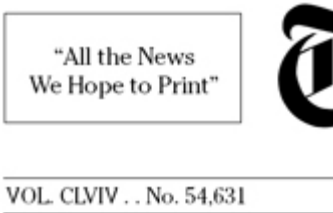


## Print Article



Detail of the front page of fake *New York Times*



Front page of fake *New York Times*



Volunteer passing out the paper on the morning of Nov. 12, 2008



## OH YES THEY DID!

### by Ben Davis

Maybe you saw it, or heard about it, last week. If you were on your way to work last Wednesday morning, Nov. 12, 2008, in New York, you might have encountered one of dozens of volunteers handing out copies of a "special edition" of the *New York Times* outside the subways, headlines blaring "IRAQ WAR ENDS" and "Nation Sets Its Sights on Building Sane Economy." I was one of those volunteers.

The stunt involved a great number of people, including an art professor at Hunter College, a couple of actual (disgruntled?) staffers of the *Times* itself, the Williamsburg collective Not An Alternative and the activist art team known as the Yes Men (a.k.a. Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, who go by many other aliases).

The fake paper itself is an impressive piece of work. Sharply written and stylistically acute, the 14-page special issue breathes a sense of defiant idealism that is largely missing from the fake news industry these days. Though shaped as a parody, the meticulous *Times* clone actually sets out quite reasonable policy goals for a progressive administration.

It is dated July 4, 2009, and meant as a sort of missive from a more hopeful future. Though reportedly six months in the making, the publication very much captures the "Obama moment" -- a profound sense of possibility, mixed with a broad rejection of the politics of the last eight years and a sense of urgency about the present.

While headlines about the war and the economy catch the eye, it is the below-the-fold feature, "Popular Pressure Ushers Recent Progressive Tilt," that sets the tone. Here's the lede: "The spate of reform initiatives undertaken by the Administration and both houses of Congress can be attributed directly to grassroots advocacy, according to a comprehensive study due out this month." The point of the project overall, the organizers say, is "to help jump-start our imaginations" about what is possible right now, if people are willing to fight for it, a theme that is repeated over and over throughout.

Here are some other highlights:

- \* Among the imagined stories are "All Public Universities To Be Free," "Pentagon Ends Secret Budget," "National Health Insurance Act Passes," "American Evangelical Churches Announce New Policy of Sanctuary for Iraqi Refugees" and, of course, "Court Indicts Bush on High Treason Charge" (in this fantasy scenario, Bush actually turns himself in after being "born again, again" and finding his principles.)

- \* A report titled "Last to Die in Battle Remembered, American and Iraqi" describes on the dedication of monuments to the Iraq War dead in Baghdad, a pair of obelisks whose heights correspond with the relative number of war casualties for Iraqis and coalition forces -- 40 versus 15 feet tall, respectively. "For the Iraqi dead, the most conservative estimate of 93,067 was chosen to avoid the coalition monument being absurdly small or the Iraqi monument prohibitively large," the story reports. (Estimates of Iraqi "excess deaths" --

Timeline of events accompanying article  
"Popular Pressure Ushers Recent  
Progressive Tilt"



An article from the fake *Times*



Fake HSBC ad



Fake GM ad



Fake full-page ExxonMobil ad

though not ones usually cited by the *Times* -- range as high as 1 million.)

\* The story titled "Times Reporter to Embed with Peace Groups" is a clever way of highlighting an important gap in the newspaper's coverage of the Iraq War, and foreign affairs in general. It announces plans to dedicate the same kind of resources to reporting on peace groups like Iraq Veterans Against the War as the paper does to covering Pentagon press conferences.

\* There are ad parodies as well. It is one of these, in fact, that best captures the paper's simultaneous sense of optimism and cynicism, a send-up of the current HSBC Bank campaign which features three like images of president-elect Obama, with three different captions: "epoch-making," "pivotal" and "squandered." Another ad from General Motors announces the return of the EV1, the electric car that the company debuted in 1996, then scrapped when it wasn't profitable (familiar from the documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?*). Given that GM is poised to take down a large chunk of the U.S. economy now that its business plan of churning out Hummers has gone up in a puff of diesel fumes, this one has a special poignancy. The tagline is "GM: Because We Have To."

\* The lead editorial is a mea culpa from *New York Times* op-ed page arch-hack Thomas Friedman. Titled "The End of the Experts?," the column has Friedman admit that he has been proven wrong on globalization and, especially, the Iraq War, of which he as an early and ardent supporter. Not only does the piece generally nail Friedman's breezy, just-go-with-me-here style, but it provides enough real quotes from his pre-war editorials so as to be conclusively damning with respect to the *Times'* role in leading the nation into disaster. "To err is human," fake Friedman writes, "but to print, reprint, and re-reprint error-mad humans like me is a criminally moronic editorial policy." Amen.

The best moment I've seen so far associated with the paper's distribution -- what I am guessing will probably become a highlight of the inevitable film about the event -- appeared in a quickie **documentary** already released at midday on the 12th (randomly, the clip also features an interview with actress Lily Taylor). It captures an unidentified *Times* functionary outside the paper's headquarters responding to the hoax. "I don't understand what statement they're trying to make," the man complains. "We've been all over the Bush administration since day one. We set the standard for coverage of the Iraq War." A voice from behind the camera calls out, "Like Judith Miller?," to which the man responds by abruptly storming off in disgust, apparently with no comeback. A better stuffed suit you could not get from central casting.

I became involved in "Because We Want It," as the fake *Times* project was code-named, by accident, running into a link on a website asking people to participate in a "super-secret" Yes Men project, "a massive power shifting exercise," as it was somewhat hyperbolically described. Duties were kept purposefully vague in advance (e.g. "distributing materials"), but knowing the Yes Men, I also knew basically what to expect.

Since 2000, the team has become celebrated for its media pranks, which typically involve posing as spokesmen for institutions like Halliburton or the WTO, issuing statements that admit to corporate crimes or otherwise reveal the corrupt goals of business or government. Famously, Bichlbaum made it onto the BBC as a representative of Dow Chemicals, issuing a full apology for the infamous 1984 Bhopal chemical spill, and offering full reparations to the victims, thereby forcing Dow to defend its actual policy in the court of public opinion, despite itself. The Yes Men produced an



Thomas Friedman does the right thing



An unnamed *Times* staffer responds to the parody



Copies of the fake *New York Times* ready for distribution



A blurry Andy Bichlbaum at Union Square, Nov. 11, 2008

eponymous DVD movie about their exploits in 2003, and in 2006 made headlines with an action calling attention to the department of Housing and Urban Development's criminal policy of liquidating public housing in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina [see "[Artnet News](#)," Aug. 29, 2006].

For last week's action, after signing up for text message updates about "Because We Want It," I was informed that I could pick up my materials the night before by locating a "white U-Haul" on the northwest corner of Union Square. Sure enough, a low-key Andy Bichlbaum was on the scene at the meeting point, surrounded by cameras in the gloom, with a bunch of volunteers ready to give me as many of copies of the fake *Times* as I was willing to take away. In all, according to the group, 1.2 million copies were printed.

Heading to work in the Financial District the next morning, I set up near the Wall Street subway stop to hand out my papers and see what happened. As soon as I hit the pavement, however, I saw another guy wading through the crowd, crying "Free *Times*! Get your free *New York Times*!" I joined him and, at a break in traffic, asked how he had gotten involved. He said that an artist friend was on the Yes Men's listserv. He gestured across the street, and sure enough, two women were at the mouth of Wall Street, passing out the faux *Times*.

It really did not take me long to finish my task -- it is not hard to pass out free papers in the Financial District, and they flew out of my hand. Just one woman caught on immediately, explaining, "Is this real?," then peering at the paper and saying "July 4, 2009 -- oh, that's good!" and walking on. On my way to the office, I saw a copy of the paper, discarded on the sidewalk just a short walk from where we had been distributing them. Easy come, easy go, I suppose.

We had been instructed not to tell anyone who was behind the action, in an effort to heighten the impact of the project with mystery. "Remember Joe Smith hired you. That's all. You don't know who did it," read a text message that went out to volunteers at 9:41 am on the day of the action. They needn't have bothered with the cloak and dagger stuff. At 10:15 am, another message came in: "We're moving all vans. Gawker posted locations. Were revising. Will post new locations soon." The gossip website had, in fact, also posted that the Yes Men were behind the prank, cleverly cracking the case by. . . following a link from the project's website, [BecauseWeWantIt.org](#), to the Yes Men's personal website. (In fact, the AP already had an item on "Because We Want It," revealing the identities behind it, by 8:02 am.)

Nevertheless, focusing excessively on the project's media impact is somewhat beside the point for me. For many, the Yes Men's Hans Haacke-meets-*The Daily Show* actions represent a paradigm of engaged art-as-activism (the group is featured, for instance, in "Ours: Democracy in the Age of Branding," Oct. 16, 2008-Feb. 1, 2009, at Parsons in New York). One of the things that makes it attractive as a model, I think, is that it seems to offer a way that artistic ingenuity can fill an actual social need -- given the wreckage of the last eight years, old-fashioned protest often seems to have hit a wall, and it can seem that something flashier and more media-smart is needed to "wake people up," in the face of a predominantly indifferent and hostile corporate media.

My take is a little different. If anything, I think activists are already excessively focused on the media. People often judge the success of a demonstration primarily on how much media coverage it receives, rather than seeing demonstrations as a place to gain confidence, meet people and groups, and build the core of a long-term movement. This is not to downplay the importance of media smarts





Distributing copies of the fake *Times* to volunteers, Nov. 11, 2008



Pamphlet with instructions given out to volunteers in "Because We Want It"



A man picks up a copy of the free paper by the Wall Street stop in the Financial District



A discarded copy of the fake *Times*

and creativity, but simply to say that history teaches that effective social movements involve sustained and lasting organization at their heart, and that there is no shortcut around this.

If there is one thing that the Yes Men's hit-and-run "culture jamming" performances are not, it is sustained. And yet what I have always thought was interesting about them is that their politics are rooted enough that, unlike some of their peers of the my-art-is-my-activism type, their work often has a specific, targeted, agitational component, and thus not only says its piece but highlights an absence -- some area where there should be more activism. In a recent presentation at the Guggenheim Museum about their New Orleans performance, it was clear that the Yes Men wanted more than to have pulled off a successful prank. They were exhorting their audience to join in and lobby HUD for a change in its policies.

The decisive interest of "Because We Want It" is how it offers a development of these themes. Even the most engaged art exists, potentially, in two forms -- as a part of struggle and as an idealist alternative to struggle. This two-sided nature is a perpetual dilemma. As a project, "Because We Want It" specifically tackles this head on -- the virtual future sketched by the articles in the fake *New York Times* hinges on persistent and sustained popular activism of the old-fashioned kind.

In small type on the inside front page, we read a statement from the editors: a "better world. . . though still very far away, is finally possible -- but only if millions of us demand it, and finally force our government to do its job." That statement goes on to list a wide range of activist groups that readers can get involved with (though notably, some of these groups, like the leadership of the anti-war coalition United for Peace and Justice, have themselves been known in recent memory for downplaying grassroots organizing).

Normally, the Yes Men have functioned by ventriloquizing corporations, relying on the media's reaction to carry their statement and make its impact. By taking its task as ventriloquizing the media itself, "Because We Want It" ended up by necessity focusing instead on engaging a large team of volunteers to participate in their cultural activism.

For this reason, I think that the most important yardstick to measure "Because We Want It" with is not its media splash, or even necessarily who read all the way through the paper after seeing it on the street. What is most important -- its most important success -- is the collective nature of the action itself, which reduplicates and exemplifies the paper's central message: the collective nature of the struggle for a better world.

This is truly a hopeful thing. As the paper rightly notes, a lot depends on what happens to that energy in the near future.

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Text message from the organizers of "Because We Want It"



Andy Bichlbaum [left] and Steven Lambert go on CNN to talk about the project