1917), the Factory and University occupations that paralysed France (1968), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), to the battle for control of Cairo's Tahrir Square (that is raging as I write), revolutionary moments are symbolised by, and mythologised through breaches of social order and decorum, and their implicit message that, as the Zapatista's say '*un otro mundo es posible*' (*another world is possible*) (Garcia, 2009).

That an inextricable link binds media and message is a fundamental premise of print discourse. This relationship is further compounded when a third factor, the social dimension, is brought into the equation.

In curating *Agitpop* I came to realise that a review of activist graphics over the past half-century provides a glimpse into the mutability of this complex system of relationships, in which simultaneous changes occur in forms of graphic expression, the means of image distribution, as well as the social organisation and focus of protest. Thus the collapse of centralised command and control organisations and the growth of non-hierarchical, and apparently leaderless, oppositional cultures is echoed in the diminution of graphics of exhortation, *Hasta la Victoria Siempre*, and an exponential growth in subversive wit *The Party is Over!*

In many respects the community-based screen print workshops, that sprang up in many countries during the late 60s and 70s can be seen as localised manifestations of a broadening of access to the means of image and message distribution that, by the early 90's, achieved global potential with the emergence of the World Wide Web.

The earliest significant use of the Internet as an oppositional political tool can be traced to the Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico. In 1994, following a declaration of war against the Mexican government and the occupation of a number of towns in Chiapas, the rebels broadcast their demands, via fax and the Internet, and invited journalists to visit them, thus sparking global support networks for their cause (McGowen, 2003).

By 2001, employing similar means, the anti-globalisation movement attracted over 200,000 protesters to the G8 summit in Genoa (Bazargan and Hayton, 2001). Subsequent tweets, blogs, and SMS's have resounded globally from conflicts in Burma, Thailand and Iranian. As I write this paper, thousands are demanding 'regime change' in cities across Egypt. In response, the government has turned off all Internet and mobile phone communication, yet the number of demonstrators grows daily, indicating perhaps that social revolution may not yet be dependent on Facebook.

Irrespective of the extent to which new media might be considered either a catalyst for, or conductor of, democratic empowerment, there is no doubt that it has established new ways of holding the powerful to account. From the shocking images of routine torture by US troops in Abu Ghraib, to the classified documents systematically dumped on Wikileaks, America's moral authority has been, to say the least, severely tarnished by decentralised Internet communications, and pressure groups, such as AVAAZ (meaning voice in many languages), and 38 Degrees (named after the angle that precipitates avalanches), have pioneered campaigning methods that demonstrate mass support for specific issues. But not everything in cyberspace is universally progressive. Just a couple of Google searches generate the same amount of CO2 as boiling a kettle (Leake and Woods, 2009), and our consumption of paper has grown, not reduced, with computers. In reviewing activist communication strategies there are other issues to consider too.

There is the problem of the endless replication, and the suppression of interpretation, that is a prevailing feature of the Web. This is evident to anyone who generates its content. Issue a press release and sit back and watch the same phrases, uncritically pasted throughout the system, replicate exponentially. There is the uncomfortable fact that the CIA was a major financial investor in Facebook to consider – why bother developing a sophisticated surveillance system to monitor your citizens' behaviour, when they are happy to do the job, for free, themselves (Hodgkinson, 2009). And then there is the isolation; that brave new world of virtual, global, isolation, in which we are simultaneously 'Linkedin' to long-distance social networks, yet pitifully alone in the privacy of our personal computer.

This conundrum, between the lure of intangible cyberspace and allure of tangible locality, finds expression in two opposed tendencies that dominate contemporary activist graphics. Both approaches are rooted in earlier styles and strategies. On the one hand, there is the school of subvertising, pitting its collective slick-net-wit against the corporate giants, on the other hand, there are the low-tech, low-budget, locally created posters with global wings.

The Ad-busters, and subvertisers aim to play Mammon at its own game, destabilising its power by derailing its illusions. Or, as one group's mission says *'We are a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society'* (Adbusters, 2011). Their dominant graphic method, derived from the Situationist International, is *détournement* (Debord and Wolman, 1956); which employes ironic twists, manipulating images to subvert their original meaning and power. The judicious application of a little tip-ex and green felt-tip pen, for example, turns 'Starbucks' into 'Starfucks'. Jamie Reid famously employed this strategy in his record sleeve design for the Sex Pistols *God Save the Queen*, 1977 contribution to the Royal Jubilee celebrations. I also employed this strategy during the campaign to boycott South African goods. But it was always one of a number of design strategies that might be employed as and where appropriate, depending on the issues and aims of a given campaign. Today, *détournement* is the left's dominant graphic device, endlessly upturning McDonald's Golden Arches, or slipping references to emphasima into Marlboro Country. However, this narcissistic auto-canibalism, while seemingly poking fun at Mammon, also reinforces its dominant position by reducing the symbols of struggle to the vocabulary of corporate culture.

The competing style in use today employes a –'small is beautiful' ethic that, in the face of corporate advertising, (and its sibling rival subvertising) relishes in the humanised scale of hand-crafted protest. A recent survey of this tendency: *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today*, Edited by Josh MacPhee, uniquely assists us to understand the motivations behind much of this work because, unlike regular collections, it offers commentaries by the producers themselves. The book is, in the editor's words, a *'messy aggregate... the beginnings of an aesthetic conversation about what is wrong with the world we inhabit and what a new society we want to live in might look like'* (MacPhee, 2009, p10). MacPhee's opening editorial remarks *'Every print in this book was printed by human hands.... They can't compete with billboards or bus ads, never mind television or the Internet. Yet these printmaking methods remain vital, maybe even because of their anachronistic existence'* (MacPhee, 2009, p6) sets the tone for many of the producers' commentaries, which tell us more about each artist's affection for their chosen media than the affect of their artwork on the causes espoused. Consequently, the reader is unable to distinguish between prints made in small numbers, and distributed to a handful of associates, from works produced in large quantities contributing significantly to campaigns. In a book promoting activist images this distinction may not appear important, but in the world of political engagement, and any analysis of efficacy, it is essential. It would be unfair to single out the omissions in *Paper Politics*, without signalling the almost total lack of documentation; how many of this or that poster were printed, how were they circulated, and over what period and to what effect? that is characteristic of exhibitions, books and archives related to this field. It would be additionally unfair to suggest that the artists documented in *Paper Politics* have a collective aversion to cyberspace. On the contrary, many actively distribute their work via Internet sites such as Just Seeds Cooperative, which was also initiated by MacPhee.

What became evident during the making of *Agitpop* was that two distinct strategies, discussed above, had emerged in response to mass access to computer design tools and the Internet. One strategy employed traditional print technologies, producing work from within localised contexts; its images frequently represented people, who, as in posters by artists such as Favianna Rodriguez, are represented in, and through, the imagery. Moving from local to global

these groups use the Internet to distribute their work to other communities. The alternative strategy drew heavily on visual resources already disbursed throughout the Internet, which it reconfigured and reinserted into the public domain. The production context was the Internet itself. The relationship of the producers to the issues they address was frequently one of distant, rather than localised commentary, and the dominant imagery comprised not people, but the signs and symbols of the corporate world. While this approach may generate powerful graphic statements, the producers' alienation from direct social engagement in the conflicts, which they seek to influence, raises questions about the efficacy of this strategy

| Let us take for example the circulation of an 'Obamacon'\_style poster in response to the demonstrations taking place as I write. During the recent US presidential election many conservative figures moved over to the Obama campaign. This group became known as the 'Obamacons'. Over time this term was extended to include all converts to the Obama camp. One website Obamacon.me offers a design resource enabling anyone to edit the text and transform an uploaded image to produce a pastiche of Shepard Fairey's famous *Hope* poster. The online, user-friendly software has obvious appeal, but the ambiguities arising from its application in real world politics can be disconcerting. On 4<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2011, for example Associated Press circulated globally a photograph of demonstrators in Turkey holding aloft an 'Obamacon' image of Hosni Mubarak, with the legend 'No You Can't'. The encapsulation of a series of inversions; including the image of an incoming candidate replaced by an outgoing one, and the negative shift from Obama's phrase *Yes We Can* to *No You Can't* present a witty repost to the embattled Egyptian President. However, the explicit reference to the incumbent US Head of State that frames the terms in which this opposition is expressed is, in the context of Middle-Eastern politics, extremely problematic.

Such decontextualised graphic products are frequently encountered intermingled with materials created within local campaigns. Internet collections of posters from the recent Iranian election conflict, for example, abound with them. What is also emerging is the possibility of critical dialogue between the image-makers and the people whom they seek to support. A poster by Japanese designer Tatsuro Kiuchi, for example, makes direct reference to the recent Iranian election fraud by its use of a bright green background (the opposition's colour) and the legend *Where is my Vote?* But its depiction of a single figure burying their head in the ground is a grotesque distortion of the actions and attitude of the Iranian opposition as the following good-natured blog discussion points out.

*Arsham says*

*Hello Tatsuro*

*I'm from Iran and what you have painted, is a little bit ironic. Somehow humiliating, of course this is what I understand from the painting. (like lots of other people). Apparently, it shows that you don't have any true understand of our Green revolution or what really happened in our election.*

*A true painter should study about the subject that he/she wants to paint. So next time, try to come better up with the subject which you want to paint. No Offense Arsham*

*Tatsuro says*

*Hi Arsham,*

*Thank you very much for your comment. If it appeared to be ironic to you, I take your word seriously. I must admit that I might have not fully understand the Green revolution. I should have studied more about the subject. However, I didn't mean to be ironic at all. It was not my*

*intention. So, could you explain a little more about what made you feel ironical about the image?*  
[sic.]

Supported by a broad-cross section of highly educated and graphic savvy citizens the Iranian Green Movement produced a plethora of sophisticated graphics, which due to the reduced level of corporate penetration of their society, present a refreshing reminder that people, rather than corporate logos, are at the heart social struggles.

How then might we assess transformations in production and dissemination of activist graphics resulting from developments in communications media? Perhaps more urgently than other forms of graphic expression this field pursues a dual function: to reinforce the values of sympathisers and attract converts to a cause. It deploys and perpetually redefines stock symbols and narratives, and employs rhetorical devices to engage and manipulate an audience, which, in turn, actively generates new meaning out of a previously internalised symbolic system (Irwin, 2006). New media, and the Internet in particular, have intensified this process, increasing the potential for active engagement, while simultaneously facilitating dislocated participation. Yet the field remains seriously deficient in developing, and widening the availability of the critical tools necessary to seriously evaluate its own potential. I hope that this short paper might, in some small manner, contribute to recognition of this problem. Perhaps we might begin by rephrasing the title of this paper: Webolution Wow, who needs critical discourse?

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