

Dissolution and the Industry of Culture: The History of the Flash mob

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“In New York people will go where other people are just because other people are there.”

The above statement came from Mike Epstein during his June 20, 2003 interview with NPR’s Robert Siegel on *All Things Considered*. Mr. Epstein was referring to his participation in a recently held “strange” event that had just taken place three days before on June 17. In what is now considered the first successful flash mob, which was actually the second mob orchestrated by the then-unidentified mastermind known as “Bill,” more than 200 people, including Epstein, met at a local rug store on a specific date at a specific time (Epstein 2003).

Here’s what happened: Epstein had taken part in a mass email exchange network, which group leader “Bill” had started days before. Bill, who seemed to be just another interested party and not the individual who was orchestrating the event, asked his email friends to synchronize their watches with the US atomic clock. At 7 pm, participants were asked to meet at one of four local bars. In order to keep the main event secret, Bill asked each participant to go to one of the designated bars according to the individual’s birth month. (This is why the second mob was successful while the first was not. By the time the first mob had convened on its target location, the Manhattan police were already waiting. Unfortunately, the police had also received the strange first email from Bill concerning the whereabouts of the mob’s focal point and had decided that since a mob was to meet at this certain business something was up that might warrant their

attention.) In the second mob, once people arrived at their specified bar, they received slips of paper instructing them of their next move.

So, here they all were, not knowing who in the room was participating in the mob or just in the bar because of the drinks. While waiting in one of four bars, participants received the paper instructions. It is not clear how the paper slips were passed out or even if the instructions were given to normal patrons of the establishment; however, everyone quickly knew what they were to do next. Bill's instructions were very short, exact and specific. The instructions said that at precisely 7:27 pm the group should assemble around one particular rug on the 9th floor of Macy's department store in the home furnishings area (Epstein 2003). The instructions also tell members of the mob that they should stand around this particular Oriental rug and contemplate its beauty. Further instructions suggested that if any salesperson asks what the group is doing, any member of the mob would answer that they all lived in a warehouse together in Long Island City, Queens, and needed a "Love Rug," which the group could only purchase together. Exactly 10 minutes later, at 7:37, the group leaves through the front doors and disperses out into the street and back into their daily lives (Wasik 2003). The event is over.



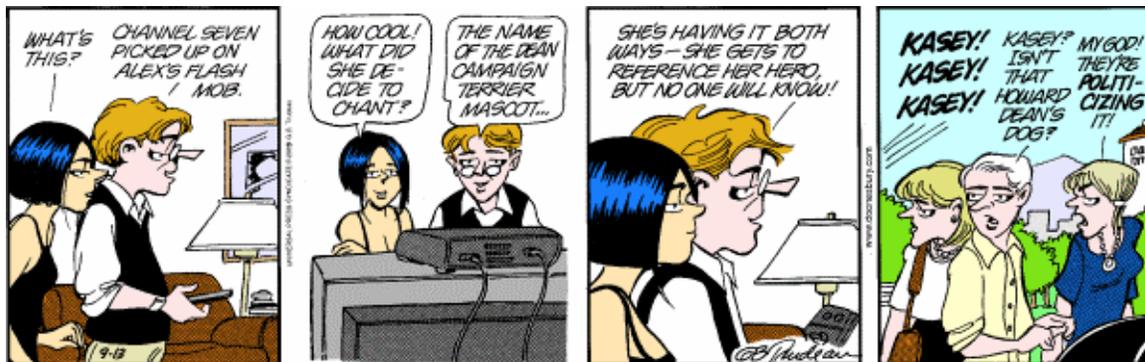
Flash mob considers rug



Rug salesman considers flash mob

Almost three months later, the campaign staffers for Howard Dean's U.S. presidential run sent out one of their own mob announcements. This mob would do something differently and, in the process, would receive its own media coverage. One reason to take note of Dean's mob event is that it was the first political event held in the flash mob format. Like the New York flash mob orchestrated by Bill, the event was mostly organized through social media tools. However, it was the first flash mob-type event that was announced to the public through well-known cartoon-- Doonesbury. In the cartoon, a reference is made to a flash mob event that would be held at the Seattle Space Needle. In the cartoon, Trudeau alludes to a Dean campaign event by having Alex, one of Trudeau's characters, type: Saturday, September 13th, 10:35 am at the foot of the Space Needle. Everyone should link arms in an enormous circle, hop up and down, chanting 'The Doctor is In'....It's a flash mob for Dean (Zepeda 2003). Right after this event the Trudeau cartoon was published the social media quickly picked up on the event time and place and started circulating the announcement: Time: Sat Sept 13th 10:35 AM -

Place: Foot of Space Needle - Activity: Link arms in an enormous circle, hop up and down chanting 'The Doctor is in!' - Disperse (Democratic Underground 2003).



Now jump to March 21, 2010, just weeks before this paper was written. Over the past several months, there have been a number of events loosely referred to in the media as flash mob in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During these riotous events, thousands of teenage students convene in the city's streets and engage in what is described in the press as violent outburst of teenager's angst (Wagner 2010). The news media have been quick to suggest that, since the teenagers learn about these events through social media outlets, the events are examples of flash mob. The Philadelphia riots have caused severe and extensive damage to businesses in the area and have resulted in episodes of physical violence against both participants and bystanders. In response, the city's government has instituted curfews. Despite being associated with the flash mob idea, the events in Philadelphia are nothing more than teenage riots.

“Teen ‘flash mob’ 100 Strong Wreaks Havoc in Center City Streets, Invades Macy”
NBC Philadelphia (Video)

February 17, 2010 at 10:14 am

Dateline: Center City, PA

<http://www.breitbart.com/teen-flash-mob-100-strong-wreaks-havoc-in-center-city-streets-invades-macys/>

Even though the recent Philadelphia riots were organized and publicized through social media networking tools, the events themselves are very much removed from the original idea of the flash mob, which “Bill” established over 10 years ago. The Philadelphia events, in addition to others, illustrate that news agencies tend to perpetuate misinformation about the nature of these mobs. This misinterpretation has now made it difficult to distinguish and define what a flash mob really is. What this paper seeks to do is to reconsider the flash mob by: comparing it to its predecessor, the smart mob; and distinguishing it from other events that exploit its characteristic network-based organizational structure. Ultimately, this paper will bring some clarity to the terms we use to describe the social media phenomenon of flash mob. The article will seek to situate the flash mob movement within the history of performance art in a way that would suggest the movement is a new step in combining performance art and public art that encourages the development and use of networked communities.

A surprise from the creator of the flash mob

When Bill Wasik announced his role in the flash mob creation in March 2006 issue of Harper’s Magazine, of which he was an editor, the identity of the person behind the movement was as much a bombshell of information as was Bill’s revelation of why he did it. Firstly, in the article Wasik defines flash mob as “gatherings of people somewhere in physical space that last for 10 minutes or less and they are brought together on the fly via text message or email and then everyone disperses and leaves no trace.” (Wasik 2003) But, this does not tell us why one would want people to gather in a place

and look at a rug for ten minutes and then leave without taking anything with them.

Well, this is the crux of the conversation: what does one take away from the flash mob and why do they exist? There are many conflicting explanations for the flash mob movement, with some even arguing with the inventor's motives. However, ultimately, Wasik looks to contemporary popular culture and the networks that are created through social media tools for the answers to these questions. Wasik's reasoning for the development of the flash mob is very simple: he wanted to poke a little fun at New York hipsters and scenesters, "almost all of the mobs I organized had been, in some sense, jokes on the subject of conformity" (Wasik 2003). More to the point, he was making a comment on how popular culture was leading people around for no reason, and those who were being led were not asking why:

The basic hypothesis behind the Mob Project was as follows: seeing how all culture in New York was demonstrably commingled with *scenesterism*, the appeal of concerts and plays and readings and gallery shows deriving less from the work itself than from the social opportunities the work might engender, it should theoretically be possible to create an art project consisting of *pure scene*—meaning the scene would be the entire point of the work, and indeed would itself constitute the work (Wasik 2003).

For Wasik, art was a key component of the project. In fact, according to Wasik's above statement, he was looking at this as one large art project. Yet, when others started appropriating his idea, the aesthetics of the mundane seemed crucial. Wasik's reliance on the "performance" is what made his flash mob unique, for they resided not in the public interaction solely, but the public interaction viewed by the aesthetic. In other words, these events served as artistic "happenings". This is why, when, his flash mob moved from being solely a comment on the culture (as an artistic exercise) to a tool of politics and

commercialism, Wasik knew that his art project was complete. For Wasik, he had documented the act of dissolution in a group.

“To me, flash mob were a kind of performance art and, you know, they weren’t protests, they certainly weren’t a substitute for protest. They were a social experiment, they were a demonstration of what the technology of internet chain emails could do and text messaging can do and a demonstration of social networks in the way in which people can just through you know one person forward it to ten people and they forward it to 10 people and before you know it you can gather really tremendous crowds... The mob was all about the herd instinct, I reasoned, about the desire not to be left out of the latest fad; logically, then, it should grow as quickly as possible and then—this seemed obvious—buckle under the weight of its own popularity” (Wasik).

Wasik’s first steps were very important in setting up a seemingly free-form, open-source types of communication network. In fact, since much of the information before and after the mob events remained online-- in chat rooms, blog posts, chain emails and so on-- the physical act was only part of the project. The physical act of showing up at a place, doing something strange that alters the idea of the place’s intention, and then leaving that alteration to be documented by those who participated is nothing unusual in the art world. This type of interaction has been going on for almost a century, including, in the latter part of the 20th century, with the emergence of Fluxus art. George Maciunas, then-editor of a literary magazine called Fluxus, initiated the Fluxus movement. Within this magazine, Maciunas selected content on which artists could focus. Maciunas would ask different artists, including Yoko Ono, to submit to Fluxus; he also encouraged events through the magazine’s networks of visual artists, writers, performers, participants, etc. Much like Wasik would do decades later, Maciunas shaped the content of Fluxus performances:

Fluxus products were defined by George Maciunas. They were the logical development in the evolution of this thinking about the Fluxus movement. And

existed concurrently with the other aspects of the movement, at times overlapping, at times contradicting, even sometimes intertwined with Fluxus events. Works would occur as a result of performance activities, or as elements of participation environments, as ideas for altered foods or for furniture. Maciunas mind was open to all sorts of possibilities. From the smallest of stimuli he was able to develop numerous ideas. Some Fluxus works have similar outward appearance, because he would specify a particular format for use. For example, in 1964 when he sent out small plastic boxes to artists and invited them to suggest ideas to fit, the result was a similarity of packaging in a number of Fluxus editions produced during that period (Kellein p121 1995).

The similarities between the networks of Maciunas and Wasik are astounding; however, with the advent of new technology, Wasik was able to use the popularity of social media tools and capitalize on social media's ability to conceal identity and create anonymous interactions. Furthermore, Wasik's project, which was seemingly removed from the elitism of the art world, relied on the free exchange of information through popular media. Wasik says he remained confident in the project's appeal to a certain type of crowd:

My subjects were grad students, publishing functionaries, cultured technologists, comedy writers, aspiring poets, musicians, actors, novelists, their ages ranging from the early twenties to the middle thirties. They were, that is to say, a fairly representative cross-section of hipsters, and these were people who did not easily let themselves get left out. I rated the project's chances as fair to good (Wasik 2003).



Maciunas' portrait of Dick Higgins, Lette Eisenhower, Daniel Spoerri, Alison Knowles and Ay-O for the Fluxus Street Events" in New York, Spring 1964.

Both Wasik and Maciunas understood the importance of marketing an idea; however, Wasik understood that idea would inevitably change and its original intent would die a quick death. Wasik did not take ownership of his flash mob, until they had fulfilled his own prophecy: that the flash mob format would be appropriated and used by corporations for commercial ends. At the start of the project, Wasik felt it was very important to remain anonymous. Wasik wanted the others- participants in the game-- to forward his messages and to feel like they had some sort of ownership in the interaction. Anyone could have been Bill. Not only was Wasik an invisible participant, but also anyone who played along had the chance to show up and leave without anyone saying anything to them or even knowing them. Yet, by forwarding the emails and commenting on social media sites, even virtual identities could participate in the mob. By being part

of the email chain or the blog repost/comment, the online self was essential to the project's success. Because of the use and power of anonymous online communities and communications, Wasik found that everyone's anonymity in the world of social media perfectly suited his project. Clay Shirky call this type of anonymity "Collaborative Production" in the book *Here Comes Everybody*. For Shirky, collaborative production is one way in which shared information is comprised and expanded by a group's collaborative cooperation:

Collaborative production is a more involved form of cooperation as it increased the tension between individual and group goals...no one person can take credit for what gets created, and the project could not come into being without the participation of many. (Shirky p 50 2008)

Shirky continues to explain the levels of shared awareness and information on the three ways in which a group might come to knowledge. Shirky explains the three levels of social awareness, as, "when everybody knows something, when everybody knows that everybody knows, and when everybody knows that everybody knows that everybody knows." (Shirky p 163 2008) Now, to be fair, Wasik's project is an example of just this concept. But, the question of this project entering the final of the three stages, where "everybody knows that everybody knows that everybody knows" is somewhat questionable, because the shared awareness of the project's true intentions were blurred until Wasik revealed the original ideas. Yet, in other forms of flash mob that had swiftly spread across networked communities, the true example of everyone knowing all may be applied.

Through social media communication tools like blog-posts, email chain letters, etc., information can spread wide and fast, depending on the amount of information and the attractiveness of that information to the public. Wasik's first email was very simple

but effective: *You are invited to take part in MOB, the project that creates an inexplicable mob of people in New York City for ten minutes or less. Please forward this to other people you know who might like to join.* (Wasik 2003) Since Wasik made sure to send this email to himself through an unidentified obscure email address, the origin of the email could not be traced back to him. Receiving this email functioned like being on a kind of special guest list; those who were cool enough to be linked up to other cool people were “invited.” This network thus resembled a data map of the persons who were the “cool” kids, who would get this sort of thing.

So you have a group of people, at the beginning and the end, connected only by a social media network and connected only for a short time by a random event. The event is coordinated through a network of anonymous online identities and takes the form of “in-the-know” strangers being compelled to descend on a particular place at a particular time. So, what do we call it? After the second mob no one really had a name for this type of thing but that was very soon to change due to the already expanding conversation in the blogosphere. After the first successful flash mob event ended, blogger Sean Savage came up with the name “flash mob” on his blog Cheesebikini.com, which referenced a similarly named, 1973 science-fiction short story about the same type of scenario.

‘Flash Crowd,’ which deals with the unexpected downside of cheap teleportation technology: packs of thrill seekers who beam themselves in whenever a good time is going down. The story’s protagonist, Jerry berry Jensen, is a TV journalist who inadvertently touches off a multi-day riot in a shopping mall, but eventually he clears his name by showing how *technology* was to blame.” (Wasik 2003)

Published in 2002, Howard Rheingold’s book titled *Smart mobs: The Next Social Revolution* defined these events by the use of network environments happening in social media technologies and appearing in both online villages and public spaces. The

introduction of Rheingold's smart mobs suggests that flash mobs are a small part of the growing smart-mob structure. Rheingold states that a smart mob is a group that "behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially increasing network links... an indication of the evolving communication technologies that will empower the people" (Wikipedia 2010.) The key point to Rheingold's thesis is that smart mobs are a type of social engagement that may be created and organized by interacting with the technology of shared networks or the technologies that allow the shared networks to interact within an event program. For example, having the ability to text message from your cell phone is, in effect, a type of smart phone, because texting is a technology that relies upon an network (i.e. your cell provider); another smart mob event could appear in the form of one internet user forwarding emails. The internet itself exists as a smart mob, as people interact, engage, organize and create networks on it. From Rheingold's point of view, a smart mob may be both the technology and the use of that technology. However, these smart mobs rely upon cooperation with and participation by the network's users. Ultimately, cooperation and participation imply consent among the network's users. Cooperation is a crucial form of permission-granting because it allows for the establishment of relationships with the group's users—whether that is through making a cell phone call or using the Internet. Collaboration within these cooperatives may be useful, but is not always needed for the co-production of the groups' effect. While cooperation may empower the participant, whether a user or a program, collaboration enables the user to participate for the benefit of the group. Since flash mob have both cooperation and collaboration they fall under the larger umbrella of smart mobs. Three things distinguish flash mob from smart mobs: the type social engagement that is used,

the interactions between the participants, and the intent of the originator or developer of the network. Wasik intended his flash mob to exist as ephemeral experiences that were part of an art performance that only he Wasik, the inventor, knew about until after the events had occurred. Therefore, his flash mobs were less about the engagement of the individual than the purpose of the network. Flash mob remain separate from smart mobs in that way.

Secondly, since flash mob originated as an art project that would comment on the lifestyles of young fashionable hipsters, Wasik's flash mob were very much different than other events labeled by the media as "flash mob," especially political rallies and the teenage riots in Philadelphia. First and foremost, the flash mob was both a performance art piece and a parody on the roles of popular culture in the New York culture scenes. Only Wasik was aware of the reason for the mob event. Contrastingly, in a smart mob, the people that participate are fundamentally interested in the reason for or the outcome of the mob event, while Wasik's flash mob there is no reason for the outcome, at least not anyone other than the artist. This is why Wasik's flash mob may be considered an art piece.

Political rallies, like the one used in the 2003 Howard Dean campaign did use social media tools and technology to get out the word, but Howard Dean's rally at the bottom of the Seattle Space Needle was more of a smart mob than a flash mob. Yes, the individuals showed up and left in almost no time, and yes, they were called together using the same types of communication as Wasik's group, but, according to Peter Dahlgren, the political opportunism is what made the two movements different. In Dahlgren's book *Media and Political Engagement*, the author focuses on the act of

engagement as the cause of passion and for mobilization (Dahlgren 2009). While, at some point, Wasik's events caused engagement and mobilization, one must look at the reasons behind the motivation for the event and from the participants. Like in Dahlgren's example of political engagement compared to participation, there are two different concepts. For Dahlgren, engagement "refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object" (Dahlgren 2009). It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation. With a political rally people are engaged in what they are doing, they are being called into a place with a vested interest in being there. They are relating to an idea for which they are already engaged. But, in the case of Wasik's event, there is no outcome for engagement outside of Wasik's own understanding of engagement. The interest of the participants in the event cannot fully rely on Dahlgren's definition of engagement, only relying on Dahlgren's definition of participation.

Well, how do we talk about the Philadelphia 2010 riots? The use of and reliance upon technology does not make them smart mobs or flash mobs. It is my belief that the people who are participating do not have a vested interest in their outcome and the reasons for or outcome of the mob event. In fact, the final outcome is far removed from engagement, at least in the traditional sense, the one used by Dahlgren, but there is no documented evidence of the personal reasons why participants chose to engage in the events in Philadelphia. The participation of the event here does not mean that the participants are engaged with their surroundings or their ideals. In these riots, the sole act of participation is the act of the mob, or the group. Therefore, engagement by the vested individual becomes overwhelmed by the act of the mass, the mob.

The Philadelphia riots are also not flash mob because they do not fall under the canopy of an art project. While the Philadelphia riots used the same communication media as the flash mob, where information is shared across social media tools, the result is very different than an artistic statement or document. Here, there is no consideration of an artistic statement being made from the outcome, or any aesthetic attribution being paid to the way in which the events work. So, the remaining factor of the Philadelphia riots, and one about which news agencies should be conscious, is that what is happening in Philadelphia is simply a mob riot. The participants are not acting according to any vested interest or engagement, nor are they part of an art project.

The misconception concerning the definitions of flash mob and smart mobs by entities by nightly news media anchors might seem somewhat unimportant to larger scholarship. As Wasik well knows, and even documents in his 2003 article, identifying the flash mob once it has gotten out of the hands of the art project and into being appropriated into anything between political theatre to commercialism is fairly complicated. Yet, it is a small example of the multiple misuses of terms built by the technology that have given rise to it. In fact, in order to understand future appropriations of flash mob, along with smart mobs and anything that may come from these groups, it is beneficial to get the information correct as soon as one can. It is very true that the history of flash mob is rather small yet these events grew out of larger, and older, concepts, especially in disciplines like the arts, cultural studies, and social behavior. In order for one to continue to look at the historical placement of flash mob in art history, it is crucial to take into consideration the premise for the movement in the first place. As I have said before the premise here is ratified through the artistic process and must be viewed from

that process. All other viewing of Wasik's flash mob, and flash mob that extended out from Wasik's ideas, are arbitrary.

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