

Behind the activism

Schweik Action Wollongong

Activists receive attention when they are in the public eye — at a rally, in a daring stunt, commenting on television. But much of the work activists do is not visible to others. This behind-the-scenes work is essential and deserves to be valued. Activists need to pay more attention to this work so it can be done more effectively.

To learn about behind-the-scenes work, we reflected on our own experiences and interviewed a range of activists. We came up with a lot of ideas. We don't have definitive answers. Our aim is to point out some issues that deserve more thought and attention.

To highlight the issues, we've written lots of brief stories about activists. These are fictional, though they draw on lessons from our own experiences and from the interviews.

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What is behind-the-scenes work?

Setting the scene

As we sit in the theatre, the curtain goes up. The spotlight singles out the lead actor; then the supporting actors come into view. We watch the performance, our attention on the actors. At the end, they bow and we applaud.

What we won't see are all the other people who helped make the production possible: the director, the producer, drama coaches, accountants, costumers, set constructors, programme writers, musicians and light designers. We may read about some of them in the program but there are many more who remain invisible despite being crucial to a successful performance.

Our aim here is to look behind the most visible action at the less noticed supporting activities.

bts is an abbreviation for *behind the scenes*. It means invisible, out of sight, hidden, not noticed, unobtrusive or easily ignored. Other equivalent terms are offstage and backstage.

The bts part of activism

In a theatre, the actors are on stage and others are literally offstage or backstage, namely behind the onstage scenes. Other activities — in our neighbourhoods, workplaces and public meeting spaces — are just like theatre in a crucial way: there's a lot that goes on out of sight and that few observers know much about or even know exists.

"The world is divided into people who do things and people who get the credit. Try, if you can, to belong to the first class. There's far less competition." — Dwight Morrow

Our focus is on bts work in activism, on the crucial but hidden work that plays an important role in successful activism.

What is activism? A typical definition is organised activity, going beyond conventional

political methods, to bring about change in society. It includes rallies, strikes, vigils and much else.

Actually, we aren't interested in a restrictive definition — we're interested in any action to bring about a better world. This might be a counsellor trying to help people addicted to drugs or an engineer designing houses for the homeless. This work generally wouldn't count as activism, but it brings about beneficial change — as does successful activism.

Exploring bts

The roles going on bts are often perceived as less important, merely "bit parts" to the leading roles. But although bts roles and tasks are often invisible, they are crucial to the success and effectiveness of the public event or performance. Cleaning, food preparation, mail-outs, lighting and sound, for example, are tasks necessary for public action to take place.



In the media, newsreaders are up front, supported by large numbers of bts workers. Many young viewers only see the readers and think that's what they want to do.



On television, newsreaders are the stars. They're on screen more than anyone else, becoming quite familiar to audiences. They are often seen as knowledgeable and sometimes glamorous. Yet their job is impossible without essential tasks by numerous other workers, most of them unseen and many unacknowledged. Journalists collect information for news reports; editors select items; copy-editors prepare text; camera operators make film; make-up artists prepare newsreaders for the screen; engineers make sure equipment is working; accountants keep track of finances; cleaners keep the place clean; and many others handle even more functions.

From the point of view of viewers, the newsreaders are on stage and nearly everyone else in the studio works bts.

At times television shows reveal some bts operations in television itself, such as the battles between producers, journalists and others. But even so, there's little attention to workers even further bts such as caterers and electricians.

The people involved in television production know most of the roles associated with the final production and who is doing them. Journalists, editors and producers, who make many of the decisions about what is said on the television news, know that newsreaders say words written and verified by others. Within each section of television production there are workers who are closer to the final production work than others. Those further away are still undertaking crucial tasks even if they are invisible to many.

Is what you see up front the whole story?

Who double checked the facts and tightened the script for the newsreader?

Whose work is least visible, even to other bts workers?

Who knows what is going on bts, even in their own field or department?

Whatever occupation you can think of, there are some people whose work is visible and some whose work is obscured or invisible — the bts workers. Actors, teachers, newsreaders and lawyers are “on stage” for a good bit of the time — but other sorts of workers do nearly all of their work out of sight of the public. Some examples are given in the table.

Some on-stage and bts roles in selected occupations

Occupation	On-stage roles	Audience	Bts roles
Cleaner	Rare	Boss	Nearly all the work
Corporate accountant	Rare	Managers	Nearly all the work
Engineer	Rare	Clients; bosses	Nearly all the work
Factory worker	Rare	Managers	Nearly all the work
Farmer	Selling produce	Purchasers (usually wholesale)	Purchasing, sowing, harvesting, selling, accounting, transporting
Lawyer	Meeting clients; in court	Clients; judges	Preparing cases
Nurse	Attending to patients	Patients, visitors, doctors	Training, cleaning, meetings, record-keeping
Shop assistant	Attending to customers	Customers, managers	Learning the job, preparing goods, inventory

Why is bts work important? Having the bts work more at the forefront is likely to lead to skill sharing, more equity in work loads, prevent burnout, limit skill loss, allow work activities to benefit from people's diverse strengths and finally get the best result for our efforts. Valuing and sharing bts work is likely to inspire greater participation in all kinds of work. What's visible may give a false impression about who's doing the work and who deserves acknowledgement. This can cause resentment among workers and sometimes cause the work to be done less effectively — or not at all.

Bts work in activism

Cheree and Charlie were in the news last night. They lowered themselves from the top of a factory building and wrote "Shut down toxics now" on the wall. Everyone saw it as they came to work or drove by.

Cheree and Charlie were activists in the limelight: they received all the attention. They gave themselves up for arrest and were at risk of a prison term. They certainly took risks. But what about activism bts?

Cheree and Charlie were part of a group. Others did a lot of things that made the factory action possible: organising meetings, collecting information about the factory, producing leaflets for the workers and arranging for legal assistance after the arrests.

Most activist work is not visible to the public. For every action by those like Cheree and Charlie, there are hundreds of hours of work doing the routine things that keep groups going:

- Organising meetings
- Keeping records
- Raising funds
- Collecting information
- Producing leaflets, notices, bulletins, websites
- Talking to prospective members
- Maintaining connections within the group

Just a single one of these tasks can involve quite a lot. Organising a meeting, for example, can be a big responsibility, yet most of

the work is not likely to attract attention. It includes

- Deciding on a suitable time
- Finding an accessible venue and booking it
- Notifying members about the meeting
- Setting an agenda
- Facilitating the meeting: keeping it running smoothly
- Arranging for food and drink, if appropriate
- Cleaning and locking up afterwards

Organising a meeting seems simple enough. Yet skills are involved and experience can make the process run smoothly. A good organiser makes everything seem simple. If something goes wrong, the organiser cops the blame. Is there praise when things go well?

A rally is similar: good organisers can make it seem effortless. There are a few stars of the occasion: the keynote speakers and spokespeople interviewed by the media.



Then there are all those attending the rally. They are visible to observers but are not singled out for attention, except maybe when a television camera does a close-up. The invisible activists are the ones who organised the rally, doing planning, police liaison, publicity, arranging equipment, fund-raising and much else.

Actually, the organisers often attend the rally and sometimes are keynote speakers themselves. So some activists work offstage and onstage too. But who wants to put all their energy into a task that isn't highly valued?

Groups can benefit when opinions and decision-making processes are revealed and shared, increasing ownership and involvement in the group's work.

Revealing bts work around leaders or frontline people could go towards countering a tendency to defer to "experts" rather than a more deliberative democratic approach that considers all opinions in detail before reaching a decision. This would mean ensuring the necessary time and resources are provided to participants to analyse a problem or issue before making a decision.

Some organisations encourage bts workers to go on stage. Amnesty International, for example, puts resources into helping regional volunteers become media spokespeople.

There can be different levels of visibility in activism: some people are high profile, others visible and yet others usually unseen.

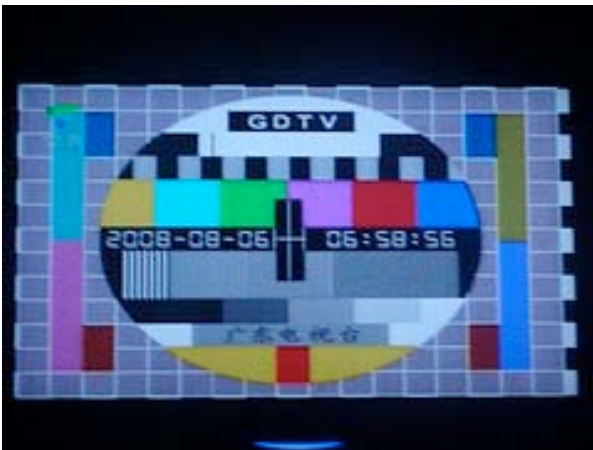
Revealing bts activity

Making people aware of what goes on bts can make a difference in the way they behave. This can happen in unexpected ways. Joshua Meyrowitz in his 1985 book *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* noted that television, via family dramas and comedies, exposed the existence and types of parent interaction that previously had been backstage, namely not known or thought about by children.

Prior to television, many parents talked about some things privately — not in front of the children. For example, when children were present, they might not have talked about finances, personal issues or how to discipline the children. In front of the children, they tried to present a more formal, united position.

Television family comedies showed the sort of thing that parents did when they were

by themselves. For example, they made comments about children's behaviour, expressed their uncertainties about how to handle children and argued with each other. Children in US families watched these shows — they were family comedies, after all — and assumed that their own parents behaved the same way. Suddenly parent behaviours that had been out of sight, in the backstage of family dynamics, were revealed to the children.



According to Meyrowitz, television, by showing backstage behaviour, undermines authority. If the president, queen or prime minister only appears in public in carefully staged performances, an illusion of difference — of being superior and deserving special privileges — can be maintained. But if intimate details about daily life are revealed, the illusion is shattered. President John F. Kennedy had numerous affairs, but these were hidden from the public with cooperation of the media. President Bill Clinton's sexual liaisons were splashed over the evening news.

Within activist groups, revealing backstage behaviour may have the same effect. If all group members know how much effort Sally puts into organising meetings or Anthony puts into resolving disputes, they might give them more say and not defer so much to the official manager or leader.

Revealing backstage work can change the way activism is viewed. Members of the public who have a good sense of what's involved are less likely to say "That's pathetic — only a handful of people turned out for that

protest" and more likely to say "It's impressive how that action was organised on such short notice." Or, alternatively, "it would be good to see more people attending so I should lend a hand to the organising group."

However, you can't learn much about activism by watching television. Activists are seldom featured and, when they are, it is usually in terms of misleading stereotypes, with backstage work totally invisible.

Work roles and activism

Counsellors can do a tremendous amount of good and their work has many bts components. They also have the advantage of formal training, salaries and careers, professional networks and researchers investigating ways to do better. Activism within counselling means pushing things along, trying to make the job and the whole approach better, especially for people who are often neglected by the profession — and looking well beyond benefits to counsellors as professionals.

Engineers can do a tremendous amount of good and their work is almost entirely bts. People walk into buildings, drive cars, toast bread and listen to music but seldom think about the engineers who designed the products, the components and the manufacturing processes. Activism exists within engineering — one example is developing and promoting designs that serve people who are poor or live with a disability.

In every activity, there are people pushing the boundaries, seeking to make the world a better place rather than serving their own interests first. In every case, the issue of bts work is important: some people do vital and necessary work with little or no public credit. We focus on what's conventionally called activism because many activists have far fewer resources than people working in large and well-resourced organisations.

A successful campaign can bring satisfaction and be inspiring. It helps keep activists going. However, it is not the whole story, or maybe not even the most significant

part. The well-known insight of the “journey being the destination” very much applies to activists’ sense of satisfaction and inspiration. It helps put bts activities in context, which otherwise can be quite dull. Much activist work is bts, so how are satisfaction and inspiration sustained over longer periods of time?

The Schweik bts project

To find out, we — members of the group Schweik Action Wollongong — began a project to learn about bts work in activism. We started by writing short accounts of our own experiences doing bts work: writing newsletters, arranging for media coverage, working for charities, helping a group reconnect after a split, and organising a campaign concerning public housing. These stories helped us see the diversity of bts work.

We next interviewed each other and wrote up and shared the resulting comments and stories. Then we interviewed a range of activists in Australia and the US about bts work. We sought answers to several questions, such as:

- How do bts workers feel about their roles?
- How can more people be encouraged to share bts work, especially when it’s boring yet vital?
- How do activists doing bts work keep going?

Using all the material we generated and collected, we made a list of significant points about bts work and classified them into categories. To illustrate the key points, we wrote brief stories. These fictional stories were inspired by the interviews and our experiences.

The rest of this document consists of the stories and comments about them.

Recognising and valuing bts work — and keeping going

What are bts roles?

Carla started work in the office of a small non-government organisation. She quickly learned all the practical skills needed such as taking messages, preparing agendas, handling accounts, filing documents and fixing the photocopier. The practical skills were straightforward, though some of them were challenging, particularly troubleshooting around technology problems.

What Carla hadn’t expected was the complexity of dealing with people. Responding to enquiries was usually easy enough, but she found it difficult when there were persistent, aggrieved or desperate individuals. She had to work out ways of dealing with them politely yet promptly. She undertook specialised training and gradually became knowledgeable about how to handle awkward enquiries.

Carla had to work with the media, negotiate with client groups and maintain relations with a range of government and community organisations. She had to work with the diverse opinions and approaches of colleagues and board members. The workplace undercurrents kept Carla working bts, and sometimes this was a very long way from the stage.

Marta worked in a small neighbourhood centre where lots of community activities took place each day. One task was packing food hampers for the local residents. Marta suggested a working bee and her colleagues agreed. But when the room with the large table that suited their task was not available, Marta’s colleagues said the work could not be done. Marta quickly checked for available spaces, rearranged some furniture in another room, and gathered the foodstuffs for packing so the work could go ahead.

While these were minor problem-solving bts tasks for Marta, there was a risk that without her efforts the packing task would have been postponed to another time. Marta wanted to do it while there were willing hands, avoid having to make another arrangement that may or may not have been possible in a hectic work environment, and involve others rather than leave it to the last minute when she might have to do it all on her own.

Comment Bts work can include practical tasks like bookkeeping, cleaning and writing. It can involve dealing with people, sometimes a challenging task. And it can involve problem-solving and creative thinking to address urgent or complex matters.

Who does bts roles?

Rosa's outstretched arms captured by the newspaper photographer at the antiwar rally depicted her passionate plea for peace along with all those hopeful people listening in the street.



Rosa was both a "guest" speaker at the rally and one of the organisers in the small antiwar collective. She had done extensive preparation to speak with the radio station in the lead-up to the rally. With her activist friends she had personally phoned community members to let them know about the peace action. They also sent letters and used email

to get the word out. Using a public space involved Rosa working with the police and local officials, booking equipment, briefing and confirming entertainers and speakers, and other tasks. The small collective had limited time and resources for organising the event and could not pursue all the ideas proposed for the day.

Comment Sometimes those on the public stage are different people to those working bts. Sometimes they are the same people.

Educators and political activists often do both public and hidden work. They include people such as Rosa.

People who see the broader picture of their work, office or community can often identify tasks and how to undertake them. Problem-solvers and those who take the initiative are likely to undertake bts roles.

Some people have more opportunities to put effort into activism, for example those who are retired from the paid workforce with more free time, those with specialist or diverse skills and those with ample financial and other resources.

Those committed to a cause and able to work well in groups, and those with a strong sense of community, are good prospects as bts workers.

Missy was the key organiser of the public event for her local community centre. She played a public role along with her male colleagues, introducing guests and making a brief speech throughout the event. At the end Missy and her female colleagues washed the dishes, swept the floor and helped pack up while her male colleagues packed a few things and debriefed on the night's events. Missy organised to return the key for the hired hall and did the final inspection so those remaining at the end could go home.

Comment Decades of feminist protest and consciousness-raising have failed to address the inherent sexism that still expects women to take almost full responsibility for the very bts work of domestic labour or the

responsibility to organise someone else to do it. Often those who have to be prodded to undertake bts tasks are unhappy with the person facilitating the work.



Linked to this gender imbalance in unpopular bts tasks are systems of power and status connected with ethnicity, age, credentials, sexual orientation, expertise, rank (formal position in a hierarchy) and informal status. Those with power can abuse their roles to humiliate or undermine others.

Systems of power and status can also render certain work, and those who undertake it, invisible. The work, despite being crucial, may be viewed as less valuable. Valuing the bts role and tasks and affording dignity and importance to those who undertake this work will help address exploitative and discriminatory practices. Ongoing awareness of and opposition to sexism, racism, homophobia, bullying and disrespect will allow bts and front line workers to collaborate to achieve the best outcomes.

Marsha worked as an educator or facilitator in training. When she booked the venue for her next group, she ensured that it was accessible for all the participants including those with limited mobility. Even though preparing her workshop materials and handouts was critical

to her training role, for weeks beforehand Marsha organised and checked a range of equally crucial tasks to make her workshop successful. Marsha experimented with technology to ensure it would be suitable for the training; she located useful resources that would assist with key aspects of the learning; she investigated the needs of all the participants as part of her planning; she organised catering that met all dietary needs.

Marsha was responsible for all the follow-up after the workshop, including filing of documents, display of photographs, organising of evaluations, and finalising of financial and other accountability processes.

Comment Increasingly many occupations or roles are becoming “sole” positions working on a consultancy basis or in single positions without a team. These jobs may focus on one-off projects and not have administration or resource positions to assist with bts work.

For many, when the curtain comes down on a public event, it is over and they move on to the next task. But workers like Marsha can have weeks of post-event mopping up before the event is really over.

What difference do bts roles make?

Byron worked in a flexible office where he used his resources to organise a local environmental campaign. The group was always well attended, as Byron would send detailed minutes of discussions and actions. The group regularly noted how easy it was to be an active participant and contribute as Byron’s convening role gave them the crucial information of where to be and what actions were agreed upon.

Comment Bts roles often serve as a conduit between people, facilitate tasks, and monitor what is needed to keep a group cohesive, active and effective in its work. If someone is doing the hidden administrative tasks this

allows the group members to use their unique strengths and focus their contributions.

Bts work goes on all the time, in all groups – support is needed to keep going

Betty found herself one more time saying “I’ll do it” when someone in her work team said it would be a good idea to publish a local newsletter. Betty knew it was not as simple as writing a few articles and getting some artwork. This project involved getting people to write the articles, issues of payment, a legal contract that covered copyright, ownership, attribution, future use, advertising and other issues that she was not qualified to answer.

Betty suggested a brainstorm on what’s involved with doing the newsletter and then seeing who would volunteer for the job. The enormity of the bts tasks meant this project didn’t happen, as there were not sufficient volunteers to do the work.

Comment If the same people always do the bts work they can burn out and not develop or use their other skills. It is good for everyone to know the extent of the work at the outset so it can be shared among members in the group.

Bruce loves his current affairs radio show and gets significant recognition for his role in getting to the crux of a good story in his interviews. He is a happy, well-informed interviewer who makes his interviewees feel relaxed and talkative. Bruce always thanks his production team and acknowledges the extensive research they do in finding interesting guests for the show. When interviewed himself Bruce outlined how his program assistant prepared the guests, provided them with background to the show and its aims and did extensive research that assisted him in his own preparation. Bruce’s production group had been working with him

for over 10 years and the listeners knew the presenter was part of a team and from time to time heard from other team members as presenters in their own shows.

Comment Bts activity is partly shaped by personality factors. But a larger influence is the way that “scenes” (frontline and bts) are organised. For example, making bts work visible and overtly valued will change the way it’s done and who does it. It feels inspiring when everyone is pulling together.

Bringing bts action to the front

Agnes made a detailed checklist of all the tasks that she did in preparation for the “Gala Fundraising Dinner.” The list included the minor organising tasks and a timeframe for when they should be completed. The speakers and invitation list were obvious but who was going to work out the copyright issues about playing background music? Could someone obtain vegan food? Who was going to negotiate expenses and payments with the guest speakers? Agnes prepared a list that included everything from setting up to cleaning up afterward, so names could be put next to actions. Everyone could then share a mix of the frontline and bts tasks.



Comment To bring bts action to the front, prepare a list of what to do to organise an activity.

Learning and doing bts work

Skills in bts work

When Eva joined the action group to reduce poverty and disadvantage in the community where she lived and worked, she was impressed and challenged by the wealth of experience and knowledge present around the large table. On the whiteboard current priorities were listed, each with tasks attached. At first the list was overwhelming: the tasks seemed unending. Eva suddenly felt there were not nearly enough people sitting around the table to accomplish the tasks at hand.

Eva expressed her doubts. The facilitator responded by telling her that this was a common response of people who were new to the group. The facilitator asked Eva what attribute she thought was the most important for helping the group. Eva thought for a moment and remembered that her motivation for joining the group was wanting things to change in her neighbourhood, so she said that she thought the most important thing she could bring was a willingness to do what was necessary to make a change. She went on to say she realised she would need to learn herself as well as to mentor others. The facilitator agreed and then asked her to fill out a questionnaire about her skills.

Comment Working out what you can do, knowing what others can do and breaking down the tasks can make the front-line and bts work more manageable.

Learning skills

Christina was just 18 when she joined the women's group. She was enthusiastic and idealistic. There were a couple of really old office workers in the group, Jo and Janis. They weren't paid but they made everything happen. Well, they seemed really old to Christina. Probably they were in their 50s or 60s.

Jo and Janis were delighted to have Christina involved, with her energy and passion. In the course of day-to-day work, they patiently showed her how things were done, everything from accounts and making posters to choosing venues and resolving disputes. Christina learned her bts skills on the job.

Comment Mentoring and sharing skills underpin successful bts work.

Martha was competent with computers but times were moving rapidly and she struggled to keep up. Her neighbourhood campaigning collective passed all complex computer tasks to an IT-savvy member who worked alone and later showed the finished items to the group. Martha had extensive experience in submission writing and policy work but two or three "experts" in the group undertook these tasks separately. Martha was a confident public speaker but rarely undertook this role as the group had a spokesperson. Martha mostly was asked to do the minutes but found she wanted to participate in a different way in the group and use all her skills. At the group's planning meeting Martha proposed that experienced and less experienced members mentor others in various roles and this be reviewed every three to six months. This would allow her to do other roles and other group members to learn new skills.



Comment There are so many specialists — speakers, writers, accountants, computer programmers, event managers — that many people think all tasks should be handled by specialists either in the group or brought in from the outside. While this may be efficient and easier in the short term, for ongoing strength it is useful to assist group members to develop their own skills in different areas. It can be useful to identify gaps in skill levels and ensure training to do the job.

How can bts roles be done better?

Clem had been around for a long time and knew the ropes. He was a union delegate with “eyes in the back of his head” according to some. He saw things other people didn’t. He could see a problem in the making. Clem’s new young colleague in the office followed Clem around for weeks while they organised excursions, held barbeques and attended meetings. It was when the new worker double-checked the insurance for the camping trip that Clem knew he was working with someone who was also checking bts to do the preparation.

Comment Watching an experienced worker is a good way to learn. It’s invaluable to have someone able to tell you how to do things and willing to check what you’ve done.

Documenting bts tasks

Greta kept an archival scrapbook with the what, why, where, who and how of her activist group’s activities. The group’s work for fairer immigration laws was documented in words, photos, paintings, media, textiles and poetry. Greta briefly recorded who attended their events, when and where, any media response, photos and follow-up needed. She could share this with others who weren’t there and inspire them with the event’s successes.

Comment How can you pass on great tips if you haven’t kept a clear record or any documentation? Recording an organisation’s projects enables its unfolding history to be celebrated, analysed and evaluated.

Elvira and Jonathon were both passionate activists for a local sustainability group. Over the years they realised that they had developed some great resources about how to run campaigns. Elvira was leaving the group to pursue an opportunity in another country and the group realised that they were about to lose valuable knowledge and expertise. They decided to develop a living resource documenting the “what” and “how” of their campaign activities.

The group heatedly debated what this resource should look like. Mary was convinced it should be online whereas Jo was worried this could prevent some people accessing it. They also debated the advantages and disadvantages of being prescriptive about how things should be done, as there was a feeling that this could limit creativity and innovation in the future.

Jonathon came up with a simple yet effective model they all could agree on. His suggestion was to keep an online scrapbook and a hardcopy version. The scrapbook would have headings like “what we did,” “why we did it” and “did it work?” The scrapbook would be added to the agenda of each meeting and someone would be tasked to keep it up to date. How this would be achieved, Jonathon joked, would be a whole other discussion. Elvira as a final parting suggestion said they could do it as part of the meeting process.

Comment It’s valuable to document how to carry out bts tasks. Make tacit knowledge explicit. This also ensures that bts workers are acknowledged. Individual names can be included, rather than solely the name of the organisation, for reasons of individual acknowledgement and for later follow-up. The documentation may take the form of a scrapbook, newspaper item, e-letter, website or annual report.

For many years, Carlos published the newsletter and maintained the website of the Denizens for Democracy neighbourhood group that promoted peace, justice and participation primarily in his local district but further afield if their campaigns took them there. His poor health and the aging membership of Denizens for Democracy left him worried about what would happen in the future to the group's decades of work and history.

To find successors to undertake the work, Carlos started investigating like-minded groups locally and regionally. He organised a manual outlining the nuts and bolts of all the tasks and a list of supporters who had specialist skills. He even set up a plan C to his plan B of handing over the resources of the group. Plan C involved other people who were prepared to take it on further down the track if circumstances required. With Carlos' task manual, archive options and directory of support and resources, most people thought the project not too onerous.

Comment It is wise to plan for the future and have good procedures in place in case others need to take over bts work.

Bts campaigning

Paid community and government workers were always competing with each other for funding, according to whichever suburb they represented. Although each suburb had the same issues, they were seen as different rather than having shared needs.

The workers got together and had an idea: they should figure out a name for the whole area so they wouldn't have to refer to separate suburbs. This would put the whole area on government's agenda and enable them to seek joint funding.

So they started what they called a whispering campaign: they adopted their agreed name — northside borders — and started to use it in letters, meetings and funding applications. They didn't make a resolution or produce a document; they simply had a conversation and then began.

Half a year later, other people started to use the name. They knew they had been successful when northside borders was put into a government plan as a district of interest and high need.



Comment Grassroots conversations, initiated bts based on a clear goal, can be the basis of a campaign to increase public awareness. Be sure to constantly check your strategies against your overall aim.

Be prepared

Belinda was active in a toxic chemical network. She maintained a list of experts who were willing to speak to the media. She attended conferences, introducing herself to scientists who might be sympathetic, and did some cold calling based on web searches.

She monitored several news services. When a suitable opportunity arose — for example a comment by a politician — she contacted journalists and suggested experts they might interview.

Belinda's preparation work was bts: the experts were the ones heard and seen by the public, not her. Belinda's preparation and initiative enabled her to take advantage of opportunities and sometimes to create them.

Comment Be prepared to act when the opportunity arises. Bts preparation makes it easier to identify opportunities and act quickly.

When planning to attend a meeting of an organisation in which you're involved, first find out what's happening, perhaps get on the

agenda, and prepare what you want to contribute.

Strengthening relationships

Anthony had a way with people. Without them even noticing, he would soothe ruffled emotions and help colleagues work together.

On one occasion, tensions mounted between two hard-working members whose styles clashed: Fred liked to keep everything in order, sometimes obsessively so, whereas Freda was spontaneous and impatient with anything smacking of bureaucracy. After a flare-up that threatened Fred and Freda's commitment, Anthony got them talking and laughing, introducing themes that subtly helped them to appreciate each other's virtues.

No one fully appreciated Anthony's bts role in maintaining working relationships — not even Fred and Freda. That was what made his interventions so effective.

Comment Bts relationships between workers — and maintaining and strengthening these relationships — are vital to effectiveness.

Cultural factors

Leo and Alma wanted to consult on their education project with diverse members of their community, particularly members of the Muslim community. Leo spoke with a male friend and asked about possibilities to speak with others and what would be appropriate. Alma wrote to a Muslim women's group outlining their project and who they were and why they were doing the consultation. Alma received an invitation to a gathering with an

outline of how the event would unfold and how she could participate.

Comment Developing an understanding of cultural norms often involves a lot of ongoing bts work.



Using experts

Sally maintained the group's records, but she wanted to do better — she wanted a system so that everyone could use the records without everything getting messed up. Whenever she visited another group, she asked about their records and observed their system, getting a few new ideas. After getting a better grasp of possible systems, she invited the person she admired the most in this field to give a demonstration for her own group. Only a couple of others showed up, but Sally was inspired nevertheless.

Sally gradually became more skilled at record-keeping. Members of the group started boasting about "their" system. A few years down the track, visitors came to Sally for advice on record-keeping.

Comment When learning how to do a job, one approach is to invite in experts to run workshops.

Problems and solutions

How can more people be involved, especially in neglected areas?

Coral and Ben were working long hours to establish a small community garden in an area of social and economic disadvantage. They were passionate about food. Their idea was to grow food in public places where anybody from the community could obtain it. Although local people appreciated the food, no one particularly wanted to do the work required to make the garden. Coral realised that they would not be able to maintain the work or continue to provide all the resources. They needed help!

One of the best ways to get help is to ask for it in a way to which people can respond. This is what they did: they organised a community picnic and working bee and they had a conversation about what community members wanted to see happen with the garden. The outcome: people wanted social interaction. A regular garden time was set which also included other activities, such as good coffee and art-making for young people in the area. The garden became a focus for all sorts of activities — including gardening!

Other suggestions they have for involving people are to ask a little of a lot of people and to create a buddy system to get people to encourage each other and be committed to a person as well as a task. They also try to get organisations with similar goals involved and form working parties to raise funds and awareness.



Comment To get more people involved, try to figure out what would interest them. Ask them! Experiment and see what works. Learn from the experience of other groups. Be open to new ideas. Make activities fun and productive so people feel welcome and go away feeling they've done something worthwhile.

When bts activity is bad news

John had worked for Activist Life for over a decade. He knew the ins and outs of every part of the issue and the local personalities. He gained a sense of identity from being the kingpin — the person who determined the directions of the organisation and to whom everyone looked for advice.

Jill and Jan, two independent-minded members, had been involved for several years and developed a good understanding of the issues. John subtly encouraged some newer members to question Jill and Jan's commitment, raise complaints about them and make them feel unwelcome. Jill and Jan became frustrated that their ideas and contributions were being misinterpreted and sidelined. They decided to leave Activist Life. John remained as the kingpin.

Comment Some bts activity is undesirable, such as bullying or marginalising members. Another example is hijacking of agendas — for example, stacking of meetings — which is done bts in order to hide it. Groups are more likely to succeed when they are transparent, inclusive and address unhelpful behaviour such as bullying.

Fostering a sharing culture

Joyce realised that members of her network were falling into narrow roles. A few focussed on membership activities, others on finances and yet others on communication. The

network was missing out on synergies between the different roles. Joyce organised some informal showcase meetings. She first got the membership experts to tell about their successes and how they brought them about. Next it was the turn of the finance people. Each time, the specialists were pleased to let others know what they were doing — it was a chance to shine. The process loosened roles and opened up contact between members.

Comment There's a lot of specialised knowledge bts. Sharing it is crucial. The challenge is to find ways that combine appreciation with learning.

People like to have their roles acknowledged. When each person feels that their contribution is recognised by the group, it allows for any differences to be discussed in a supportive and creative atmosphere.

Having fun bts

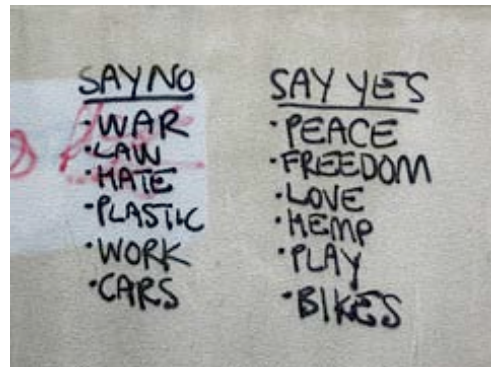
Kaling was a highly dynamic environmental organiser. She loved nature but also loved being with people. She arranged for working bees to get tasks done — producing posters, planting trees, going on fund-raising walks, even doing the accounts. Supporters enjoyed helping out because of the food and fun.

Comment One way to get more people involved in bts work and to help energise activists is to make the work satisfying. Working with others is a great way to do this: people like being with others and feeling they are doing something worthwhile. Fun arises from bonding with others by exchanging stories, music and food and by being stimulated by a range of activities from routine to daring.

Going solo bts

Roberta: I sometimes act alone or carry out actions with just one other person. For

example, I've made stickers to put on buildings such as banks, insurance companies and other corporations. Quite a lot of thought is needed — what to say, where to put them, how to pay, design features, avoiding security and distributing to others. All this is bts.



Comment A lot of responsibility is involved in doing bts work. Usually it's better to share the responsibility. However, some bts workers need to be anonymous for security, personal or other reasons. When activists work alone or with one or two others, without accountability to a larger group, careful consideration of ethics and politics of actions is necessary to make sure such actions are productive rather than harmful.

Individuals acting alone and performing bts alone may see themselves as part of a global network, perhaps communicating only through cyberspace or perhaps not directly communicating at all but simply identifying with a group by observation: "I saw the website and see myself as having similar ideas and responses to those I found on the site. So I have now joined the online forum and am planning to make my own webpage and blog."

Some people decide to act alone because of the problems of fitting in with groups, including power struggles, hierarchies and conflicting values. Others choose to work alone because of limited time, increased access to technology, skills and personality factors. Individual activism may not be as prominent as a public rally or meeting but it often requires as much bts work as actions carried out by groups and large networks.

Sharing the bts workload

Lee loved the feeling of being useful. She desperately wanted to make a difference, to be part of something bigger. But she was shy, so she volunteered for the organising jobs that most others didn't notice.

Lee liked it this way. She became highly knowledgeable about the issues, but dreaded being asked to give an interview. She preferred being bts. She was safe in doing what she did and doing it well, without a more public role.

Comment Some people can contribute most effectively by working to their strengths. Doing things that are comfortable and safe may be the best for some long-time activists and is also a method for easing people into activism.

It is worthwhile encouraging people to share all aspects of work, at the same time accepting people's differing levels of willingness to do different types of work. More people developing new skills can help with sharing the load.



Tools of activist work

The work team regularly met Wednesday evenings at a community centre. Attendance was poor — the workroom was hot in summer, cold in winter and had a strange chemical smell. The location was inconvenient for some team members. So the team decided to try different venues, including

some people's homes, and occasionally outside on a warm evening. After a while they settled into a routine at the places that seemed most congenial.

Comment Infrastructure and tools — such as venues, equipment and means of transport — can foster or hinder mutual support, in other words the sharing of bts work. It's worth experimenting with different tools to find what works best.

Knowing the scene

The planning meeting was going well until there was a thumping at the door and shouting and loud laughter. The three drunken men seemed intent on disrupting the meeting. Rick, a prominent figure in the community who was chairing the meeting, confronted them and nearly got into a fight. He was nearly ready to call the police when Sylvia intervened. She knew Jonesy, the de-facto leader of the three drunken men. She got talking with him, brought out a few things to eat and calmed them down so they were less disruptive.

Sylvia knew from long experience that calling the police wouldn't be effective: it would be at least an hour before they arrived, during which time their meeting would be on hold. Sylvia also knew the police wouldn't do much — and involving them would only aggravate the situation. She chose instead to use a few tricks for appealing to Jonesy's good nature.

Comment Experienced bts workers don't assume that official channels — like calling the police — are always the way to solve problems. They have learned how to handle difficult situations by relying on the resources of the group itself and always keeping long-term commitment and effectiveness in mind. Bts workers often know better how things operate.

Conclusion

Bts work is a big topic, because so much of it goes on. We haven't given a list of readings, because this topic is off the agenda: the routine work of groups is taken for granted. Our main aim is to encourage activists to pay more attention to it.

A few themes arose from our investigation.

- Bts work is vitally important.
- Activists should value it.
- Ways should be found to make it more interesting and satisfying and to get more people involved in it.
- People need to learn how to do the work. Some of it requires a lot of skill, insight and experience. Learning from other activists is one of the best ways to develop bts capacities.
- Keep finding ways to keep activism going by looking after yourself and others.

We enjoyed probing bts. We hope you do too!

Comments by Iain Murray

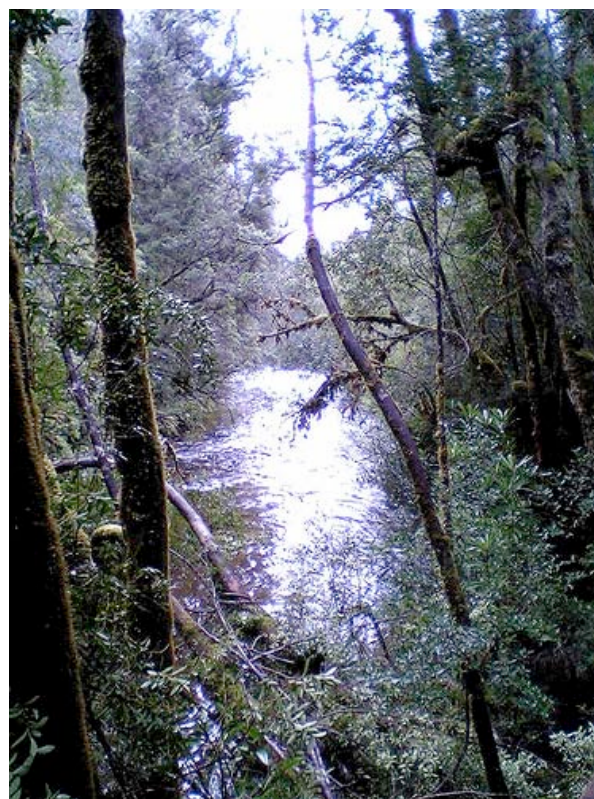
We showed this text to several friends. Iain offered comments.

There's an interview with Franklin Blockade organiser Cathie Plowman in Roger Green's book *Battle for the Franklin* that seems to encapsulate the disparity between bts and spotlight work quite well:

"In the first stage everyone just wanted to go up the river and get arrested. In fact there was this arrestomania. People would come into the Information Centre and say 'I've come to be arrested tomorrow,' and I'd say, 'Well there's no boat tomorrow.' And they'd say, 'Well I want to get arrested tomorrow.' 'You can't get arrested tomorrow'." Arrest was coming first — it was described as the ultimate sacrifice in the field — arrest was the all-important thing.

"I was having to worry about kitchen cooks and things like that. I was doing camp co-ordinating, boat co-ordinating, I was looking after equipment and supplies, I was doing media interviews, I was doing first aid — there were very few doctors and nurses around, I was doing all the liaising with the People's Park caravan caretaker where we were staying and I was collecting everybody's

camp fees. I was doing a zillion things." (pp. 252–253)



The Franklin River

I imagine that Plowman is describing a period where the Franklin campaign had begun to receive significant media coverage, with a consequent influx of new participants eager to play a part. I wonder if and how the blockade organisers were able to direct this new energy to share the load of managing equipment and supplies, providing first aid, collecting camp fees and the other bts work people like Plowman were doing?

Todd Gitlin's book *The Whole World is Watching* examines the interplay between leadership of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the mass media from 1965 through to the formation of the Weather Underground. Chapter five in particular talks about how the "spotlight" of increasing media attention affected the movement's ability to choose and certify its own leaders.

Gitlin's book might also be read as the story of a movement that progressively jettisoned bts work (for instance, face-to-face

campus-based organising and policy development) in favour of working entirely "in the spotlight" of the mass media. As the movement attracted more and more media attention, it also attracted new participants whose idea of the movement was formed primarily by the media's representation of the movement. As bts work is excluded from this representation by definition, a feedback loop occurred where the skills and experience needed to carry out the bts work — including the work of fostering leadership and participatory democracy — eventually disappeared.

Battle for the Franklin, Interviews by Roger Green (Melbourne: Australian Conservation Foundation; Sydney: Fontana, 1981)

Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980)



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Schweik Action Wollongong

Schweik Action Wollongong is a small voluntary group in Wollongong, Australia, fostering awareness of nonviolent responses to aggression and repression.

The group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejek), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. See Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (Penguin, 1974).



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