

# WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION?

November 19, 1997

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**T**he Lesbian Avengers is a direct action group. We are not a lobby or service organization or a mass grassroots mobilization movement. So what is it that we do that makes us different from these other types of organizations? As we choose what we should do as Avengers, we need to ask what constitutes a direct action or a worthy effort. While there may be other interpretations among Avengers and political activists, this paper seeks to clarify the types of actions we seek to create so that our mission as agents of social change is focused.

According to the original Lesbian Avengers handbook, there are many ways to contribute to our community and society but Lesbian Avengers reason for being is direct action. We do not rely on having influential, wealthy friends who gain access to powerful politicians as do national lobby groups like Human Rights Campaign. We do not field high-powered attorneys to appeal to the court system to apply laws favorably for queers like Lambda Legal Defense Fund or American Civil Liberties Union. We do not canvass neighborhoods to fight for a local or national issue like Clean Water Action does to mobilize a community. These are political change strategies that Avengers are unlikely to use (but anything is possible). So what is direct action and why do it?

## **Direct action defined:**

Narrowly defined, direct action has these elements:

- *immediate*: impact of action is immediately perceived or conveyed to the audience (e.g. meeting is disrupted, not electoral process to elect more sympathetic legislators);
- *concerted*: focused action on a topic;
- *conveys a readily understood message*: the context, or the image or information conveyed communicates a clear message on topic of concern;
- *demand attention*: the audience cannot ignore the action due to its assertive nature (e.g. not submitting a petition but generating media attention by the action).

More broadly, direct action might be defined as any activity aimed at producing dialogue about a given topic.

## **A good direct action results in:**

- real change
- inclusion of the subject in the public discourse
- changes in society's perception of a topic
- empowerment for the queer community
- empowerment, satisfaction and fulfillment for group members

**Real Change:** Eradicating homophobia, racism and poverty may remain the ultimate goals of a direct action group. Short-term goals like passing an anti-discrimination law may be a politically useful focus. Direct action is often used to generate sufficient

interest within the community to address this issue. A direct action group is not interested in working within the institutional system. This work can be left to allies in lobbying and service organizations. We do not want to become part of the bureaucracy.

**Inclusion of the subject in the public discourse:** Much of our work may be simply to raise the visibility of our concerns or our very existence. A shift in the public discourse means that our action pushes for the inclusion of our concerns in the public discourse.

**Changes in society's perception of a topic:** Changes in how society views a topic may be achieved through direct action even if the ultimate aim of eradicating lesbophobia and discrimination is not. For example, to assert through direct action that some judge, bishop or administrator is a bigot may not change the impact of a current incident but it may cause part of society to reevaluate its attitude towards a topic that it had previously given little thought to. Direct action does not work to generate sympathy for its cause by trying to make queers more appealing. The job of direct action is to challenge society and dissent from broadly tolerated views and make the challenge unavoidable.

**Empowerment for the queer community:** Additionally, assertive, angry, highly visible dyke activists often are often a source of empowerment for the entire queer community and help intimidated queers feel better about themselves and their prospects to participate in a better society. Even if an action receives only negative play from the media and mainstream groups, many queers still find the visibility of rebellious queers heartening or an impetus to get involved.

**Empowerment, satisfaction and fulfillment for group members:** Sometimes activism alone, especially in a queer-hostile environment, must sustain us as part of a group of energetic dissenters. An action may not reach its intended audience or provoke the kind of discussion that was intended. The groups, however, may manage to have a fabulous time engaging in street theater, wheatpasting, or designing headresses, and the action may be valued as a community-building exercise. Actions should use fun as a means of maintaining the morale of the group. Not that all actions are by their nature fun, but elements should be engaging so that individuals can feel empowered as part of a group, even if the ultimate goals are unattainable in the near term.

Actions do not always hit their intended targets: no one may see the sign, hear the message, notice the dissenter. While fun may result from the action, too many actions that fail to communicate a message to the intended audience will frustrate group members.

## ■ Types of actions

Direct action, conceived as a concerted activities which aims to produce dialogue on a given topic can take a variety of forms. "Micro-actions" might include: leaving queer magazines, books and other propaganda at doctor's offices, bus stops, hotel rooms, restaurants, etc., stickering, flyering, graffiti, spontaneous actions arising from emergent circumstances). "Macro-actions" may comprise high visibility media-oriented demonstrations, civil disobedience, parades, protests.

### **The football approach to direct action:**

When planning an action, participants may wish to consider whether the action is largely a defensive or offensive approach. Defensive actions occur because someone else has set the terms of the conversation, and activists' presence is a reaction to the event. Our purpose may simply be to demonstrate that there is a vocal group that registers its dissent and will fight to protect its existence. A typical example is protesting a prominent anti-gay speaker or conference.

Alternatively, an "offensive" action sets the terms of the debate. The action preempts the opposition's ability to set the stage for how an issue will be discussed or it raises an issue that was not part of public consciousness. For example, the Avengers who were arrested while "praying for justice" on the steps of the Mary Our Queen Cathedral in Baltimore chose this action to accuse the Maryland Catholic Church of promoting bigotry and discrimination by actively opposing an anti-discrimination bill. The debate was not about whether or not queers need specific legal protections, it was about the actions of the Catholic Church, which the protesters asserted promote bigotry. The question was "are the bishops bigots?" rather than "is there a clear pattern of discrimination that warrants legal prohibition?" The bishops are liable for the first question, queers are responsible for the second.

### **■ Steps to planning a direct action**

To plan an action, the group needs to identify its issue and how best to communicate its concerns about that issue. Individuals interested in planning an action should meet as

a small group and identify the elements, they are:

- (1) **Goal:** what are you trying to achieve?
- (2) **Message:** what are you trying to communicate through direct action tactics?
- (3) **Audience:** who are you trying to reach?
- (4) **Means:** how are you trying to convey your message?
- (5) **Risk:** are there any legal or other considerations specific to the means chosen? Is any special preparation required or certain risks that participant should be prepared to take?

In planning an action, especially a complex, multi-faceted one, you may also want to clarify your short-term objectives along with your longer term goals. The following, provides examples to the steps of action planning.

#### **EXAMPLE ONE**

- Issue:** State legislature defeats anti-discrimination bill for the 4<sup>th</sup> year in a row.
- Goals:** Shift the discourse so that legislators and the public at large address equal rights for queers
- Message:** Legislators unjustly deny equal rights to queers
- Audience:** Legislators, the voting public via the media
- Means:** Dramatic entry and likely illegal hanging of visible banner
- Risk:** High likelihood that actors will be arrested but unlikely to

be charged with a felony, full legal preparation should be done.

**Action Scenario:** During a full session, covered by state and local media (especially TV), activists repel down the balcony of the state legislature's house chamber and unfurl a banner that reads "What about dyke rights?" shortly after a losing vote on a gay rights bill.

## EXAMPLE TWO

**Issue:** Celebrate national coming out day  
**Goals:** Queer visibility  
**Message:** Queers are here  
**Audience:** Congress/State legislature, general public  
**Means:** Kissing on steps of National/State Capitol  
**Risk:** Little, although a police liaison should be designated and attorney consulted

**Action Scenario:** Just as a well attended session of Congress recesses or a reception is ending, queers state a Kiss-In in the most visible place adjacent to the event. Literature is handed out about queer visibility, perhaps demanding that National Coming Out Day be made a national holiday and that all residents be required to kiss someone of the same gender.

## EXAMPLE THREE

**Issue:** Governing body of a university withdraws funding for a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender resource center  
**Goals:** Restore funding  
**Message:** There's a need for the center because queers are active on campus, are harassed and all

students would benefit from more information about queer issues; highlight university board's bigotry in decision opinion-makers in the university community, public high visibility at important university events, literature, signs

**Audience:** Little if no disruptions occur, and events are accessible

**Means:** Passing out alternative inauguration programs (patterned after the legitimate programs; costume: straight dress) at the university President's inauguration and then standing visibly throughout the ceremony with hot pink sashes that read "Demonstrating Need." After the ceremony, all activists (wearing sashes) attend the reception, pass out literature and ask attendees not to give money to the university or to designate it for the Queer Center.

## ■ Media's role in direct actions

(by Cathy Breman)

For better or worse, media is the primary way in which information is communicated within our modern capitalist society. We must recognize that media is not "free" or impartial; indeed, media is increasingly becoming subject to the wrath of conglomerates which focus their energies on communicating their specific agendas to the public. For an in-depth discussion of the myth of the free press, consult *The Nation*, a weekly leftist magazine.

Once we understand media's role in conveying information, we can use media to achieve our own ends. Some actions are purely "paper" actions aimed targeted at the

media to gain publicity for your organization while raising awareness about an issue of great concern to your group. When this is the case, media serves as the audience for your action and it is irrelevant that your action lacks a visual element (such as a loud protest on the steps of any state capital building). Success of an action where media is the audience is contingent on media coverage.

A media presence is not essential to a good direct action. However, media can be used to bring your action and its message to a larger audience. When we use media to convey our message, media is a tool, much like the signs we may carry and the costumes we may wear during a direct action.

To use media as an effective tool to convey our message, we must identify the intended audience of our direct action. The audience may be the opposition, the "mainstream," possible allies, and friends. Once we identify our intended audience, we can determine which media outlets we need to contact. For example, if we are staging a protest aimed at reaching Catholic voters, we may consider contact Catholic newspapers and radio shows. If we're trying to reach fellow queers, the gay press should be contacted.

In addition to serving as the audience and as a tool, the media is a wonderful source of direct action opportunities. Don't overlook morning and afternoon Talk radio shows as a source for good direct actions. Everything from homophobic comments by D.J.s to announcements of events by anti-gay groups exists on radio - a group lacking in direct action opportunities may benefit from tuning the dial to your local radio station.

In the Baltimore-D.C. metropolitan region, The

Baltimore *Sun* Editorial pages provide ample opportunities for direct action opportunities. Often, the homophobes among us will use the *Sun* to vent their hatred. When they do this, the *Sun* runs their names and the communities in which they live. A good activists stores this information away for future direct action opportunities.

The same reasoning holds true for local television coverage. Local T.V. is no where near as enlightened as national coverage (which should scare you). Listening for lesbophobic stories and comments from reporters or anchors may be tedious, but the result just may be a good picket at the television station.

Media can be manipulated by the direct action organizer who pays attention to trends and who realizes that media workers (reporters, columnists, anchors, etc.) are lazy by necessity because they are bombarded with press releases on a daily basis.

You may want to tailor your action to meet media's expectation of "What's hot in the gay community." In 1992, it was "Don't ask, don't tell." Today, it's Gay marriage. Paying attention to these trends may make the difference between a well-covered action which reaches many and an action which gets no coverage. You may wish to contact GLAAD for materials it produces on dealing with the media.

## ■ A note on legality

(by Cathy Brennan)

Some people, usually those critical of direct action, define direct action by its confrontational, public, disruptive, and

possibly illegal nature (such as ACT-UP's famous protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City).

Defining Direct Action by its illegality may alienate those who fight for social change but who, for whatever reason, choose not to get arrested. In the interest of preserving direct action as a strategy for the law-abiding, we will identify Direct Action that relies on breaking the law as Civil Disobedience.

The goal of civil disobedience is identical to that of Direct Action; however, in civil disobedience, breaking the law is an incidental component of the action. The most famous examples of civil disobedience include Civil Rights sit-ins during the 1960s and Phillip Berrigan's activities to fight the proliferation of militarism in the United States.

Persons who are going to engage in civil disobedience ought to consult an attorney before they make a decision to get arrested. No matter what you may have heard, it is not "cool" to get arrested. Going to jail is a pain in the ass - and you may end up getting seriously hurt while in the big house. Additionally, you should consider whether the arrest will jeopardize your job, your health, or your general well-being. For those of us who use illegal substances, particularly marijuana, please note that you may be drug tested as a condition of your sentence if you're ultimately convicted of a crime. Therefore, it behooves you to contact a knowledgeable political activist or a lawyer to determine whether it advances your political interests to engage in civil disobedience. For further information, you may contact Cathy Brennan at (410) 889-7261. In Maryland, the American Civil Liberties Union can be reached at (410) 889-8555.

Once you consider your options and make the decision to get arrested, remember that it is better to get arrested on public property. That's because you can invoke your right to free speech under both the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and state law.

## ■ Is this direct action?

When planning a political action, it's important to always go through the steps of what is the goal, message and audience; then the means of accomplishing these objectives can be created. The group must ask if this is a good way to expend group energy. A publication like a communique of Lesbian Avengers activities or a 'Zine is not a direct action since its purpose is not a concerted effort to address a topic in a way that demands attention and conveys a readily understood message. A publication may be a useful tool for group-building and possibly recruitment of new members. However, if the goal is recruitment -- the best means of accomplishing this should be assessed. Outreach to groups, such as dykes of color, will be accomplished through a well targeted outreach strategy rather than the distribution of pamphlets at certain locations.

**Test Yourself:** Are these direct actions?: die-ins, kiss-ins, brick through a window, graffiti, chalk talk, posters, letter to elected official. Be explicit about group actions — always know why you do it and what the trade offs are. While many activities may not fit the definition of direct action, a direct action group may decide that it is in the best position to carry out an activity addressing a particular issue. Straying too far from direct action, however, can cause the group to lose focus and relevancy. Remember that direct

action is a means to accomplish political objectives with tactics that are easy, accessible, empowering, and fun.

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Thanks for comments from Alessandra Tanesini.