

CHAPTER 14

Poo in climate activism

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-mâché models, which looked like 3D emoji poos and measured about one metre 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 that created the model poos is an autonomous climate activist group called Little Blue Dot (LBD), which comprised around six active members in 2021. 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 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 and looking out through small openings. Walking about “wearing” the poos brought new possibilities and different reactions to the models, from both the public and the 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.¹ 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.²

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,³ to apply for funding from ArtCry. This covered the costs of taking the poos to a protest 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 MPs 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.⁴ 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 COP26 Coalition 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,⁵ 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.⁶ 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 and 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 (Boycoff and Osnes 2019).

E-mail: prestonclaire@hotmail.com

NOTES

1. For some evidence see 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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Fig. 1: River Cam at King's College – Sewage pollution protest, 2021 / Little Blue Dot

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