

# PRINCIPLE

## MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Many injustices (and toxins!) are invisible due to distance, ideology, or simple chemistry. If you can't see it, you can't change it. So, the first task of an activist is often to make the invisible visible.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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**"IF YOU CAN'T SEE IT, YOU CAN'T CHANGE IT, SO THE FIRST TASK OF AN ACTIVIST IS OFTEN TO MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE."**

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"We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive."

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

Social problems are often obscured by *distance*, *ideology*, or *simple chemistry* (when was the last time you noticed PCBs in your drinking water?). If you can't see it, you can't change it, so the first task of an activist is often to make the invisible visible.

There are several kinds of "invisibility." Which one you're dealing with will shape the approach you take.

#### Distance

Climate chaos might be stranding polar bears in the Arctic or submerging small island nations in the Pacific, but for most people in the global north it's out of sight, out of mind. Countless artful interventions have sought to make accelerating climate changes more visible, whether by painting anticipated future sea levels on city streets and buildings or mock-drowning a polar bear in the fountain outside the Department of the Interior in D.C., as Greenpeace did in 2009.

People with privilege often have the luxury of putting distance between themselves and the consequences of their actions. When tackling an issue that seems distant, it helps to bring the issue home by highlighting the human cost.

#### Ideology

People who have the luxury of not seeing an uncomfortable truth often simply won't, even if it's in front of their faces. Privileged

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Bicycle rally for peace
- Billionaires for Bush
- Boxing Gender Oppression
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Burmese Students' Long March
- Conflict Kitchen
- Countering Homophobic Policing
- Couple in the Cage
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- Every Heartbeat Counts
- #GambiaHasDecided
- Maraiwatsede: the land belongs to the Xavante
- Mining the Museum
- Miniskirt March
- Modern-Day Slavery Museum
- Pedestrian death puppets
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Replacing Cops with Mimes
- Round Dance Revolution
- Schools of Struggle
- Sign Language Sit-in

whites easily ignored the everyday injustices inflicted during the Jim Crow era until blacks organized and took action, sitting in the “wrong” seats in diners and on buses, marching in the streets, and so on.

Injustices made invisible by ideology can be brought to light by judicious reframing (see: PRINCIPLE: Reframe the issue). A frame defines what is part of the story and, more importantly, what is not. Actions that target the point of assumption (the simple question of who can sit where on a bus, for instance) can focus attention on what was previously “outside the frame.”

### **Chemistry, and other easily overlooked facts of life**

Many pollutants cannot be seen by the naked eye, yet cause great harm. The key is to bring that harm into public view. Consider the makers of the movie *Gasland*, who lit some Pennsylvania tap water on fire, powerfully refuting years of industry denial with a single powerful visual demonstration. Or the forest activists who filled several city intersections with the stumps of cut-down trees. When Kodak was caught discharging toxins from its manufacturing plant in upstate New York, Greenpeace created a public fountain that brought the effluent from the pipe — normally out of site below the water surface — cascading into public view. These kind of actions are particularly effective when the corporation has worked hard to hide or deny the damage, or simply done it far away from consumers.

The role of the activist often resembles that of the child in the Hans Christian Andersen story: Even if everyone knows the emperor has no clothes, saying as much in public can have revolutionary consequences. Exposing previously hidden problems can be the first and most important step in resolving them.

*Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.*

### **LEARN MORE**

Making the Invisible Visible

Amnesty International

<http://www.thedailydogooder.com/2012/01/24/daily-dogooder-making-the-invisible-visible/>

- Stolen Beauty
- Stop Praver Plan
- Street Graduation
- Streets Into Gardens
- Taco Bell Boycott
- The Salt March
- Trail of Dreams
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?
- Yellow Pigs in Parliament
- Yomango
- #YouStink
- Zapatista Caravan

### **Tactics**

- App flooding
- Creative petition delivery
- Culture jamming
- Eviction blockade
- Guerrilla projection
- Identity correction
- Invisible theatre
- Jail solidarity
- Public filibuster
- Reverse graffiti
- Subversive travel
- Trek

### **Principles**

- Balance art and message
- Bring the issue home
- Challenge patriarchy as you organize
- Change a name to change the game
- Do the media’s work for them
- Give voice to those that can’t speak
- Know your cultural terrain
- Reframe the issue
- Show, don’t tell
- Think narratively
- Turn the tables
- Use others’ prejudices against them

### **Theories**

- Abolition
- Action logic
- Alienation effect

- Anti-oppression
- Artivism
- Commodity fetishism
- Critical multiculturalism
- Cultural hegemony
- Ethical spectacle
- Feminism
- Framing
- Glitch feminism
- Neoliberalism
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- Prefigurative politics

### **Methodologies**

- Battle of the story
- Hardship to grievance
- Points of intervention
- Story of self, us, and now

### **TAGS**

Action design, Campaign strategy, Communications