
The Weeks of Work that Make the Day: Looking at all the activities in activism

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What you see is often not the full story. Public and up-front work is generally propped up and shaped by a myriad of behind-the-scenes (bts) activities. These activities are likely to have taken considerably more time than the final acknowledged, public activity. By focusing on bts tasks in activism we can identify the extent of work done and explore how to include more people in both bts and front line work. Comparatively, the preparation, facilitation and wrapping up of work associated with this kind of common public event is substantially greater than the public event itself. There is real long-term value in revealing the skill-sharing, solidarity and bts efforts that create and inspire efforts for social change.

Introduction

Here is a summary of a typical public political event.

The rally had around 500 attendees supporting the rights of people to seek asylum in Australia after fleeing their homelands. There were a series of speakers and performers, professional looking banners, many large visual props depicting the faces of men, women and children behind razor wire, handouts circulating, proposals for future action and media covering the event.

But what about the work involved in organising the rally and making sure it ran smoothly? These activities were behind-the-scenes (bts): they were invisible to most of those attending.

In this article, I look at the bts activities involved with activism, broadly defined to encompass social justice work in a paid or voluntary capacity. I have adopted the term behind-the-scenes — and the abbreviation bts — to emphasise how hidden the bulk of work is compared to the front view. A fundraising concert with two performers on stage may involve eight people working off-stage and ten people working for several weeks leading up to the hour-long performance. Bts work encompasses all the support tasks, preparation, planning, networking and negotiating, evaluation, documentation, administration, monitoring and facilitation work that underpins visible public activities.

Knowing what is going on behind the scenes to any undertaking is as useful as seeing the up front action. It gives the whole story and helps us account for the true effort involved in an event.

The hype around a publication, a campaign, a public gathering or any activism often overshadows the sturdy underpinnings that made the finale successful. Acknowledging and emphasising the importance of hidden work could make it more attractive. It is possible that despite revealing the great extent of the bts work — by showing how to share and develop skills and learn shortcuts and practical tips — participants are inspired rather than deterred by the quantity of work.

One of the first important questions activists ask is ‘what do we want to achieve?’ Looking at the bts work reveals what really makes the ‘star’ attractions, slick final products or one-off bursts of activity. It can show us the valuable resources we already have and what more we need to complete the work.

By mapping out what is involved with bts activity, we see that when the action seems to end there is often much more to do. There is important mopping up work — including documentation, evaluation, celebration and appreciation — to be done to ensure the successful activities can be replicated or resurrected in some other form.

Finally, a practice of looking bts may sharpen our ability to question the front line action and look deeper for the whole story. For activists the value of a more critical look behind the main action can reveal the urgent and ongoing need for our work as feminists, peace activists and progressive campaigners. It is useful to note whether bts workloads and practices are fair, inclusive and empowering and match our aims.

The following case study outlines the bts work of 1991

and 1992 fundraisers for a health project and artisan cooperative in Guatemala. The US backed repressive regime in Guatemala was responsible for over 200,000 civilian deaths, tens of thousands disappeared and thousands of displaced peoples, mostly Indigenous Guatemalans. In a small way the fundraising project sought to assist some of the displaced people and bring the little known story of Guatemala to the foreground in our Australian community.

I selected this case study because it was well documented at the time and required six weeks of bts work prior to the successful one-day public event. The bts tasks comprised a multitude of discrete activities before and after the event. A table follows the case study with point-form detail on the specific tasks.

Swimming for Guatemala (SFG)

The photos of the SFG showed what people saw on the day of the Swim. There was media, colourful t-shirts, welcoming people, chatting, laughter, photographers, swimmers, stalls, food and a hub of activity in every inch of the university pool.

This doesn't tell the full story of what was going on behind-the-scenes: surveys being filled out for future planning, briefing of the media, directing and redirecting of swimmers to their lanes, accounting the money, and answering constant questions covering everything from Guatemala and fundraising to how to order a pair of swimmers or buy a t-shirt. The photos didn't pick up my stress-induced hives getting redder as the day went on. I suspect everyone on the organising group had their own stress reactions.

To anticipate any problems, we workshopped every role and aspect of the SFG the night before. A thorough two-hour group discussion before the SFG translated to a smooth two-minute exchange on the day. Our organising processes reflected our commitment to self-management and empowerment as outlined in the fundraising project proposal. Swimmers and supporters wouldn't have known that we met almost daily for six weeks and talked through all decisions. All this work was invisible to outsiders.

Looking even further behind the scenes reveals how our fundraising collective came to exist. My long interest in Central and South American progressive political campaigns finally inspired me to visit Guatemala in 1990. It was the news story of the US Ambassador to Guatemala Thomas Stroock providing funds for another orphanage that sent me reeling. I wanted to know why he wasn't asking 'Why would Guatemala need more orphanages? What happened to all the parents?'

Of course everyone knew the answer: military and death squads of the US-backed regime were killing 'leftists', 'activists' and anyone perceived as a threat. In the daily newspapers it was common for dozens of bodies to be found or kidnappings reported in the same manner as a car accident or any other piece of standard city news.

I had not long returned from Central America and Guatemala was the place that had shown the worst that human nature can offer and the side of humanity that cannot fail to deeply inspire. I recounted my stories from Guatemala with friends, many of whom had also been involved with Central and South American solidarity activities. One friend, Lucia, and I were having swimming lessons with fitness in mind and relaxation an imperative given our hectic jobs as community workers. 'We will have to combine the fundraiser with swimming so we stay healthy while we organise it,' she decisively threw into our conversation.

The Swim for Guatemala was devised. It would raise funds for two projects. One was an artisans cooperative for Indigenous Guatemalans who were forced out of their communities by the scorched earth policies. The other was a health clinic for displaced Guatemalans.

We did some urgent planning to assess how much time we had available in an average week. Very little was the answer but we decided to go ahead. Then we went swimming as neither of us could comfortably do more than a few laps.

We wrote down the key aims of our fundraiser, now officially called the Swim For Guatemala (SFG), and what we wanted to achieve. We wanted to involve non-activists in this international social justice campaign and raise broad public awareness. We wanted to use a 'non-political' activity like swimming to bring people together for a political fundraiser. We particularly wanted different networks — of activists and others — to work together to broaden awareness and share resources. Most of our life's routines went by the way for six weeks as we did little other than plan/speak/organise and swim for Guatemala.

The really important thing that happened next was that we linked up with Community Aid Abroad (CAA) and the Committee in Solidarity with Latin America and the Caribbean (CISLAC) as they both had fund-raising projects in the region. I had worked with many others in Wollongong on earlier CISLAC projects.

CAA had a good national reputation, other projects in this region and access to resources we didn't, including knowledge on how to run large fundraising events. They had printing and mail-out resources and advertising expertise. We had local networks, good planning and

facilitating skills and clear ideas on what we were trying to achieve. We had members with first hand knowledge of the political situation in Guatemala and extensive links with activists interested in contributing to such a social justice project.

One SFG supporter commented, 'Goodness, I have reconnected with nearly all my old friends and made many new ones, got fitter and bought a SFG swim suit, all over the last few weeks.'

Who was involved?

We were a loose-knit working group of friends, local activists and community workers who had worked together in different contexts. We had a maximum of around 13 local activists, with five in the core group. We met almost daily (nightly, often till very late at night). We drew up lists, checked and rechecked lists, and mapped out what had to happen over the six-week period leading up to the Swim. The work was divided up between those who felt comfortable with doing the tasks.

When other friends and community members offered to help, we informally chatted about what they could offer in time and skills. They went away with set tasks and came and went reporting back as they completed their jobs. They set their own tasks according to their specialist skills and the time they could donate. Yet others did tasks such as design and make swimming costumes, attend badge-making working bees, sell badges and distribute flyers about the Swim.

Tight time frame, intensive workload and staying on track

The time frame constantly scared us as each day swept past in a flurry of activity. The six weeks preparation time was quickly evaporating. The hundreds of letters seeking donations and sponsorship, thanking people, publicising the swim, writing background papers on Guatemala and why we were undertaking the project, distributing information on the streets, finding swimmers and scheduling their pool time, liaising with the media and 'sporting celebrities', all took time.

While every minute seemed precious for getting tasks done, we had pizzas and laughed as we stamped and numbered, folded and filed. We talked endlessly about each step, who was doing what, how it was going, what was going wrong, how could we fix it. We sometimes laughed until we cried which was cathartic and I suspect a coping strategy learned through many feminist and other political struggles.

In reality it was the endless lists, check lists and 'job descriptions' that really helped manage the workload. The written lists and job descriptions of what needed

to be done helped people stay on track, see what still needed to be done and gave a sense of achievement and moving along.

The generosity of some local politicians, unions and community organisations saved the day by providing administrative help, space to work in and support for workers who were immersed in the SFG preparations

How can such a big project work with volunteers?

Our networks were long standing so we knew what skills people brought to the group and we trusted their ability to follow through with their tasks. The core group ensured continuity.

The flexibility of the working group allowed people to self identify their strengths, abilities and availability. The core group matched up people and tasks and filled gaps as necessary.

Every 'meeting' of the SFG was a working bee occasion with the 'talking' and 'doing' happening at the same time. The SFG working group was informal yet had structure and clear documented expectations and tips on how to fulfil commitments within the short time frame.

The strong sense of ownership came with the transparent way everyone saw how their efforts contributed to the broader project and watched as each aspect fell into place. We were all in this together and often laughed at our mounting hysteria as the SFG day loomed. An SFG group member commented:

We owned every aspect of the SFG, looking after each other, completing tasks well, checking and rechecking in with each other, we carefully assisted our co organisers with their jobs, we shared the creative and fun tasks and all the tedious jobs that had to be done.

How did you make decisions?

There was no 'formal' discussion about how we would make decisions. The five core organisers would regularly throw forward ideas for discussion and we would think through the pros and cons and decide as a group. The decision was then allocated to an action list.

The table lists the key activities within broad categories that allowed the SFG work to progress each day. The high volume of hidden work revealed in the table may reflect how the bts tasks of activist work generally are proportionally greater than the visible public work.

Swim for Guatemala behind-the-scenes actions/skills

Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Map out time and resources available against an estimated workload to complete an activity •Do an informal 'skills audit' to see what work group members feel comfortable doing •Itemise resources needed •Involve as many people as possible in the initial planning •Make all tasks and responsibilities transparent so everyone involved is aware of who has accepted what responsibilities •Identify gaps in resources
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •List all administrative tasks •Prioritise them with a realistic timeframe •Aim to fill the identified gaps in resources by seeking funds, submission writing and sponsorship early in the project •Discuss reporting back processes to make sure everyone understands the groups agreed processes
Group Communication (Internal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Five core members of the group were part of all communication to ensure continuity and to document progress •The core group could make quick decisions and delegate tasks •'Talking and doing' working bees meant most dilemmas and issues were worked through thoroughly •Meetings remained informal with no minutes; instead, lists and ongoing documentation of the fundraiser were the only records •Timetabling swimmers remained with the core group for ongoing monitoring •Despite the hectic pace of each SFG gathering, there was lots of room for levity
Public Communication (External)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The core group had most responsibility for liaising with the media and public speaking with groups like Rotary and schools •Detailed printed background materials assisted members to promote the SFG •Experience and repetition made this easier for key members and they took more responsibility for media •We used the skills of the community workers — who had undertaken significant media work in their paid positions — to promote the SFG publicly •We were very persistent in following up media links and made ourselves available for any possible opportunities to get the word out •The ongoing discussions in working bees meant we could share information we learned about how the media operated and how we could gain their support for the SFG •To build on the benefits that come from 'word-of-mouth' information sharing, we promoted the SFG at union meetings, at Politics in the Pub, book launches and on the 'peace trains' of activists travelling to rallies in Sydney protesting against the first Gulf War

Finances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Bank accounts were opened, receipt books kept, tax deductibility explored, records maintained, a treasurer nominated, CAA credit card facilities used and a PO Box all put in place to ensure maximum accountability
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A detailed letter outlining the SFG included information on the sponsoring organisations and how the Wollongong community could get involved •Core members wanted to replicate the SFG so documented what we learned along the way, created templates and precedents and noted problems and possible solutions for the future •We kept a diary •Essential tasks had a 'job description' and jobs were rotated throughout the day on a roster system •Form letters, fundraising books with instructions, promotional materials, posters, flyers, vouchers, media clippings, questionnaire and results, photographs were maintained

The bigger picture

My goal in looking behind the scenes is to see the whole activist picture. By seeing all the work that makes up an activity we form a better understanding of how to include more people in more productive activism work even when the workload seems overwhelming.

Looking behind the main action seeks to redefine what is valuable work and note the interlinking of various activities to form a successful and useful whole. Consciously noting how some people in the SFG did bts or front-line work or both assists us think about what it takes to do the different roles. Looking bts shows us how gender imbalances in roles and lack of acknowledgement continue to undermine our collective successes.

The majority of the SFG workers were women with a long history in the female dominated welfare industry. Our work skills and experience were then and continue to be poorly paid relative to similar sectors. We could easily apply our community work organising expertise to a passionately held political campaign where our efforts were greatly valued. Our paid and unpaid activist experience allowed us to garner support from an extensive network of like-minded men and women supporters.

Looking at bts work shows us how conscientious activists can be overlooked and at risk of burnout while everyone notes the public performance. Acknowledging, sharing and monitoring bts work is essential to the wellbeing of activist working groups.

The SFG emphasis on how we approached the massive workload was to incorporate fun, meals and 'story telling'

as an antidote to exhaustion. Sharing the work in a friendly group setting made tedious tasks manageable. Sharing and developing skills and the solidarity of being part of an exciting public project helped counter burnout.

If looking at bts becomes more embedded in our activism practice, the first comment on a successful campaign will not be, 'great action' but 'how did you make such a great action?' Hopefully people will want to know what happened bts to make the public activity successful.

Revealing the value of bts work reminds us that public speakers often have speech writers, technicians maintain and direct the spotlight on the main performance and a successful political campaign was the result of the efforts of many people out of public view working hard over a long time. There will be days or even months of bts activities to prepare for and support a brief public event. The learning from that hidden activity lasts a lifetime.

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Author

Sharon Callaghan is a community worker and social activist who writes on topics that reflect social and political issues within the community.

Taming the Wilderness

To hold the future in the palm of your hand
and see profit: this is a peculiar talent.
Beaches should of course be mined
if not for rutile then for silica. Bulldoze
frontal dunes for high-rise residentials,
strip shows and casinos after which
tourists shall be encouraged.
Hills blast blue metal quarries,
open cut coal, bauxite, yellowcake
makes spectacular scars on an otherwise
boring environment and one tree's
as good as another, anyrate, Creeks
are for cheaper effluent disposal, rivers
should be dammed. Think BIG, you can always
find a reason. Coastal swamp or quiet
mangrove sheltered bay for bluewater
access, dredge, landfill, elevate, boats,
canals, jetties, pergolas, backyard pools,
it's just bush anyway. Honeyeaters
have no economic value, who needs
beauty anyway? The trees conveniently
pulp for glossy brochures so the people
who come to see them will know
what they missed. Each beachcomber island's
palms, waterfront bungalows, shops,
villas, plastic lagoons, packed, no
vacancy and more and more
tourists come half the world for what
they left behind. Coral, clams, fish, birds,
seastars, turtles, solitude remain
accessible. There's always somewhere
they can go and it'll all grow back
in a hundred years anyway. Won't it?

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