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Nobody was dirty: Cultural exhibitions as societal transition tools

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abstract

This brief article shares a social transition attempt where a cultural exhibition was used to question the resources consumed in the name of cleanliness. Thirty-two pairs of unwashed jeans were installed at the National Gallery of Victoria with the aim of making people more aware of the hyper-clean social standards reproduced in everyday life, that consume energy, water and chemicals. This short speculative piece aims to contribute to the Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions dialogue by conceptualising cultural interventions, like exhibitions, as a societal transition tool, and providing empirical data on one cultural exhibition's attempt to shift cleanliness practices away from resource intensity.

This note reports an attempt to use an exhibition to contribute to a social transition. I performed an intervention into laundry practices of a group with the aim of saving water and energy. This involved thirty-one participants who were asked to wear the same pair of jeans five days a week for three months without using water, energy and chemicals to wash them. By discussing the participants' experience, their self-awareness and the way that they were able to reflect on their cleanliness expectations and practices, I concluded that not washing jeans does not lead to socially challenging personal hygiene. This suggests potential for interrupting current collective cleanliness conventions, the routines that they permit and the consumption concealed therein in order to save our diminishing environmental resources. I injected this idea into mainstream society with an exhibition, or cultural intervention, that explored ways that cultural paradigms could be called into question and how, if possible, they could be redefined. Although an exhibition is an imprecise strategy of public engagement and its outcomes are hard to determine, some insights about eliciting awareness and questioning cultural conventions that contribute to environmental pressure can be drawn from this study. This body of work is not yet at a stage to formulate broad generalisations around societal transitions, but does present some practical observations about using a modest cultural intervention in an attempt to shift a social convention.

A cultural event was staged in Melbourne with the aim of decreasing macro level cleanliness expectations in order to save laundry resources. An olfactory exhibition consisting of thirty-two pairs of jeans that were worn for three months without washing (see Fig. 1 for images), and an introductory didactic, were installed in the National Gallery of Victoria, and a press release was circulated to engage the media (newspapers, radio, blogs, television) with ideas around washing less. The message in the press release and exhibition didactic was that laundering frequently is not only unnecessary for physical health but also detrimental to the environment.

This provocative exhibition questioning the role of cleanliness in a resource scarce world, attracted media interest and was reported in several local, national and international newspapers, blogs, and current affairs television and radio programmes. This was an unexpectedly wide scale response given the small scale of the study. During the media attention the story was run by publications in Australia, the UK, India, Vietnam, Hungary, Sweden and others. Some articles collected up to one hundred comments, and I received numerous emails from people who wanted to share their jeans washing practices, and ideas about cleanliness. There was even a poll on one of the sites that asked readers "Would you wear unwashed jeans for three months?" that received over 4000 responses (a third said yes). This response to the research provides an interesting vantage from which to consider the relationship between societal transitions, individuals and media. Media could be seen as a leverage point in shifting collective conventions, even though it is unclear how the message portrayed, the volume, quality and credibility of communication and the way that people receive media messages affects attitudes. Furthermore, immediate shifts in cleanliness perceptions are almost impossible to measure, let alone the endurance of any societal transition away from resource intensity. Even though this one idea about washing less created such varied and widespread attention, including deep engagement by some individuals, the collective conventions of cleanliness evidently have not undergone a societal transition to the extent needed to enable less laundry with significant environmental benefits.



Fig. 1. Images from the exhibition.

The emailed correspondence, web comments and comments from exhibition visitors provides fertile material to reflect on. These responses from the public sphere showed that some observers rationally reflected on the ideas of over-laundering and associated resource consumption, and noticeably changed their practices. I have never given any thought to simply washing less. Sometimes clothes are thrown in the washer simply because it's that time of the week. These early adopters, or carriers of alternative practices, could be conceptualised as beacons from which environmental innovations disseminate. As this cultural intervention demonstrated, raising awareness in a few individuals can have wider social implications, adding or halting momentum for societal transitions. It is not yet clear the extent to which exhibitions can aid in disseminating environmental innovations to large populations, at least to the extent required for significant quantities of resources to be saved. Mindful engagement of individuals and social transitions are not dichotomous: interventions mindfully engage early adopters, and then alternative practices are normalised through interpretation, application and reproduction, to become the new accepted social conventions. Momentum for new conventions is built through repetition, observing others in society performing routines and imitating these. Thus, constructing and communicating alternative discourses through cultural interventions, like exhibitions, may be helpful in societal transitions for environmental innovation.

Societal transitions do not just happen, they require individuals within practices to challenge conventions, provide alternatives, and communicate and share them: the active engagement of at least a few. Media may play a supporting and catalytic role in the uptake of pro-environmental ways of doing, and at the very least commands further scrutiny on its transitional potential. The outcomes of this one particular study suggest that mindful engagement of individuals and societal transitions are simultaneous and interactive. Thus, in promoting sustainable conventions focus must not only be directed to meta aspects of a societal transition but also to the social individual. Cultural interventions like exhibitions could prove to be a useful tool in stimulating both individuals and societies towards sustainability.

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