HOPENHAGEN: DESIGN ACTIVISM AS AN OXYMORON

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ABSTRACT
Hopenhagen was an initiative by the International Advertising Association (IAA) in support of the United Nations at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP-15) in Copenhagen December 2009. The international public relations campaign culminated with an installation in the public square in central Copenhagen during the climate summit. Meanwhile, many of thousands of climate activists congregated in Copenhagen found Hopenhagen itself so offensive that they made the campaign and installation itself a target of their protests. Hopenhagen is a classic example of corporate appropriation of people’s movements and the subsequent neutralization of the messages demanding structural change and social justice. As such Hopenhagen embodies the conflict within the concept of design activism itself. This paper will describe how Hopenhagen 2009 damaged genuine people’s movements at Copenhagen. It will also prescribe strategies for public exhibitions and information campaigns for more democratic communication processes. Critically it is wrong to assume that the tactics used in the advertising industry can be used to build a climate movement. The mistake started as soon as the UN asked the IAA for help.

MAIN TEXT

Imagine the giants of global ad industry, working as one!
Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General at Davos 2009

Hopenhagen was an initiative by the United Nations and the International Advertising Association leading up to and during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP-15) in Copenhagen December 2009. The massive international advertising and public relations campaign presented itself as a people’s movement and culminated with an installation in the public square in central Copenhagen during the COP-15 climate summit. In the midst of a heavily contested political space with nothing less the future stability of the climate at stake Hopenhagen created a feel-good façade where corporate sponsors were helping governments save the world. A dominant feature in the
campaign was the giant Coke adverts; ‘A Bottle of Hope!’ plastered around Copenhagen. These quickly became the target of subvertising attacks by activists (figure 9). Many of the tens of thousands climate activists who came to Copenhagen for the climate summit found Hopenhagen so offensive that they made the campaign itself an object of their protests and the Hopenhagen installation was a site of activists’ banner drops and occupations (figure 3).

Hopenhagen is a classic example of corporate appropriation of people’s movements and the subsequent neutralization of messages demanding structural change and social justice. This paper will describe how Hopenhagen damaged genuine people’s movements and even democratic processes at Copenhagen. By critiquing the Hopenhagen campaign this paper will also prescribe strategies for public exhibitions and campaigns to cover social issues in a less authoritarian fashion. Hopenhagen demonstrated what can go wrong when marketing and social change are conflated. As such it displays the problematic tensions within the idea of design activism itself.

The project started at Davos in January 2009 when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked for help from the international advertising industry to build awareness and public support for a strong climate deal at Copenhagen. The Kyoto Accord was due to be replaced and Copenhagen was an opportunity to finally get serious about climate change. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had
high hopes for Hopenhagen. When he called on the world’s advertising industry to help at Davos in January 2009 he wanted;

To create a strategy to harness all the brilliance, innovation and creativity that the marketing industry is known for...it should be THE climate change communication initiative. We hope it will be a game-changer. It will explain, educate and ask for global engagement leading to success in Copenhagen (Ban 2009).

The campaign was produced by the International Advertising Association (IAA) and Ogilvy Earth with an assortment of large advertising and PR firms including Ketchum, Colle+McVoy, GroupM and Havas. The website was designed by Zazengo. The campaign resulted in industry awards for the PR firms and advertising agencies that drove the initiative including ‘Bests Green Third Sector’ from the UK Green Awards. Bob Isherwood was the Creative Chairman for the UN/IAA Climate Change Initiative.

Hopenhagen was unveiled at the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival in June 2009 then at New York’s JFK International, LA International and London Heathrow airports followed by an “aggressive” international campaign including a virtual campaign on the web where six million people signed the Hopenhagen petition and became ‘citizens of Hopenhagen’ (figure 5).

The website pitches Hopenhagen as global community of change makers:

Hopenhagen is a movement, a moment and a chance at a new beginning. The hope that in Copenhagen this December – during the United Nations Climate Change Conference – we can build a better future for our planet and a more sustainable way of life. It is the hope that we can create a global community that will lead our leaders into making the right decisions. The promise that by solving our environmental crisis, we can solve our economic crisis at the same time (www.hopenhagen.org/mission).

Hopenhagen had a massive outdoor presence on gigantic billboards and bus shelter adverts around Copenhagen during the COP-15 Summit. The central focus was an installation in the main
square consisting of several temporary buildings with a combination of artwork, games and exhibitions featuring ‘sustainability’ innovations and corporate advertising. A giant globe displayed projection updates on the progress of the summit and other information. Exhibits demonstrated technological innovations and green technologies. An observer who was not aware of the dynamics and political struggles in the climate movement might be lead to believe that Hopenhagen represented the interests of grassroots people’s climate movements.

The campaign created significant opportunities for corporate sponsors (Coke, SAP, Siemens, Gap, BMW and DuPont and others) to demonstrate their good will as corporate citizens. In Copenhagen towering billboards dominated the campaign with the giant illustrated Coke, ‘A Bottle of Hope!’ adverts (figure 6 and 7). Hopenhagen projected the image of being part of a movement against climate change wherein people, the government and corporations were all working together in harmony. The cross-media spectacle created the impression that Coke, Siemens, BMW, etc. were helping governments to stop climate change and save the world. The stark difference between the campaign messaging and reality was demonstrated by the fact that Hopenhagen itself became the object of scorn and protest by climate activists in Copenhagen during COP-15.

Don’t corporations also want to save the world?

Since the ‘Bottle of Hope’ advert was such a central feature this paper focuses on Coco-Cola as the main corporate sponsor of Hopenhagen. The ‘Bottle of Hope’ advert conflated the social movement with Coca-Cola. Hopenhagen represents a problematic merging of corporate advertising with ‘social marketing’ where advertising agencies respond to social concerns by building the impression that their corporate clients are genuinely interested in creating solutions. While the explicit aim of the campaign was to build a movement to stop climate change,
the implicit aim was to cast corporate sponsors as good corporate citizens. Contradictions between explicit messaging and implicit intentions increased cynicism and generated divisive tensions. This anger was evidenced by the protests against Hopenhagen itself aiming to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the spectacle (figure 8).

The case of Hopenhagen raises several questions. Why would anyone at the UN expect the advertising industry to be capable of operating as ‘a game-changer’ (Ban 2009) on environmental issues? Why would the UN expect the International Advertising Association to transcend its own ideological commitments? The answer can be found in a fundamental confusion about social communications. The UN asked the IAA to help with COP-15 because they, along with many other people today, confuse advertising with social communication. Society is now so heavily dominated by the marketplace that social relations are increasingly mediated by ‘the market’. Marketing is considered to be akin to social communication. In the same way ‘people’ are now ‘consumers’. Ban Ki-Moon naively thought the advertising industry could ‘educate’ the public about climate change. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The advertising industry is keenly aware of the interests of their corporate clients and will only ‘educate’ the public to serve the agenda of their corporate clients (and buy the right products). Hopenhagen was not actually about creating the kind of systemic change necessary to address the climate crisis, but it was a brilliant marketing opportunity for Coca-Cola and other big brands.

This analysis is not just a matter of liking or disliking corporations. The issue is important because climate change is a serious threat to life as we know it and presently we are doing very little to stop the ever increasing rise in carbon emissions. A strong deal at Copenhagen or the subsequent climate conferences demands legally binding commitments by global governments to keep emissions below 350 parts per million with an equitable distribution of carbon allocations across global populations. The deal would acknowledge historic responsibility for carbon emissions by the West and pay a climate debt from high carbon emitting countries in the Global South who are most heavily impacted by climate change. A mechanism to enforce these projects must not be reliant on carbon trading, a worse than useless mechanism for reducing emissions as demonstrated by the disastrous lack of results produced by the European Emissions Trading Scheme. These are the political problems faced by the negotiations at the climate summit and it is
disingenuous and even anti-democratic to create a communication campaign that ignores these debates. Hopenhagen used the skills of designers to create a spectacle of corporate concern with no actually agenda for change on the order that would address climate change. In fact, the failure to reach a strong agreement at Copenhagen was a (short-sighted and ill-informed) ‘victory’ for corporations and the IAA as it enables them to continue avoid regulation.

![Image: Subvertised Coke advert on a bus shelter]

Hopenhagen is the largest of a new type of social marketing campaign responding to deepening social and ecological crises. Hannah Schling from Corporate Watch stated;

> The case of ‘Hopenhagen’ illustrates how the triad of Corporation – PR Company – and NGO operates to create and then ‘engage’ with the ‘citizen consumer’ in the wake of effective global critiques and boycott movements’ (Schling 2011:11).

Although there were many corporations, PR and advertising firms and NGOs involved, the main players were: Coca Cola, IAA/Olgivy Earth and WWF.

Coca-Cola had been implicated in serious malpractice in India where they had been involved with intensification of drought and theft of water in Plachimada, Kerala, India (Brown 2003). The Coke plant drained up to a million litres of water a day from the underground aquifer in Phichimada and local communities complained wells had run dry. Additionally there was poisoned groundwater and Coke was supplying toxic sludge by-products as fertilizer causing cancer and nervous system disorders (Schling 2011). Social movements fought and closed the Kerala plans and the Kerala High Power Committee ruled that Coca-cola was liable for $48 million damages (India Resource Center 2010). These problems (and others elsewhere) were embarrassing and expensive for Coke. Hopenhagen created an opportunity for a change of PR strategy and Coke was able to position itself as a concerned corporate citizen. Suddenly Coke was speaking as experts on ‘water sustainability’ panels at conferences and Coke’s CEO Muhtar Kent was one of few key Fortune 500 CEOs at COP15 (Schling 2011).

Hopenhagen was led by the International Advertising Association (IAA) and Oglivy Earth. The International Advertising Association (IAA) is a professional association representing 4,000 members in 76 countries serving the interests of the advertising industry by fighting against regulation and ‘fighting for consumers’ freedom to
exercise their right to choose’ (IAA website). Their political leanings are heavily free-market. The campaign itself was created by PR companies led by Ogilvy (a global adveristing and PR agency) their subsidiary Ogilvy Earth, Ogilvy PR, Mannov (part of Ogilvy PR) and several other advertising and PR firms. These companies ‘donated’ their time and expertise for free.

Ogilvy Earth has been establishing itself as ‘experts’ in avoiding greenwash (they published a ‘From Greenwash to Great’ report in 2010) and helping corporate clients brand themselves as good environmental citizens. Most famously they helped BP rebrand as ‘Beyond Petroleum’ in 2000—a $200 million rebrand campaign (SourceWatch 2011). The Deepwater Horizon Oil spill in 2010 released 4.9 million barrels of real crude oil into the gulf demonstrating that BP is not actually ‘beyond’ petroleum at all. Nevertheless, Ogilvy maintains that brands need their ‘greenwash compass’ more than ever.

Individuals within advertising agencies might have sincere intentions and might be oblivious to the how their corporate clients are complicit with the systemic drivers of climate change. Nevertheless, these attempts at engaging with social issues are damaging. Corporations want to appear to be doing socially valuable work but as long as they are more interested in appearances than seriously working on problems these campaigns are futile. Creating a campaign around the idea of stopping climate change as part of a branded exercise within a corporate culture committed to intensive fossil fuel infrastructure use is worse than useless because it institutionalizes hypocrisy.

Unfortunately the World Wildlife Fund is on the list of those responsible for the divisive spectacle that was Hopenhagen. WWF is the largest international campaigning NGO in the world and as such has many faces and campaigns, some effective and others much less so—or not at all. WWF is sponsored by Coke, Nokia and other corporate sponsors and often works to improves the public image of its supporters. Recently they have become involved with large spectacles that claim to be about raising awareness but appear to be more concerned with image management for corporate sponsors. WWF functioned as a means of legitimizing Coca-Cola at Hopenhagen (Schling 2011). More recently at Earth Day 2011 WWF worked with SkyTV to produced ‘Rooftop Rainforests’ in London, UK. This latest project involved the impractical and not very environmentally sound task of putting a rainforest on the roof of the Westfield Shopping centre. These expensive stunts do little to educate or engage audiences but do support corporate PR agendas by broadcasting environmental credentials of corporate supporters.

Activists were Copenhagen during the summit demanding action on climate change and for many of these people Hopenhagen came to represent the corporate take over of public space, people’s movements and even political processes. The Yes Men, Climate Camp and independent activists all targeted the Hopenhagen installation. The Yes
Men are creative social activists who respond to corporate ‘crimes’ with elaborate pranks and a practice they call ‘identity correction’ which basically involves telling the truth about the activities of corporate targets. During Hopehagen The Yes Men attempted to hack the Hopenhagen globe to inform audiences of Coke’s actually practice on sustainability. They accused Coca-Cola of dishonestly about its environmental impacts and labor practices; “we have every hope that the Coca-Cola Company will immediately cease stealing the water supplies of communities in India and will put an end to its poor labor practices... We will now lead a pledge to never drink Coke again, that we want everyone to join in on” (The Yes Men quoted by Hiskes 2009).

The Camp for Climate Action (aka Climate Camp) is a direct action group frequently camp at the site of carbon criminals. They arranged coaches to COP-15 from the UK where they organized with Climate Justice Action. Several dozen climate campers braved the freezing cold December nights in tents when they occupied Hopenhagen to express their disgust with corporate greenwashing. Climate Campers claimed the design work for a recent camp has been copied by Hopenhagen (figure 12 and 13).

The case of Hopenhagen demonstrates how corporations attempt to align themselves with people’s movements and in doing so destroy the discursive and political demands of the movement. As such, Hopenhagen embodies a conflict within the concept of design activism itself. While design often functions as a driver of
consumption, consumerism, globalization and unsustainable behavior, activism is concerned with social injustice and environmental devastation. Activists struggle to combat the forces of globalization by forming social movements and resisting corporatisation of the commons and everyday life. Designers are normally servant of corporate entities focused on the creation of profit. These two forces are integrally at odds. What can lessons can be drawn from the example of Hopenhagen? This section will describe five ways in which Hopenhagen damaged genuine people’s movements at Copenhagen and how these problems can be avoided.

Corporations aim to create an image of being socially engaged and ethical but will only engage on their own terms and as long as it suits the bottom line. Hopenhagen created divisive tension between environmentalists and those who wanted to harness the energy of social movements to boost their own brand. The appropriation of dissent by advertisers is nothing new but in the case of Hopenhagen it was particularly disastrous for those who had hoped Copenhagen would deliver strong legislation and genuine solutions to climate change.

In attempting to create the illusion of a bottom up initiative advertising agencies designed Hopenhagen as an idealised vision of what a new climate movement might look like to deliver pre-packaged to the people. What Hopenhagen was missing was a process that sees public ownership and participation in decision-making as essential. Debate about political issues in public spaces is central to democratic processes and should not be controlled by top-down messaging and public relations agendas. Confronting environmental realities is a learning process. Public exhibitions must reflect the nature of contested information (within scientifically credible limits) and help the public develop the capacity to input, analyze and debate. It’s the difference between approaching an audience as passive consumers or active participants in a process of change.

For visitors to the city already struck by Copenhagen as a model green city where 40% of population cycle to work despite the snow, Hopenhagen created an idealized façade of a future utopia where the public supports strong climate change legislation and corporate sponsors were helping governments save the world.

Missing from the campaign and exhibition was any sense of the intense conflicts, the power struggles and the contested nature of the policy opinions on the topic of climate change. This depoliticization of heavily contested material is problematic in a highly charged political arena.

The Hopenhagen campaign stated; ‘6.8 Billion People – One Voice. Together we can fix climate change’. But six billion people do not speak with the same voice as Hopenhagen’s public relations agenda. Hopenhagen attempted to represent the diverse voices at Copenhagen and make its own agenda appear as the universal voice; the ‘One Voice’. There was no space in the public square for debate. This exclusion of dissent is undemocratic and authoritarian.
Hopenhagen was a high profile example of the precarious path environmental campaigns can take between generating excitement around the issues and generating material that masks unsound environmental practice. A climate campaign should help audiences make well-informed decisions. Information about complex issues such as climate change needs to reflect the fact that many topics such as bio-fuels, air travel and carbon trading are highly contested issues within environmental movements and it is disingenuous to ignore this debate. Dubious information or even misinformation can allow damaging environmental activities to remain publicly acceptable. In the context of a climate summit it is wrong to make unfounded technological claims that will dislodge the real work of changing consumption habits in order to reduce carbon emissions. Hopenhagen promoted the popular fiction that climate change can be avoided through intelligent shopping. The installation focused on new products and technologies. On their own these gadgets will not stop the climate crisis. When corporations control which information forms the basis for public discourse, knowledge itself is dangerously distorted.

Hopenhagen is a prime example of social marketing in response to the growing public anxiety about converging ecological / social crisis. In a recent report Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser claim that social marketing based on the ideological assumptions and strategies of the advertising industry function as an obstacle to pro-environmental behavior. The problem with these tactics is that they ‘remain indifferent about the deeper values or goals that motivate people’ (Crompton and Kasser 2009:12). Hopenhagen’s emphasis on green consumer goods reinforced materialistic values and failed to engage audiences in regards to the questions at the root of the climate crisis. This focus on consumption patterns displaces responsibility from governments and corporations to individuals, an ethos that will leave us unable to move forward with strong legislation and collective action.

The success of a climate movement depends not only on a greater level of awareness but also on a critical mass of individuals developing greater capacity for personal and political change. The ‘value - action gap’ refers to the gap between our values and our ability or willingness to change our behavior and political alliances based on these values. The value - action gap separates our awareness of climate change from our willingness to take action. The women’s movement or the civil rights movements are examples of social change that happened through learning and empowerment. They prove that large-scale social change is possible when enough people decide that they want to make it happen. Customs can be changed to reflect new priorities and values. Social learning projects can function to help individuals cross the gulf between their values and their actions. Environmental communication campaigns should function to help individuals find a sense of agency in the face of change.
Hopenhagen could have been a public space for learning where participants were provided an opportunity to engage with the complexities of the issues and examine core assumptions that drive unsustainable lifestyles. There is a real need of the creation of learning processes to help the public understand complex issues presented by the ecological crisis and to assess deeply political problems. The women’s movement helped individuals develop the capacity to act according to new values through transformative educational processes. These strategies could inform environmental communication, education and design today (Boehnert 2011). Creating a new understanding of complex environmental problems, helping the public engage with science and develop the agency to act is a challenge, but there is a wealth of research and experience within social movements to facilitate these processes. Unfortunately, Hopenhagen was not designed to engage audiences on this level.

Climate change communications should function as junctions between science, policy and the public. A well-designed communications campaign in this context should be much more than simplistic messaging. Communications need to be about helping to build legitimacy and credibility. To do this, initiatives need to engage audiences with the issues in an honest manner and also allow public ownership of the debate. The advertising industry is out of its depth in this area. It is a category mistake to expect marketing to perform these tasks. Communicating ideas about the environment demands a different perspective from those dominant in the advertising industry.

Good-looking design will not stop climate change. Marketers can drive consumption but they can’t create a culture that resists the very thing marketing represents. Hope alone will not stop climate change. If hope becomes associated with hypocrisy – then the challenge of building a climate movement has been made exponentially more difficult.

The Hopenhagen campaign’s primary success was to promote its corporate sponsors; a counterproductive strategy that only demonstrates how badly we will continue to fail as long as we put the interests of corporate entities over the interests of the global public and ecological system. Hopenhagen might have been conceived with good intentions by people at Ogilvy working hard on a pro bono basis, but it is wrong to assume that the tactics used in the advertising industry can be used to build a climate movement. The non-result in Copenhagen was a hollow victory for the IAA and corporations resisting regulation. It was a devastating defeat for climate scientists and everyone concerned about the long-term prospects of humanity. Ironically the campaign meant to embody hope symbolizes betrayal.
REFERENCES


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