



ACT UP

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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On March 24, 1987, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, or ACT UP, staged its first action in New York City on Wall Street, protesting the Food and Drug Administration and the drug company Burroughs Wellcome. Converging on the site in the hundreds, protesters passed out flyers, disrupted traffic, and drew considerable media attention. One activist even built an effigy of the head of the FDA that he hung outside a church during the protest.

Through this demonstration, ACT UP initiated its direct-action strategy in the fight against the AIDS epidemic. Using bold images and confrontational tactics, ACT UP worked to promote awareness of AIDS and challenge the complacency of politicians and government officials who had yet to respond adequately to the crisis.

As its statement of purpose reads, "ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We protest and demonstrate; we meet with government and public health officials; we research and distribute the latest medical information; we are not silent."

Targeting Wall Street allowed ACT UP to highlight one of the most pressing needs of those living with AIDS in the late 1980s--effective and affordable drug treatment. Because of FDA policies, Burroughs Wellcome was the only company that made and sold AZT. The high cost of the drug--anywhere from \$10,000 to \$13,000 a year for one patient--and the belief that it was the only treatment option available prompted New York City activists to target this monopoly.

According to writer Larry Kramer, one of the early organizers of ACT UP, the action was a monumental success and attracted national media attention. He commented, "some 250 men and women tied up traffic for several hours and passed out tens of thousands of fact sheets about the FDA horror show . . . It was a wonderful beginning."

Attempts to Energize and Transform Institutional Responses to the Epidemic

By all accounts, ACT UP's first action was successful. It served to inspire veteran and novice activists in their efforts to attract more attention to the disease and agitate for increased research and more effective treatments. Other actions soon followed, and during the next year, New York ACT UP held more than a dozen demonstrations, and chapters quickly spread to other American and European cities.

Many ACT UP members had been involved with earlier social protest movements, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Members of ACT UP adapted the radical principles of these movements, including direct action, civil disobedience, and a commitment to democratic process within the organization, to their work in AIDS activism. They hoped to transform and energize the non-profit service organizations that had developed in the first few years of the epidemic, which many activists believed to have become complacent.

The problems associated with the Gay Men's Health Crisis in the early years of the epidemic illustrates the tensions within the gay community about how best to respond to AIDS. Founded by many of the community leaders who would eventually launch ACT UP--Larry Kramer among them--GMHC began providing services to people struggling with AIDS in 1982.

Yet, according to Kramer, it failed to live up to its political potential and had become co-opted by the political establishment. Frustrated with GMHC's social-service orientation and its involvement with slow moving governmental bureaucracies, he and others organized ACT UP to demand a more rapid response to the epidemic. In large part, they succeeded.

Confrontation and Negotiation

Although ACT UP is best known for its audacious direct-action tactics, including telephone and fax zaps, as well as marches, rallies, and "die-ins," it also achieved considerable success by meeting directly with governmental agencies and corporations. As Nancy Stoller notes, one of ACT UP's strengths was its expertise in negotiating "with leaders in government and the health fields using sophisticated technical analysis."

Steven Epstein has carefully documented how ACT UP's activities improved biomedical research practices and expedited the processes by which drugs were tested and approved for AIDS treatment. These successes undeniably improved the lives of people living with AIDS and empowered them to advocate for themselves in a political environment that had largely ignored them.

Problems and Limitations

In spite of the tremendous successes ACT UP achieved in the late 1980s, it could not attend comprehensively to the needs of the entire AIDS community. In many ways, the strengths of its initial organizers also reflected serious weaknesses as they tried to build a more inclusive organization and movement.

The tendency of some ACT UP leaders, especially Kramer, to hector other gay men over relatively minor disagreements proved in many cases counter-productive. It alienated people who were eager to help in the AIDS crisis.

Moreover, the organization's portrayal in the mass media as an extremist organization, led by hysterical and unreasonable zealots, caused many sympathetic individuals, both gay and straight, not to take ACT UP seriously.

In addition, ACT UP's original membership was predominantly white gay men who were well-educated and largely middle class. As much as their social position allowed them both to work with and against government agencies and non-profit organizations, their tactics and the assumptions they brought to their work often did not speak to and sometimes alienated women and people of color, straight and gay.

The original members' inability to understand fully the way their privileged status as white and male affected their experience of AIDS prevented them from working effectively with other minority groups.

Yet women and people of color--lesbian, gay, and straight--were actively involved with the organization from its inception. For instance, women in ACT UP created venues within the organization to focus more attention on women's issues and AIDS. They also worked with other activists to pressure the Center for Disease Control to recognize that women were at risk for contracting HIV and developing AIDS. Their activities prompted the CDC to include diseases specific to women on the list of AIDS-defining illnesses, so that women could qualify for appropriate treatment and access to drug trials.

Artistic and Cultural Legacy

One of ACT UP's enduring cultural legacies is its creativity, not only in its direct-action innovations, but in its use of art as a tool of AIDS activism. Gran Fury, an artists' collective, was formed in 1988 as the propaganda office of ACT UP. Named after the brand of automobile used by the New York City police department at the time, Gran Fury sought to provoke a political response from the general public, using the techniques of commercial advertising, but directing them toward political ends.

Their graphics disseminated statistics about the epidemic, such as the news that "One In 61 Babies Born In New York Is HIV Positive," offered advice about condoms, and attacked the Roman Catholic Church for its anti-safe-sex rhetoric.

Another graphic associated with ACT UP is its most visible slogan, SILENCE=DEATH, created by six anonymous gay men in 1986, before ACT UP was organized. Originally appearing in white letters on a black background with a single pink triangle pointing up, the slogan alludes to the badge imposed on homosexuals in the Nazi concentration camps; but by inverting the triangle to point upward, it not only reclaims a symbol of oppression as a symbol of pride, but it also transforms it into a symbol of hope and resistance. The SILENCE=DEATH graphic has been appropriated by many other AIDS activists and organizations.

Decline

Since 1992, ACT UP has declined as a significant political force. Many factors have contributed to this decline, including the election of a sympathetic President in Bill Clinton in 1992; the deaths and burn-out of many of the original leaders of ACT UP; and the success of drug treatments, which have made the AIDS epidemic in the United States and Europe seem less urgent than it did in the 1980s.

Another factor in its decline is that the organization succeeded in making the country more responsive to the seriousness of AIDS and the needs of People With AIDS. Many of the people who were on the barricades with ACT UP now are employed by AIDS service organizations, which have expanded throughout the country.

Moreover, as AIDS has become a more mainstream disease, it has been embraced by the mainstream medical community, and the direct action tactics of ACT UP have come to seem unnecessary.

Conclusion

ACT UP's critics have made compelling cases that its decentralized authority, chaotic processes, and predominant identification with white gay male culture limited its successes to some degree.

Nevertheless, these same critics agree that its political accomplishments were considerable and that it brought innovation and flexibility to AIDS activism. As Nancy Stoller concludes, "Despite its limitations . . . ACT UP is the most significant direct-action organization to emerge from the epidemic."

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