

FROM PRIVATE ISSUES TO PUBLIC CONCERNS: ACTIVISM AND THE EVENT AS DESIGN TACTIC FOR THE CREATION OF PUBLICS

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ABSTRACT

In Helsinki, summer of 2010, a challenge was called out within a group of friends: “I challenge you all to just consume at local independent stores for two weeks long.” This paper describes the study of “something” that started out as a private issue, and grew out to become a public concern and event. The event became a public calling for controversy, rallying support for small independent shop owners, in opposition to large retail chains. It attracted local media coverage and became a Facebook event that attracted almost a thousand participants. This paper will argue that an event as such is both relevant for activism and design in general, in particular regarding design tactics for the construction of publics. To demonstrate this, the paper presents a qualitative study of this event: a rhetorical analysis of the call for participation and a semi-structured interview

with one of the organizers. Study suggests that an event as such addresses certain sentiments, and by doing so reproduces certain sentiments. It suggests that this event, as a design tactic, is aimed to transform values and to reproduce practices. As a tactic it aims at the construction of publics and provides the means for collective action.

INTRODUCTION

In “Design and the Construction of Publics” DiSalvo raises the relationship between design and how design contributes to the construction of publics. For this he draws from Dewey’s book “The public and its problems”. Two main questions run through Dewey’s inquiry: “How is a public constituted” and “How the constitution of a public is thwarted”. DiSalvo points out Dewey’s understanding of public being “an entity brought

into being through issues for the purpose of contending with these issues in their current state and in anticipation of the future consequences of these issues.” He continues by saying that “for Dewey, the problem of the public was not a problem of definition – it was a problem of action. The question of what constitutes a public served to highlight the concern of how a public is – or is not- constituted.” Indeed, the challenge of public action is the inability of a public to form in the first place. In order for a public to act it must come to be. Further more, it is not because of the lack of issues that a public is unable to form, but rather because issues resist identification and articulation. DiSalvo points out the contribution of design and its relationship with the act of communication: “Publics are constructed in the sense that they are brought together through and around issues. But the issues themselves do not exhibit the agency to assemble people. Rather, it is the actions and effects of others communicating issues and their consequences, that prompt a public to come into being. This act of communication is both a problem for the construction of publics and a place where design contributions occur.” (DiSalvo 2009)

Concerning the possible relationships between design and collective political action DiSalvo discusses the difference between strategies and tactics. Drawing from de Certeau he summarizes: “Strategies are expressions and structures of power exerted by institutions that attempt to prescribe behaviour and courses of action. In

contrast, tactics are means developed by people to circumvent or negotiate strategies towards their own objectives and desires.” The study of tactics makes it all the more interesting because this may lead us to areas that traditionally fall outside design, observing people that we do not usually see as practitioners of design. DiSalvo mentions: “Given that tactics are designerly means for the identification and articulation of issues; such that they might be known enough to enable a public to form around them; a central concern is to discover what forms of expression are most appropriate and compelling for those people and institutions the tactic is intended to communicate with.” Thus we can ask ourselves the following two questions: “How are things made public?” and “How are publics made with things?”

ACTIVISM, WEAK SUPPORT AND ACCELERATED PLURALISM

Stepping back a bit, it may prove meaningful to echo the various political theories that explain participation in social movements. The Resource Mobilization theory emphasizes that participation depends on the rewards available (McCarthy & Zald 1977). These rewards are divided in three types: solidary incentives (emotional rewards, group reinforcements), material incentives (money, goods, services) and purposive incentives (the belief that acts are effective). Particularly concerning rewards, Olson (1965) stresses the selective and individual incentive; without it, collective action would never happen. However,

these views have been criticized for its underlying economic assumptions, and a tendency to overlook a movement's weak support. In "Mobilizing weak support for social movements", Ennis and Schreuer take on a different perspective. They emphasize participants' attitudes, by looking at grievances, especially in considering weak support (Ennis & Schreuer 1987). They define different levels of support: Core activists, active supporters, weak supporters, the uncommitted and opponents. Concerning the weak support they suggest that less intensive support within the constituency is more pervasive and potentially as important. For this they call up the analogy with Granovetter's notion of weak ties (Granovetter 1973). Like weak ties, weak support extends outside the boundaries of localized social networks; it can provide channels for persuasion, conversion, and recruitment. They argue that the importance of weak supporters lies in their function in demonstrating the movements' power to potential converts. Also, weak support is more widespread than active support and has therefore a greater ability to reach the uncommitted beyond movement circles; they tend to spread the word. However, in "Weak ties in networked communities", in terms of weak support, Kavenaugh et al suggest that the Internet only creates weak ties (Kavenaugh 2005). Supporters often choose to move on and do not feel a need to get permanently engaged. It could be suggested that one can zip from one activism group to another. This would emphasize the ephemeral nature of weak ties. Van Laer and Van

Aelst point out the lag of Internet based activism (Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010). They warn us that anyone with a Facebook profile can form a group against or in favor of a particular cause and invite other members to sign this cause by becoming a member of this group. They conclude that new media, apart from offering opportunities, also carries serious limitation. As an example they give keyboard activism, where the low threshold has made joining low, but made the commitment and effective activity after joining equally low. However, R. Kelly Garrett emphasizes the micro contribution and says that small actions may lead to a greater sense of obligation (Garrett 2006). This means that an individual who has contributed to a campaign, no matter how limited or small-scale, even if it is simply by joining or "liking" a group on Facebook, is more likely to feel more committed to the issue, which in turn could mean a positive effect on moving beyond the movements boundary, especially if it is noticed by others. In "Online participation and mobilization in Britain: Hype, hope and reality", contrary to what many say about the deterioration of the public space as an arena for political participation, Ward et al point out that there is a rise of alternative or new forms of participation. He suggests that overall levels of participation in western societies are not necessarily declining, but that the public is now more willing to support single-issue campaigns and engage in unconventional forms of protest activity, in which the internet plays an important role (Ward 2001, Ward et al 2003).

More than a decade ago Bimber argued that the level of communication and information flow that the internet will allow, lowers the obstacles to grassroots mobilization and organization faced by political entrepreneurs, activists, and others. Most recently, Anne Marie Oosterveen concluded that Internet technology can be used in many ways by grass roots groups; such as educating, building a community, recruit fellow advocates and facilitate mass media coverage. She adds: "It is now cheap, effective and quick to broadcast information". It will particularly benefit those outside the boundaries of traditional private and public institutions, those that are not rooted in businesses, professional or occupational membership or the constituencies of existing government agencies and programs. An entire spectrum of issues will reach the agenda via Internet. According to Bimber these also include "real but quiet substance that would have been crowded out of traditional coverage by more sensational stories". (Bimber 1998, Oostveen 2010, Ward 2001)

DATA

In early summer of 2010 a group of friends challenged each other to just to consume at local independent stores for two weeks long." This seemingly simple appeal proved to be quite challenging in the urban city of Helsinki. One of the friends published this challenge in form of a blog where experiences and stories from this challenge could be shared. Soon friends and acquaintances were invited to write their

experiences for the blog. Later he also organized a Facebook group to bring all the participants together. Due to publicity, a prominent local newspaper, the Helsinki Sanomat, picked up the story and published an on-line news article on it, giving it a public profile. It became an event that attracted over 200 participants. In late summer of that same year they decided to do it again. This time a Facebook event was created for the purpose of distributing the call for participation. The mechanisms of social networking were put to work from the start. The same people of the previous Facebook group were called up to join and to forward the event to their friend networks. This time the event attracted general interest from various smaller lifestyle magazines, which published stories on the event as well. The Facebook event peaked at a number of around 900 participants. The actual number of participants may be higher than that. Something that started out as a private issue grew out to become a public concern and event. This paper concerns the second time of this event.

The organizers of the event were all either friends or friends of friends. The invitations to the event were sent out using their Facebook friends' networks. After the event an interview was conducted with one of the organizers. Looking at the artefacts, which the event produced, resulted in a careful analysis of the call for participation. The two main methods are: Rhetorical analysis based on the Burke's concept theory of

identification; Content analysis based on open coding.

ANALYSIS

In order to understand and to explicate the different aspects of this event in relation to design tactics, this paper addresses two types of material for research, each representing a different angle to the event. First, is the “Call for participation”: This is the invitation and introductory text that the participants see when they join the event. Second, is an interview with one of the organizers. This was conducted after the event. It addresses the origin of the event, personal motivations behind organizing the event and how the organizer thinks of moving people into action. The analysis also takes into account the organizer’s view on the event and why he thinks the event drew its popularity as it did. The organizer’s thinking is considered the creative mind behind the event and its tactic.

AN EVENT WITH INTENT: TACTIC OF RHETORIC

“What kind of city do we want: cold and boring, pseudo-cheap chain stores and supermarkets, or do you want to live in the city, where you will be served, where you can affect how and where you shop, which is also ecologically friendly, maybe even employing”¹

¹ The original text, in Finnish, can be found here: <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=133725356643667> or alternatively a copy of the text has been placed here:

<http://designresearch.fi/blogs/tjhien/2011/01/how-do-you-get-by-without-retail-chains/>

With this opening sentence the reader is put in a frame of mind, threat. The threat is not explicitly named, it is implied. The author does not say that the city is or is becoming cold and boring. But he suggests that this might be or is becoming reality. This normative stance continues in series associative successions. The chain supermarket, the target of this event, is being associated with “cold and boring”. At the same time the “disappearance of the last independent shop” is associated with the disappearances of our “real choice”:

“After the last little shop will be closed, we no longer have a real choice.”

It can be inferred that this sentence makes space for the association of the supermarkets with the main threat: losing our freedom of choice. Freedom suddenly becomes the ambiguous ultimate value that enables the reader to be unified with an otherwise divided audience. An extra appeal to our reason is called upon by associating the supermarket industry with the cinema industry.

“Look at what happened to movie theatres! Now the theatres are in the hands one major player and the selection has not become more diversified...”

By doing so this article both demonstrates a reality and provides a “model” in which most of us is expected to understand the consequences, if no action is undertaken. At the same time doing shopping at independent stores is being

disassociated from being necessarily more expensive.

“What we learned from the previous challenge, is that it’s not more expensive to shop in stone based stores than chain stores.”

This implies an existing public image for shopping at independent stores, being more expensive. The author acknowledges this as off-putting and might prevent people from moving into action and addresses this by creating the disassociation.

TACTIC OF SENTIMENT

DiSalvo offers us two design tactics: projection and tracing. Projection is a representation of a possible set of future consequences associated with an issue. It is often a portrayed image based on what we know today. Tracing on the other hand aims at representing the past in an, often subjective, way: making the past relevant to a contemporary context. With the previous analysis we see that the author is addressing certain sentiments, certain values. He does so through a series of associations and disassociations. These values return with the following suggestion for an alternative reality, a projection of a possible future:

“... or do you want to live in the city, where you will be served, where you can affect how and where you shop, which is also ecologically friendly, maybe even employing”

This projection is based on a representation of values. Moreover it is a list of “wishes” to which

the audience is supposed to adhere. It implies that the city of Helsinki today is not a city where you are served, it is not a city where you can affect the way you consume. By doing so, this projection, the creation of value, becomes a matter of sentiments. It creates a shared sentiment, thus transforming readers, unified into one big audience, ready to move into action as one. At the same time the association with the cinema industry can be identified as a tactic of tracing, in which actions in the past are given a contemporary context.

THE DESIRE TO MAKE A CHANGE

Olli Sirén is one of the organizers and author of the Facebook event. He is a freelance journalist and writer based in Helsinki. What follows now is a content analysis on the interview with Sirén.

Sirén starts with an observation that consumption has changed and how public perception of certain lifestyles can change over time. On the event Sirén comments:

“..., a few years ago something like this [the event] would be like a very hippy type of people doing stuff like this, doing their own small green organic grocery store stuff or something like that ... But now it’s sort of not hippy any more: its hip.”

According to Sirén people have come to question something he calls “the idea of a life worth living”. Sirén sees this paired with the change in our perception on what is valuable. Sirén is positive about the consequences of these changes for the

local livelihood and community. Sirén believes that people have come to the awareness that their choice of consumption affects whether small shops will survive or not.

"... and the thing is also that can it, can [this change] benefit local society, can the idea of good living benefit local society, can it be client friendly at the same time."

Although we speak of changes, Sirén points out that these might not necessarily happen by themselves. Sirén believes this requires a, what he calls, "push or a bit of activism". And this is exactly what Sirén hopes to facilitate with organizing events as such, to push for change in people for the benefit of the local livelihood.

"... change in the idea of [good living] is something I am not seeing that will necessarily happen. I think that's something that needs a little bit of activism to push that... this is something that I am also dreaming of facilitating with this kind of events, that there will be a change [in how we perceive] good living."

ADDRESSING WIDESPREAD SENTIMENTS: THE EVENT AS CONCRETIZATION OF SOMETHING THAT WAS ALREADY THERE

The interview gives us a glimpse in Sirén's double edged rhetoric. On the one hand, Sirén is convinced that this event is not saying anything new, but addresses a sentiment that he observes is already there. On the other hand it becomes clear that apart from addressing certain sentiments Sirén also wants to make a change, to

create, or at least facilitate the creation of a certain sentiment or value amongst the larger population, one that could benefit the local livelihood.

"I find this like a concentration of an appealing issue in time and this [event] is a concretization of that..., we got a critique from this one columnist in Helsinki Sanomat [who's] columns are always satirical towards different issues and [the columnist] also commented on this event... [The columnist] felt that people will understand it if he/she mocks it, so that tells something about the movement. The idea is already so well spread out there, that people will get the joke."

At the same time, Sirén points out that if it were not for this, organizing such an event would have taken much more effort and probably would have a low chance of succeeding.

DISCUSSION

With accelerated pluralism, Bimber argues that the Internet will contribute to an intensification of group centred, pluralistic politics. With the growing popularity of more ad-hoc protest networks, flash and single issue campaign; an entire spectrum of issues will reach the public via Internet. These open up possibilities for the public to participate in alternative or new forms of participation. These are matters of real but sometimes quiet concern that otherwise would have been pushed out of traditional channels by more sensational stories. It suggests that these new forms allow creative activists, political

entrepreneurs, people like Sirén, to communicate and engage with the public more easily and in innovative ways.

DiSalvo defines tactics as means developed by people to circumvent or negotiate strategies towards their own objectives and desires. In this event we can observe an innovative way in which a private issue with the dominance of the Helsinki food supply market, becomes public. We can observe a way in which the organizer develops an event as a means to contest the strategic domination of the three main food suppliers in Helsinki. This event exposes this issue. Moreover, this event constitutes this issue as much as this issue constitutes the event. We could say that the issue becomes temporal reality through and by the event.

However, as Dewey emphasizes, it is not the issue itself that assembles; it is the actions of people, like Sirén, that communicate issues and exhibit the agency to assemble other people and form publics: "it is the actions and effects of others communicating issues and their consequences, that prompt a public to come into being." And repeating DiSalvo, "This act of communication is both a problem for the construction of publics and a place where design contributions occur." The way this event showed to do this is to apply certain rhetoric and to appeal to people's sentiments, to address widespread sentiment. It is a concretization of something that was already there. The event is an expression, which is

appropriate and compelling for those people it is intended to communicate with. And as an action, as a tactic, this event attempts to create a public through and around this issue. The event is an action in the creation of publics.

Through events like these, issues and their consequences are communicated, prompting a public into being. At the same time, study suggests that events like these have the potential to go beyond just exposing an issue. As this study shows, the event also offers a challenge, a manual, or a script for participation: instructions for the participant on what to do. In doing so, the event does not offer a final solution or an ultimate remedy; however, it does turn the event into something that carries with it a form of collective action. To this respect the event goes further than only raising awareness.

The question of how an event as such might serve in articulating the issues that spur a public into being is a matter of design. In this process of communication, the construction of publics, provision of action, it becomes an activity of design. Through the event, the issue is made public and the public is made with the event, which has been designed. The event is a designerly means for the identification and articulation of issues, in such a way that it enables publics to form around it.

As DiSalvo points out, thy inquiry of tactics lead us into areas that may well fall outside the area we

traditionally see as design, observing people that we do not usually see as designers. The organizer of this event may even be surprised that this paper talks of him being one. However, design has much to learn by looking at these events and organizers of these events. As such, these events are tactics that belong to an arsenal of design tactics, design activism can choose from.

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