

## The case against Anglia Water

Al Dixon [Little Blue Dot]

**ABSTRACT:** Little Blue Dot are group of activists who jointly design creative actions that draws people attention to ecological and climate breakdown

My particular interest is language and storytelling. The stories we repeat without even being aware that determine what we believe is possible or not possible.

Language has power, with language we create stories that determine who we are and the world we live in. The relationship we have with the world and people around us determine how we act or respond to new information or events in life.

To motivate change we need to change the story or narrative that we individually or as a society agree upon. The tried and failed method is to believe if people have more information they will be motivated to act or will change their view/story. We are sensate beings our experience of the world and our interpretation of those experiences determines the stories we tell about ourselves. Change the experience and you can change the story, change the story and that will be the foundation of change.

Anglia Water (and most other water companies) are pumping (fact) sewage into our rivers:

Sewage in the rivers, what's the problem? The amount of sewage, the location of the outlet pipes, where it's 'spilt' or pumped, the profits of Anglian Water or the lack of real investment?? All of the things are important but the won't change the narrative.

What's the elephant in the room? The conversation of facts is akin to discussing the amount of food the elephant eats or how much sleep it gets, it sounds like we talking about the elephant but it's not. The water companies are happy to discuss facts because they won't lead to change by themselves worse and the argument will slowly exhaust the activist until they likely give up.

We looked for another way: We discussed the problem and what we could do then out of the conversation, Sewage Saturday! emerged. Perfect, Giant poohs! Great!

The problem is, that however much to discuss sewage most people do not have any experience of the problem. Without the experience there's no connection. We needed to change the mental picture and narrative of the water companies that there wasn't a problem, it's a very small problem, they're doing something about it. All not true. But arguing facts does not change that narrative.

The power of a picture and the relationship we have with the world around us

The day we launched 6 turds we changed the narrative. It was no longer about investment (or not), how much raw sewage was being pumped, or anything thing else about the elephant ..

The conversation and image in people's mind was now 'shit' in the river. Giant, Emojipoohs, funny even but the image was there and the conversation initiated

created a new story. Shit in the river. We had displaced one narrative of the water companies with a new more compelling narrative. Shit in the river .. now people could develop the story .. how did it get there, what's it doing there ... all great but it starts with a visceral experience humorous and eye catching: There's shit in our rivers and Anglian Water are putting it there. That's the new more compelling story.

An additional abstract is appended below, from Claire Preston, also of Little Blue Dot.

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### **Poo in climate activism [Extended abstract]**

Claire Preston [Little Blue Dot]

#### **Introduction**

This paper discusses a particular instance of climate activism, which was based on the visual imagery and cultural significance of shit. The activism was an exercise in political practice and arose from the collective thinking of a small but diverse group of activists, who each brought their own experiences, values, beliefs and personalities to the project. The activism was not conceived or carried out in an academic context so this paper offers an experiential account, describing its genesis and progression and reflecting on its impacts.

#### **What happened**

At the centre of the activism was the creation of five papier-mache models, which looked like 3D emoji poos and measured about one meter in height and diameter. The models were designed to draw attention to river pollution and, by extension, to the climate crisis. This was a deliberate strategy of using the pollution of a local and loved natural phenomenon as a gateway to engaging with the climate crisis more generally. The use of humour, shock and visual imagery were also central to the strategy from the start and drew on the work of Srdja Popovic (Popovic 2015). Creating giant models of poo came out of a convivial group meeting. It made everyone laugh at the time, which seemed a good basis for taking the idea further.

The group who created the model poos is an autonomous climate activist group called Little Blue Dot (LBD), which comprised around six active members in 2021, which was the start of the activism described here. LBD used the models at a series of events. The first involved towing the poos down the River Cam, in Cambridge, UK. This took place in September 2021. Other events included: joining protests against sewage dumping in the sea, joining a protest outside the headquarters of Anglian Water, supporting an Extinction Rebellion protest at the office of oil services giant Schlumberger in Cambridge, and supporting a march in response to COP26 (Conference of the Parties). LBD also took the poos to Westminster and Downing Street in London, as part of a Trades Union Congress demonstration. From the beginning, the progress of the project was communicated via two LBD social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram.

The Instagram posts leading up to the first event on the River Cam attracted the attention of a campaigner against ocean pollution, Dan Jones, based in Wales and founder of One Global Ocean and Blue Ocean Action. Dan travelled from Wales to join the Cambridge protest and swam up the Cam, towing one of the model poos behind him. Not only did this spread news of the protest to Dan's much larger social network, it also added to the media appeal of the event.

The success of the first protest led to many subsequent ones. During the process, LBD painted different wording and faces were on the poos. In this way, the poos were a recognisable but flexible adjunct to many different kinds of protest. In Spring 2022, the group redesigned the poos so that people could 'wear' them by climbing inside. This brought new possibilities and different reactions to the models, both from the public and police.

At the present time, the group still has one of the original models. One was seized by police at a protest and three more were given to other activist groups.

## **Impact**

The poos were first created in August 2021 at the start of what became a growing wave of protests about river and sea pollution. In October of that year, this pressure helped push the Government into a partial U-turn on the Environment Bill (as described in Usher 2023). Since then, the water companies have continued their discharge practices but the issue has attracted much more public and media attention<sup>1</sup>. One impact was that in August 2023 Professor Carolyn Roberts, an environmental and water consultant, brought an historic class action against six of the largest water companies on behalf of more than 20 million households<sup>2</sup>.

Meanwhile LBD has also experienced a growth in its social media presence and media coverage of its activities. It was able to leverage the coverage of its first event in September on the River Cam<sup>3</sup> to apply for funding from ArtCry to cover the costs of taking the poos to an event at the coastal town of Whitstable in October. LBD saw this as an opportunity to help bring groups protesting against river and sea pollution together both in person and via online networks. In November 2021, LBD sent an evaluation of the Whitstable action to ArtCry, which contained the following observations:

*The day was a huge success – a really good crowd, lots of social and mainstream media interest. Our social media accounts, which had been dominated by other river protesters, filled up with sea protest people. The Whitstable day was a real ratcheting up of pressure, being a very well-attended protest with high-profile speakers, including Hugh Tagholm (from Surfers Against Sewage) and Natalie Bennett (a Green Party peer and formerly leader of the Green Party). On rivers, extra pressure was brought by Feargal Sharkey (ex-punk turned trout fisherman and campaigner on rivers). This meant that by the time the Environment Bill next came to Parliament, it was possible to organise a massive online campaign in reaction to Conservative MP's voting against the amendment to curtail sewage dumping.*

In November 2021, the UK hosted COP26. This provided an opportunity to embarrass the UK Government about the state of the country's waterways

and to make the link between inaction on sewage and inaction on climate crisis as a whole<sup>4</sup>. These links played out on a local level as LBD used the improvement in its profile to help organise a local demonstration as part of the COP26Coalition Global Day of Action for Climate Justice. The poos played a central part here too. LBD painted them with the words 'I give a shit about Climate Crisis' and invited members of the public to take selfies next to them. LBD's Instagram account shows how popular this was with a large and diverse range of people.

Other evidence of the poos' impact was the increasing appearance of similar imagery at sewage protests, usually in the form of inflatable poos or one-dimensional cardboard models. Several organisations also approached LBD asking to borrow the models or asking how they were made. An image that appeared to be one of the LBD poos even appeared in an artwork by Carolina Caycedo exhibited at the Baltic in Teeside<sup>5</sup>, although LBD had no connection with the artist or exhibition.

Overall, the poos had evident success both in terms of helping raise awareness of sewage pollution and in making the links to climate crisis more generally.

## **Discussion**

There are a number of factors which seem to have contributed to the success of LBD's poo protests.

Firstly, the idea worked on a humorous level. The style of the models and referring to them as poos brought a cheeky sensibility to the actions. The response of the public was rarely disgust and more often amusement, coupled with a frisson of shock. But the word 'shit' also enabled a lot of wordplay, which LBD used both on the poos themselves and in social media. Mainstream media also picked up on this with comic headlines and, along with the visual element, it was likely one of the reasons behind the media's readiness to cover the issue.

The emoji style of the poos leveraged an existing universal symbol that works across different cultures and age groups<sup>6</sup>. It also invited sharing on social media. Members of LBD were impressed by the level of public engagement. People were very eager to take photos of the poos, particularly when they had people inside them and therefore appeared to walk about.

The police reaction to people being in the poos was also noteworthy. They possibly realised that detaining a person inside a poo would provoke comical social media images so refrained from doing that, although they did remove a poo model unseen, when it was left as part of protest. At the same time, the police were evidently wary when someone was inside the models and they couldn't fully see what was going on. This was particularly noticeable around Westminster and Downing Street. These responses reflect the carnivalesque, subversive nature of the poos and build on a history of what has been called 'rebel clowning', which challenges the powerful (Hart 2007; Ramsden 2015).

All of this meant it was fun to protest with the poos and LBD members appreciated this on a personal level. Joyful protest provides a welcome antidote to the climate grief or other negative emotions that activists can experience (Branagan 2007). The playful nature of the protests also presents

a challenge to images of climate activists being overly virtuous, earnest or angry (an observation backed up by Fominaya 2007). This might serve as a useful counterpoint, possibly making it easier for people who are otherwise reluctant to engage with the issues (Boykoff and Osnes 2019).

## NOTES

1. For some evidence see [https://metricomm.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Metricomm-Case-Study\\_Sewage-Discharge.pdf](https://metricomm.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Metricomm-Case-Study_Sewage-Discharge.pdf)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/aug/09/public-could-receive-hundreds-of-millions-as-water-firms-face-sewage-lawsuit>
3. Media coverage of the River Cam event: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-58463866>; <https://www.cambridgeindependent.co.uk/news/stop-the-poonami-say-cambridge-river-activists-for-sewage-9214734/>; <https://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/cambridge-news/jesus-green-cambridge-giant-piles-21483335>
4. For example: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/26/cop26-guests-rivers-environmental-conference>
5. For information on the exhibition see <https://baltic.art/whats-on/i-carolina-caycedo-land-of-friends/>. An image that closely resembles Dan Jones with one of the poos appears in the artwork Memories of the Tyne Catchment
6. <http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2017/17407-frowning-poo.pdf>

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