

# Meet the Yes Men, the Political Satirists Who Punked GE

*By Tina Dupuy*

*A conversation with the more than decade old group that delights in mocking the powerful by pretending to be them*



General Electric likes their tax rate low, [according to CEO Jeffrey Immelt](#). Very low. Despite \$5 billion in profit last year the company paid no income tax and received a \$3.2 billion tax benefit, according to [The New York Times](#). Which is less than low: It's taxpayer padded.

Then Immelt was tapped to be an outside economic adviser to the Obama administration, which has been decrying low tax rates for companies and the rich.

Very embarrassing.

So last week, when [USA Today](#) reported the company will give back the tax benefit due to public outcry, it seemed credible. The paper wrote: "Facing criticism over the amount of taxes it pays, General Electric announced it will repay its entire \$3.2 billion tax refund to the U.S. Treasury on April 18.... The company earned \$11 billion in 2010 on revenue of \$150 billion. The company, based in Fairfield, Connecticut, plans to phase out the tax havens over five years and said it will create one job in the US for each new job it creates overseas."

Only it wasn't GE that said it was giving the money back, phasing out tax havens and recommitting to creating jobs in the U.S. No, a real GE spokesperson came out and announced that that was ridiculous nonsense -- a hoax. Nor was GE going to "adopt a host of new policies that secure its position as a

leader in corporate social responsibility" or give its \$3.2 billion tax benefit back to the Treasury. "GE did not receive a refund," said spokeswoman Deirdre Latour.

GE, whose tagline is "Imagination at Work," had been spoofed by activists from [U.S. Uncut](#) and [the Yes Men](#). The group forced the multinational corporation to come out and quell investors' fears it was giving back money received via tax loopholes from the U.S. government.

The villain gets tricked into a public confession by his enemy?! This would be written off as a stock schmaltzy ending for a movie. The flippant feel good conclusion before the credits roll. This is a well-worn device for lazy screenwriters -- but the Yes Men have been doing it in real life for nearly two decades.

"It's comedy with a goal to get people to do something. To act," Yes Men co-founder "Andy Bichlbaum," who says his real name is the fake-sounding Jacques Servin, tells *The Atlantic* in an interview.

Do the group's members call themselves comedians? "I do sometimes when the police are involved," confesses fellow co-founder "Mike Bonnano," who gives his real name as the equally fake-sounding Igor Vamos.

"We create a joke in order to enable reporters to write about it," says Servin. "We make important things funny."

When pressed, the two men, whose day jobs are as college professors, say they feel they're activists at heart. That what they do is about having a voice. They see themselves first and foremost as citizens of a failing democracy -- and GE was a perfect example of why. The company, Servin points out, hides its profits, took bailout money and then didn't pay taxes. "Americans don't want that," he said. The Yes Men hoax illuminated the matter.

The Yes Men, who were founded roughly around 1996, are the old salts of the spoof. Most of their stunts involve months of planning -- then last maybe 30 minutes before they're found out to be a spoof. In 2008, the group printed 80,000 copies of a fake *New York Times* with the headline, "The Iraq War Ends." It cost them around \$13,000 for the stunt. It was quickly exposed as a mockup, but still allowed reporters to write about the subject.

They have an extraordinary record of successful hoaxes, a couple of films under their belts, a few cease and desist orders and only one lawsuit to speak of. In 2009, the Chamber of Commerce filed a civil complaint "to protect its trademarks and other intellectual property from unlawful use by the 'Yes Men' and others in furtherance of their various commercial enterprises." "The 'Yes Men' and their associates misappropriated the Chamber's logo and other protected marks; created a fraudulent Web site that was an exact replica of and linked to the Chamber's actual site; and falsely claimed to be speaking as the Chamber under the Chamber's copyright," the pro-business group alleged.

Their so-called crime? The Yes Men had held a fake press conference and said the Chamber was changing its environmental policy. A judge has yet to throw the case out.

As with the Chamber stunt, the GE hit involved a website. The Yes Men credit US Uncut's Justin Wedes and Carl Gibson with the success of the GE prank, which teetered on securing a website (GENewsCenters.com) which could be -- and was -- mistaken for the company's real site

GENewsCenter.com.

Now because we're wedged into a false notion that the right and the left are opposite equals, the question must be asked: Isn't this just like what James O'Keefe did to ACORN? Or like what Andrew Breitbart so bravely [threatened to do to teachers](#) this week on Hannity?

Isn't deception coupled with a political agenda resulting in a public spectacle what both sides now engage in? Culture jamming used to just be the domain of the left. Isn't O'Keefe the Yes Men of the right?

That's not how they see it. "Attacking the weak? There's no tradition of honor in that," says Vamos. "The thing that analogy ignores is power." O'Keefe's unscrupulous crusade against a nonprofit that assisted the disenfranchised wasn't comedy. Just like a cool kid pantsing a wimp in gym class to make others laugh isn't a performance artist -- he's just a bully.

Seeing the downtrodden duped isn't comedy, activism, or journalism: Its conveniently edited cruelty, the Yes Men say.

"They [O'Keefe and Breitbart] created a lie," says Servin. "A lie they feel entitled to commit because they know what's best for society. What they do is what the PR industry does -- they create fake stories."

He adds, "We create a fake story to expose the truth."

Indeed the rash of hidden camera stings by O'Keefe and those he's inspired, like the one against Planned Parenthood, are not only are racially-tinged and sexually titillating (i.e. involving characters who are Muslims, people of color or hookers) -- they re-enforce rightwing conspiracies and fears. The O'Keefe NPR sting, for example, showed an NPR employee -- gasp -- having lunch with two wannabe donors who claim they're funded by the -- gasp -- Muslim Brotherhood who want Sharia law to replace US law.

"Yeah, radically different in every way," remarks Servin on the comparison.

In contrast, the disgraced O'Keefe, thinks of himself as like the Yes Men. He told *Playboy* in an interview, "I want to make society more transparent and ethical."

And that's the key difference: The Yes Men take on power while opposed to O'Keefe takes on power's victims.

You could say the Yes Men are the George Carlin of political theater. Meaning: You watch what they do with deference simply because there's no one else who can do what they do a) as well as they do it b) as successfully and c) for as long.

They do not see it that way. They seem to believe anyone can do what they do. Which is the blind spot of the uber-talented: Of course you can do this too! Their new project is "Yes Men Labs," where others can create a Yes Men type of hoax. "The Yes Lab is a series of brainstorming and trainings to help activist groups carry out Yes-Men-style projects on their own," reads their site. A franchise? "It's more like a school," says Vamos.

The Yes Men say they get at least one request a day asking them to "do something about this or that topic." It's at the point where it's simply impossible for them to do all of them.

They can't -- so now they teach.

*Image credit: Mario Anzuoni (Reuters)*

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/04/meet-the-yes-men-the-political-satirists-who-punked-ge/237642/>

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