

## **Jesters, wit and hilarity in the wetlands: Exploring the role of humour in environmental activism**

Humour is not a characteristic that is frequently associated with activism in mainstream western culture. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity and adverse connotations associated with humour in a business context commonly lead to governments, corporations and other (commercial) decision makers injudiciously misunderstanding or dismissing activists as unprofessional, amateurish and attention seeking. Illustrated by the Save Beelir Wetlands campaign in the lead up to the 2017 West Australian State Elections, this paper challenges the conceptualisation of humour through the corporate lens and argues that comedy, wit and hilarity represent a unique and crucial source of capital for environmental activists.

Based on digital and traditional media analysis and interviews with self-confessed jokers and jesters, this paper argues that humour performed a major role throughout the Save Beelir Wetlands campaign, and substantially contributed to a change in political leadership and the termination of a \$1.9billion infrastructure project. Evolving into a colourful collective of over 35 local groups, five local councils and thousands of individuals, Beelir Wetland Defenders successfully created an alternative narrative to the state and federal governments' neoliberal agenda, which influenced not only media reporting, but furthermore fostered civic engagement and political debate.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) argued that the presence of critical counter-voices and powers is a fundamental element of any genuine democracy. Drawing on his theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), this study concludes that humour fulfils a number of vital internal and external functions within a movement that ultimately enable activists to increase their share of power and hence opportunity to challenge the status quo. Four key themes have emerged: Humorous actions enable activists to create a sense of community by attracting people's attention and drawing in diverse audiences – both on- and offline. Humour can furthermore be used as an educational tool, making science-based information more interesting, digestible, and memorable. However, most notably humour performs a crucial role within the movement itself. Humorous actions and initiatives enable activists to build bonding (social) capital, hence ensuring the sustainability of individuals and the survival of the movement over time.

Findings from this study have the potential to inform other environmental campaigns, especially given the need for humour and movement sustainability in the face of the currently proposed anti-protest legislation.

#### References

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.