

Defaced election posters: Between culture jamming and moral outrage. A case study

Axel Philipps (Leibniz University of Hannover)

Hagen Schölzel (University of Erfurt)

Ralph Richter (Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space)

Abstract

Election campaigners draw upon posters to represent political parties and candidates in the streets. To date, scholars have largely focused on the strategies of campaigners. This paper initially explores the ways and means of defacement by studying modified election posters in the city of Leipzig in the weeks preceding the 2013 German federal election. The results show that a large number of observed modifications are simple and obvious, while only some defacements show subtle forms of political communication. It is argued, therefore, that defacements as alternative means of political communication are of limited significance in a rather pluralistic society.

Keywords: election, election poster, defacement, culture jamming, alternative communication, visual protest, case study

Introduction

Posters are a vital part of election campaigns. They represent candidates at their best and disseminate key statements of their manifestos in the public domain (Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2011; Dumitrescu, 2010, 2012). The defacement of election posters, of course, complicates such political self-presentation and thus is often understood as vandalism or a politically motivated crime¹. However, consulting the internet and other sources discloses a great variety of modifications from nationalistic to sexist to parody (Cammaerts, 2007; Dumitrescu, in press; Philipps, 2015). It raises questions about the extent to which defaced election posters transform the meaning of a poster and whether they merely destroy it. In this context, we ask how often modified posters occur, and what types of defacement are employed during an election campaign.

Based on research on graffiti and street art, our study of defacement is guided by the suggestion that beyond signs of vandalism, a close examination might expose a meaningful world. Apart from the “broken windows” theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) that conceptualizes graffiti as an indicator for the loss of control and order in urban districts, ethnographic fieldwork reveals a rich youth culture with its own modes of action,

conventions and ideas (Castleman, 1984; Ferrell, 1993; Macdonald, 2002; Snyder, 2009). Despite this, studies on modified election posters assume a link between such practices and rather artistic or professional interventions inspired by the Situationists movement and political culture jammers (Cammaerts, 2007; Philipps, 2015; Schölzel, 2013; Teune, 2008). As a mode of political action, one could argue with Chaffee (1993) that like political street art, defacement is an alternative communication medium.

This paper systematically explores the scope, variation and types of defaced election posters in the German city of Leipzig during the lead up to the federal election of September 2013. In short, it examines characteristic defacements of election posters. In contrast to changes over time (Dumitrescu, in press) this case study concentrates on the range and features of defacements in the examined area. It provides initial findings in order to discuss the presence and variations of defacements during an election campaign.

The paper provides, firstly, an overview of literature on defacement and connects it with investigations on election campaigns and the usage of election posters as well as with writings on political culture jamming as resistance and alternative mass communication. The second part describes the research design chosen to observe defacements in the field. The third part offers background information about the 2013 German federal election and the city of Leipzig where the fieldwork was carried out. Following that, the fourth section describes the range and characteristics of defacements evident in the examined area. The final part discusses the results of the study which have led us to an understanding of defacement that lies, on the one hand, somewhere between subtle and obvious forms of alternative communication and, on the other, between culture jamming and moral outrage.

State of research and analytical concepts

Most research regarding election posters focuses on objectives and strategic considerations on behalf of election campaigners (Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2011; Dumitrescu, 2010, 2012). Furthermore, special focus is put on visual communication in election campaigns (Müller, 1997) and the ways political parties visually represent their candidates through election posters. Various studies confirm that major parties demonstrate their power through pictorial presence whereas smaller political parties tend to communicate content and ideology (Deželau & Maksuti, 2012; Dumitrescu, 2010; Vliegthart, 2012). Stephanie Geise and Frank Brettschneider (2010), in contrast, employ eye-tracking methods showing that pictorial elements in election posters increase the chance of attracting the attention of the viewers.

Janine Dermody and Richard Scullion (2003), furthermore, confirm that in 2001 first-time voters in Great Britain paid more attention to posters than newspaper advertisements. While such studies examine the potentials of election posters they rarely address the limits.

Posters are communication devices for election campaigners, as well as for marginal groups, to publicly portray representations and to express certain ideas. Nonetheless, each group uses election posters in different ways—predominantly either strategic or tactical—and it can be argued that defacements are tactical interventions that undermine election campaigners' strategic operations. Only a few scholars (Cammaerts, 2007; Dumitrescu, in press; Philipps, 2015) offer initial analytical approaches to examining how people (voters) make use of election posters that feature modifications and defacements. They describe such modifications as a tactical ploy within the layout of a poster. Designs are imitated and contents are changed, producing obtrusive or opposite meanings. However, defacement is understood as a tactical intervention that depends upon the grasping of opportunities since they are visible only as long as they are not replaced by new posters. Posters are far more ephemeral than many other forms of communication.

The difference between strategy and tactics in symbolic conflicts may be captured with a distinction made by de Certeau (1984). He defines these practices as follows:

I call a “strategy” the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment”. A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, “clienteles”, “targets”, or “objects” of research). [...] I call a “tactic”, on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a “proper” (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the others (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix).

De Certeau writes about power imbalances in the consumer society. He argues that in contemporary society marginality is universal and minority groups (like consumers) operate in a distinctive manner when “*poaching* in countless ways on the property of others” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xii). This practice “does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (de Certeau, 1984, pp. xii-xiii).

De Certeau's distinction can be applied to describe the different models of action in an election campaign as well as other modes of symbolic conflicts (de Certeau, 1984, p. xx; Nothhaft & Schölzel, 2015). Election campaigns are typical forms of strategic communication. Campaigners develop communication processes for long periods by defining

strategic communication purposes, milestones and budget plans. The implementation rests at least partly on the resources available. Campaigners intend to promote political parties and candidates to the public and in order to do so they control when and where election posters are distributed and displayed (Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2011; Dumitrescu, 2010, 2012). In contrast, tactical communications with posters mostly appear as isolated interventions which are related to certain pre-existing circumstances.

In contrast to de Certeau's understanding, the defacement of election posters is more than a tactical intervention in everyday life. Activists use this within the public realm, but outside the dominant modes of making sense, in order to challenge public consciousness. Axel Philipps (2015) argues, with Lyman Chaffee (1993), that defacement, in particular, gives expression to groups who have limited access to the mainstream media. Defacement is, in addition, "partisan" (Chaffee 1993, p. 8) in the way that the perpetrators make no attempt to be neutral or to weigh the facts. They are also "nonmonopolistic and democratic. Since they are cost-effective and often require little expertise, they are accessible to all, regardless of ideological perspectives" (Philipps, 2015, p. 195). Moreover, such alternative communication devices seem to be helpful in understanding lines of conflict because "these expressions offer a snapshot or historical summary of the social and political struggles of the moment" (Chaffee, 1993, p. 25). However, researchers rarely investigate the forms and function of such contentious practices in Western liberal democracies. Far more common are studies of the practice in repressive regimes (Chaffee, 1993; Johnston, 2006).

In order to understand defacement as symbolic intervention, one may also refer to different developments in symbolic protest and counterculture, especially since the first half of the 20th century (Home, 1991; Marcus, 2001). Literature on symbolic protest and counterculture often refers to artistic avant-gardes. Relevant movements include Dadaism, active from 1916 until the early 1920s, the Surrealism of the 1920s and 30s and the 1960s' Situationist International, and also contemporary artistic interventions (Holmes, 2008). The historical groups reflected on the relationships of subjects and symbolic orders, they developed techniques of exploring public space and initiating accidental processes and they worked out more or less detailed philosophies of protest (Schölzel, 2013). Today, the most prominent technique or concept developed by a historical avant-garde movement is the so-called *détournement* of the Situationists (Debord & Wolman, 2006), which may be understood as "a diversion, a detour, a seduction, a plagiarism, an appropriation, [or] even perhaps a hijacking" (Wark, 2009, p. 145).

In addition to artistic movements, diverse youth movements, such as the so-called Beat Generation of the 1950s, with its cut-up-techniques in literature (a variant of the Dada collage and montage techniques), or the Punk movement of the 1970s and 80s with its culture of “do it yourself” (DIY), including a wide range of techniques of modifying, repairing and creating things like clothing or self-publishing, designing etc., also count as relevant sources of symbolic protest. Like graffiti or street art, they are still relevant in everyday life.

One prominent contemporary mode of protest focusing on posters and billboards is the so-called adbusters or culture jamming movement established in the early 1980s (Lasn, 2000). Culture jamming— also known as “subvertising”—includes forms of defacement, parody, satire, and appropriation that are carried out in order to change the content of an advertising message, using the same methods and techniques as the advertising industry itself. The activists intend to “jam” and confront consumer capitalism’s “image factory” (Lasn, 2000, p. xvi) by replacing it with a non-commercial culture. While culture jamming usually involves sophisticated and symbolic interventions directed against pre-existing advertisements, since the 1990s it has been inspired by critical globalisation movements to turn toward everyday practices. Anti-globalisation activists are also active in the field of symbolic conflict. *Reclaim the streets*, for example, serves as a slogan for such groups that protest against the use of public space for commercial or political purposes. This also involves the transformation of advertising space for new objectives. The most influential analysis of these developments was advanced by Canadian scholar Naomi Klein in her book *No Logo* (2000).

In a nutshell, a wide range of historical references—from everyday, accidental practices to highly considered vanguard interventions—influence today’s protest culture in the fields of public communication and symbolic politics. Researchers have employed the concept of *détournement* to describe practices and developments in a plethora of fields. These include, for example, culture criticism (Vicas, 1998), consumer criticism (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009), pedagogical praxis (Trier, 2004), and a wide range of web-based practices from artistic projects to hacking (Elias, 2010). It has also served for understanding struggles between street artists and graffiti writers, on the one hand, and local authorities and commerce on the other (McGaw, 2008). The concept of *détournement* has furthermore been related to de Certeau’s reflections on strategy and tactics (Dosse, 2002). Since the middle of the 20th century, a significant part of protest culture in Western societies has placed emphasis on the symbolic aspect of public life rather than concentrating on matters of distribution of material goods. However, most of the artistic, playful or destructive symbolic practices developed by

protest culture were also re-integrated into strategies of creative advertising, for example, in the form of so-called guerrilla marketing (Levinson & Levinson, 2011). This is also true, as Bart Cammaerts (2007) argues, for political jams by well-established political actors. Nonetheless, this dynamic is captured by the Situationists' conceptual framework. While *détournement* means an attempt at criticism and liberation, they also use the term *récupération* to describe a counter-movement that appropriates ideas and images and defuses their critical power by re-absorbing them into the mainstream (McGaw, 2008; Wark, 2008).

Most of the historical and contemporary developments mentioned first occurred as rather marginal incidents and gained influence only by triggering new conventions over time. In retrospect, they therefore appear more important than they were when they first saw the light of day. Many other forms of protest were probably simply forgotten because art historians or social scientists never considered them seriously. In response to this apparent failure, this paper presents research investigating one case of symbolic conflict by shedding light on the whole spectrum of defaced posters by examining their quantitative significance and meaning.

Data and methods

Research on election posters so far has focused on strategic usage, content and visual representation. Only a few studies have investigated tactical appropriations of election posters (Cammaerts, 2007; Dumitrescu, in press; Philipps, 2015). This paper strives to address this gap by investigating defaced election posters on the streets of Leipzig.

Depending on the presented concept that best describes the function of those modifications, one sort of defacement or another may dominate the field of investigation. If, for instance, its main function is to disseminate alternative communication, political messages written over original messages may dominate. In other cases, subtle changes or physical destruction may prevail. However, the research interest demands a systematic documentation and categorization of defaced election posters according to their various forms, meanings and their scope. To do this, the case study combines a quantitative content analysis with in-depth interpretations of exemplary defacements.

Using the knowledge and experiences from a previous investigation, election posters and defacements were documented in the two weeks preceding the German federal election of 22 September 2013.

Leipzig is a typical substantial sized city in Germany, with about 550,000 residents. In order to avoid biases regarding the intensity and forms of defacements, the investigation

covered five major streets in Leipzig, each passing through urban districts of varying social strata, voter participation and political preferences. Figure 1 shows how the northern, eastern, southern, western and central routes (around the city centre) overlap with districts of different voter turnouts (minimum 58.4%, maximum 78.7%).

Experienced researchers, trained in street reading (Philipps & Richter, 2012), walked through the streets and collected data on visible election posters. They documented various aspects:

- the number of posters related to different political parties
- the features of posters, such as size, positioning and layout, noting combinations of figurative and textual elements and evident defacements of all kinds.

Furthermore, the researchers recorded all defaced election posters with digital cameras. Such data offers insights into the range, characteristics and content of defacements.

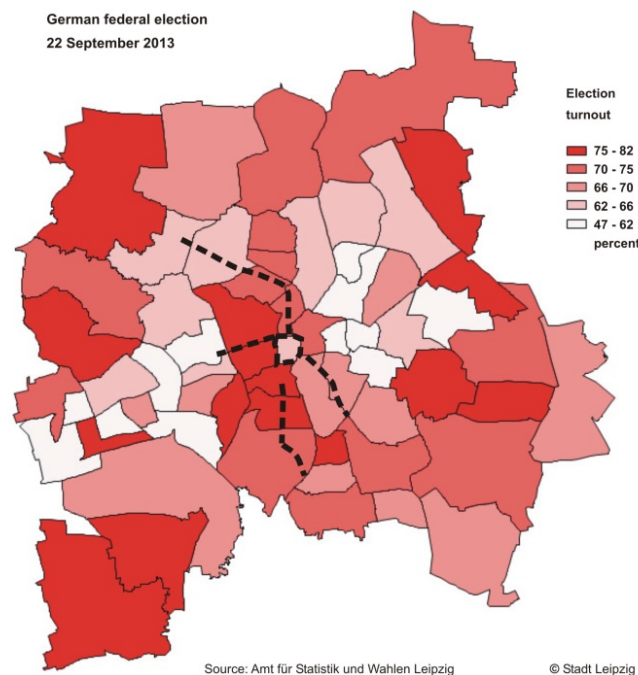


Fig. 1: Routes of investigation and the election turnout in the districts of Leipzig. Image courtesy of Stadt Leipzig.

A more detailed examination of the defacements, however, required a second, deeper analytical approach. On the basis of a quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002), photographs of all observed defacements were coded according to different aspects. The coding focused on contents and formal features of defacements such as different types of alteration (degree of destruction, supplements, subtle or overt defacement). The intercoder's reliability was measured using a random sample of ten per cent of all documented

defacements (n=24). The agreement was above 90% for all variables included. In a third step, exemplary cases of distinct types were interpreted in more depth.

Background to the German federal election 2013 in Leipzig

The German federal election in 2013 paved the way for the establishment of the constitution of the 18th German *Bundestag* (parliament). The German voting system is a combination of a first-past-the-post voting and a proportional representation system. One half of the members of the parliament are directly elected in 299 electoral districts; the second half is determined by party tickets from each of the sixteen federal states. Election posters, therefore, often depict local candidates as well as nationwide party leaders and programmatic declarations. In total, 38 political parties were entitled to participate in this election. They ranged from parties already represented in the 17th *Bundestag*, including the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU), the Christian-Social Union (CSU), the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Liberal-Democratic Party of Germany (FDP), the Greens/Alliance '90 (Greens) and The Left Party (Leftists). Besides these established political forces, long-term participants, such as the Animal Rights Party, and newcomers, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) or the Pirates' Party (Pirates), also competed for votes. The public presence of the political parties varied. The CDU's election campaign, for example, concentrated on visual representations of its leading figure, Angela Merkel, whereas the FDP fought against its anticipated loss of votes (e.g. with public statements condemning tax increases and the misuse of private data). The SPD, in contrast, pushed its candidate for chancellorship, Peer Steinbrück, and issued policy agendas that addressed issues such as fair salaries, guaranteed old-age pensions, or fair taxes. The Greens had to deal with a public debate about the positioning of the party in the early 1980s towards paedophilia²; the AfD made progress with populist statements and, due to internal conflicts, the Pirates were rarely present in the political arena.

The election campaigns of the political parties and candidates materialised in the form of advertisements, events and election posters in the city of Leipzig, as well as throughout Germany. Leading candidates of all relevant political parties made public appearances in Leipzig. The SPD celebrated one special event there on 23 May 2013: the 150th anniversary of its establishment. This was a significant event for the city because it is considered to be the historical location of the founding of the SPD in 1863. Aside from such public appearances and the SPD event, local partisans and candidates were also active.

Leipzig is a major city in the eastern part of Germany, about 200 kilometres south of the capital city Berlin. Its municipal area covers two of the 299 nationwide electoral districts.

Parties and candidates had varying budgets and placed varying quantities of posters in the streets of Leipzig.³ One of the SPD local candidates campaigned with a budget of 20,000 Euros and 3,000 posters. In contrast one of the CDU candidates started with a 10,000 Euros budget and more than 2,000 election posters. The two candidates of the Leftists were able to spend 20,000 Euros each and both placed 4,000 posters in their respective districts. The Greens spent 15,000 Euros and deployed 4,000 posters whereas the FDP fought with 15,000 Euros and 6,000 posters. The first election posters appeared on Saturday August 20 and were constantly replaced and renewed until election-day, September 22.

In summary, political parties put up approximately 40,400 posters in Leipzig.⁴ With 1,744 documented election posters our sample represents 4.3% of these posters. Along the examined routes the Leftists were present with 316 posters (18.1% of all documented posters), the Greens with 292 (16.7%), the SPD with 274 (15.7%), AfD with 229 (13.1%), the FDP with 209 (12.0%), the Pirates with 161 (9.2%), the CDU with 117 (6.7%), the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) with 56 (3.2%) and other parties such as the German Marxist-Leninist Party with a total of 90 posters (5.2%) (see Table 1).

On the five routes of investigation party posters were distributed in different locations and in different quantities, depending on the individual party. While, for example, posters from parties from the left spectrum (Leftists, Greens, Pirates) were overwhelmingly present in the south of the city, while conservative and right-wing parties (FDP, AfD, CDU, NPD) dominated the northern sections. The uneven occurrence might be a result of expected voter potential that differ, more or less, between the districts.

Table 1: Presence of political parties' posters on different routes of investigation.

Route	Leftists	Pirates	Greens	SPD	FDP	CDU	AfD	NPD	Other	Summary
	Share and (number) of election posters per political party									
Northern	6 % (29)	4 % (23)	11 % (56)	18 % (94)	21 % (110)	6 % (34)	19 % (99)	11 % (56)	4 % (19)	100 % (520)
Eastern	18 % (39)	22 % (49)	22 % (49)	23 % (50)	2 % (3)	13 % (29)	0 % (0)	0 % (0)	0 % (0)	100 % (219)
Southern	39 % (148)	15 % (55)	35 % (131)	7 % (28)	0 % (0)	0 % (1)	2 % (6)	0 % (0)	2 % (9)	100 % (378)
Western	13 % (36)	11 % (30)	12 % (32)	17 % (46)	7 % (19)	9 % (25)	28 % (78)	0 % (0)	3 % (9)	100 % (275)
Central	18 % (64)	1 % (4)	7 % (24)	16 % (56)	22 % (77)	8 % (28)	13 % (46)	0 % (0)	15 % (53)	100 % (352)
Total	18 % (316)	9 % (161)	17 % (292)	16 % (274)	12 % (209)	7 % (117)	13 % (229)	3 % (56)	5 % (90)	100 % (1,744)

The total of 1,744 election posters included 1,684 small-size posters⁵ but only 60 large-size poster stands.⁶ Poster stands were mainly used by the CDU (n=31), SPD (n=12) and the Leftists (n=9) and concentrated in the inner city district. Differences between the more established “catch-all” parties and the smaller “(single) issue-based” parties are evident in posters with pictures (n=1,156), in contrast to the text-only posters (n=587). Catch-all parties such as the CDU and the SPD visually represented their candidates whereas smaller parties (such as FDP or AfD) mainly employed purely text-based posters. The same is true of the Leftists, who may count as a catch-all party in the eastern part of Germany but are a smaller party when it comes to nationwide elections. Mixed strategies were pursued by the Pirates and the Greens.

Results

This exploration registered 236 defaced election posters. This is a defacement quota of 13.5% (see Table 2).

Table 2: Number and share of defaced posters per political party.

Political party	Total no. of documented posters	Defaced posters
NPD	56	39 (69.6%)
Green Party	292	49 (16.8%)
Pirates	161	25 (15.5%)
CDU	117	18 (15.4%)
SPD	274	37 (13.5%)
Leftists	316	40 (12.7%)
FDP	209	20 (9.6%)
Others	90	4 (4.4%)
AfD	229	4 (1.7%)
Total	1,744	236 (13.5%)

While the share of damaged and modified posters for most of the political parties is between 1.7% (AfD) and 16.8% (Greens), one party stands out as the most frequently defaced. The far right-wing NPD experienced a defacement rate of 69.6% (39 out of 56 representations). Most of the NPD posters were painted over using the same technique of a planar multi-colour application (see Fig. 2). This suggests that there was a concerted attack—presumably by left-wing opponents—behind the defacements. The use of multiple colours might represent diversity, to symbolically confront what is seen to be the one-sided and simple worldview of the NPD and its supporters. Taking into account the tactical characteristic of the defacement, it is also plausible that the activists merely mixed all paint available, producing the multi-colour stains.



Fig. 2: Poster defaced with colourful expunctions.
Photo by Ralph Richter.

The characteristics of the defaced election posters also demand explanation. How can they be categorized? Altogether, we found five distinct forms of defacement (see Table 3). Firstly, we identified complete destruction by force (5%). This type is characterized by preventing any representation of election posters in public (for example, removing the poster completely). Partial destruction, in contrast, leaves marks that disrupt, but do not totally destroy, representation. With a 39% occurrence rate, partial destructions were the most common type of defacement. Other forms of modifications are expunctions with colour stains (18%), supplements such as stickers (20%) and added hand-written words and signs (17%). The category “Others” contains daubing with organic materials such as dirt and chewing gum. Almost half of all defacements result from destruction by force. Physical damage of election posters, however, cannot be related in any definitive way to a particular political message because the intention remains unclear. The targeted poster may be chosen for specific reasons or by chance. This is underlined by the fact that destruction of posters of all parties occurs, irrespective of their political message.

Table 3: Number and frequency of different types of defacements.

Type of defacement	Number	Frequency
Complete destruction	12	5.1%
Partial destruction	92	39.0%
Supplements (e.g. by fixing stickers)	47	19.9%
Expunctions with colours	43	18.2%
Adding words and signs	40	16.9%
Others	2	0.8%
Total	236	100%

Compared to destruction, other forms of defacement are more likely to convey alternative messages. To test this assumption, supplements such as stickers are investigated in more detail. Stickers with the anarchist symbol and the English phrase “Fight all governments. There’s no authority but yourself” (see Fig. 3), are documented most frequently (n=12). In five instances, stickers demanded *Wahlboykott* (election boycott) and four stickers call for *Antifa* (anti-fascist) action.



Fig. 3 Poster of the Greens, supplemented with a sticker showing an anarchist symbol and declaiming “Fight all governments”.

Photo by Edgar Blume. Image courtesy of Andreas Bachmann.

Furthermore, the study found a number of appropriations of posters for purposes other than contesting the election. In four examples, stickers or small posters appear on election posters to mobilise people for a “Save the Distillery” demonstration (Fig. 4). The demonstration was organised to protest against the closure of a subculture techno club in Leipzig, a local policy issue current at the time. Finally, there were many other single stickers advertising online shops or events.



Fig. 4 Poster for the Greens covered by various smaller posters. One announces a “Save the Distillery” demonstration. Photo by Edgar Blume. Image courtesy of Iska Kaek.

The stickers appear on the posters of different parties, and even on those posters of parties that support the political concerns spread by the messages of the stickers, as in the case of “Save the Distillery” and the Greens. In contrast, the “Fight all governments” and “election boycott” stickers refer to the original message insofar as they call for an obstruction of the global message of election posters, that is, the maintenance of the prevailing political order and the call for citizens to participate in elections. Interestingly enough, the fight governments and boycott stickers only appear on posters of left-wing parties (the Leftists, the SPD, the Greens and the Pirates). This seems to correspond with what appears to be the political tradition of radical leftist groups of looking for arguments with other left-wing groups and parties rather than with parties at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Another explanation for the coincidence between left parties and stickers that repudiate the

political system is the local asymmetric distribution of election posters. The FDP and the more conservative parties, such as the CDU and the AfD, and the extreme right-wing party NPD placed very few election posters on the routes where left-wing groups represent a large proportion of the local population. Finally, defacement that refers to the original message of an election poster is often characterised by added hand-written words and signs. Activists, for example, added the word SED in order to recall the past of the Leftists Party (see Fig. 5). The Leftists Party was established in 2007 merging the newly founded WASG (Election Alternative for Labour and Social Justice) and the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) the direct successor of the SED (The Socialist Unity Party of Germany) in the former communist East Germany.



Fig. 5 Handwritten comment on the historical roots of the Leftist party.
Photo by Ralph Richter. Image courtesy of DiG/TRIALON.

Such responses are not always as clear, as in the cases of the posters of the FDP or the Leftists. There were also hand-written but cryptic responses. In a series of added messages on posters of the Greens, for example, a writer replied to statements on changing the energy policy: The Greens slogan *Wir bringen neue Energie* (We bring new energy), an allusion to the party's policy in favour of renewable energy, was modified into *Wir bringen neue Atomenergie. Ich bring den Teufel!* (We bring new nuclear power. I bring the devil!, see Fig. 6). Focusing on nuclear energy, one could associate nuclear power with diabolically dangerous technology. However, the Greens are strictly against any new nuclear power

plants. By reversing the original message, the activist seems to question the credibility of the Greens, but since other interpretations are possible the intervention remains rather cryptic.



Fig. 6 Cryptic response to a Greens poster.
Photo by Axel Philipps. Image courtesy of Laurence Chaperon.

Focussing on the difference between subtle defacements, overt defacements and moral outrage (Philipps, 2015) we found that most appropriations merely undermined the representational function of the posters. There were only four instances of a clear reversal of meaning of the election posters achieved by copying the features of the original poster. Figure 7 shows a subtle but effective modification. Pictorial representations of the chancellor and CDU candidate, Angela Merkel, were untouched but the slogan of the original poster “*Kanzlerin für Deutschland*” (Chancellor for Germany) was transformed into “*Kanz für schland*” through the erasure of some letters using the same grey shade as the background of the poster. At first glance, the new wording would seem to be nonsense. While there is no entry for “*Kanz*” or “*schland*” in the German dictionary, “*schland*” came into use after it was coined in 2002 (during the FIFA World Cup in Japan and South Korea) by the TV entertainer Stefan Raab to describe the way Germans celebrated their soccer team. The term is still used in fan chants and represents a new national self-consciousness particularly evident in international soccer contests. The appropriated poster implicitly connects Angela Merkel with this specific national identity. Moreover, in reducing “*Kanzlerin*” to “*Kanz*” a further

understanding arises when connecting “Kanz” to the also phonetically similar word “kanns”, the third-person singular of “können”, which can be translated as to know how to do, or to master, something. The message therefore might also be read as “(she) knows how to govern in favour of” Germany or “schland”.



Fig. 7 Subtle modification of a CDU poster.
Photo by Ralph Richter. Image courtesy of the CDU.
Poster credit: Dominik Butzmann.

Overt defacements are more explicit and the meaning is usually clearer. Posters destroyed or crossed out, as well as add-ons such as scribbled moustaches, glasses or decayed teeth (Fig. 8) are direct reversals that have the effect of negating the representational function of the posters. In total, 219 overt modifications were found. They also include radical political messages conflicting not only with certain policies or discomforting situations, but also with basic principles of the political system. Such direct appropriations are evident with the anarchistic call to fight all governments or to boycott voting.



Fig. 8 Additions as a form of overt modification.
Photo by Axel Philipps. Image courtesy of REINSCLASSEN.

Moral outrage (n=13), in contrast, refers to disapproval of the content of the posters. Figure 9 shows an election poster of the Greens representing the federal leader and candidate Katrin Göring-Eckardt with the headline *Für Mut gegen Armut* (For courage against poverty). There are two different appropriations of this poster. In one the focus is on the black, narrow handwriting adding “*Harz 4*” and “*für*” (in favour) with the new meaning “*Harz 4 in favour of poverty*”. The added writing is small and easily overlooked, whereas the original poster is designed for passers-by to notice the message whether at a great distance or walking past. The modification seems to indicate a disinterest in potential spectators and in any substantial disturbance of the original message. Rather, it seems to be a direct contention with the message of the poster and the responsible political party. This intervention questions the ambitions of the Greens to lessen poverty. The *contra* message is turned into a *pro* message and “*Harz 4*” refers—even if written incorrectly—to the German so-called “*Hartz-IV*” labour market reform (named after the policy advisor Peter Hartz) that reduced the rates of payment for the long-term unemployed to a minimum subsistence level. The reform was part of various restructuring undertaken in the legislation of the SPD and the Greens between 1998 and 2005. Thus, the activist does not just equate the reform with poverty, he or she also accuses the Greens of being responsible for the reform and the resultant increase in levels of poverty.



Fig. 9 Moral outrage, expressed by overwriting and reversing the original message. Photo by Axel Philipps. Image courtesy of Jonas Unger.

Discussion and conclusion

Most research on election posters focuses on campaigns and strategies because the physical presence of election posters is still regarded as critical for influencing voter choices (Dermody & Scullion 2003; Dumitrescu, 2010, 2012; Vliegthart, 2012). At the same time, these posters are tactically appropriated and modified for differing purposes. The modes of actions show similarities with culture jamming and alternative ways of communicating political issues and problems. Most writings on culture jamming, however, suggest that defacements are creative and effective (Cammaerts, 2007; Lasn, 2000). They often present subtle and aesthetically appealing modifications and argue that such interventions open up the potential for change in everyday thoughts and actions. The findings of the case study that we have presented provide instances of all types of modifications. Nonetheless, there are only few subtle alterations and some overt defacements exhibiting moral outrage that highlight contentious topics such as online privacy, tax increases or the current benefit rate for long-term unemployed. The largest proportion of the examples investigated consists of overt defacements in the form of destruction and direct reversals of meaning. They have only one purpose and that is to destroy the meaning of the message. Such acts are still typical

détournements, but a “simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective”, as Guy Debord and Gil Woleman (2006) have already suggested. Since most observed defacements are destructive, rather than subtle or aesthetically appealing, stimulating reflection seems not to be the primary goal. This might indicate that scholars overestimate the potential of defacements regarding reflection and confusion because they concentrate on creative and subtle appropriations.

Scholars, furthermore, have emphasised the importance of provocative statements and artistic expressions with political content, such as graffiti and street art, as opportunities to disseminate alternative information and ideas and to mobilise dissenters in repressive regimes. Similar occurrences would be used to disseminate ideologies and propaganda in more open regimes (Chaffee, 1993; Johnston, 2006). In the rather pluralistic and relatively open political system of Germany it transpires that defacements primarily frustrate representations. Election posters are seldom appropriated and modified for alternative communication. It seems that the act of defacement has lost its potential to scandalise. Simon Teune (2008), especially, argues that defacements and other subversive practices were functional and effective in the 1960s and 70s when such direct actions were new and not so readily accepted.

In terms of political culture jamming, our findings support the differentiation made by Philipps (2015) between defacements as culture jams and defacements as moral outrage. There are also a few instances of the distinction made by Cammaerts (2007) between progressive and reactionary political jams. Observed defacements, however, are not just forms of progressive or reactionary protests. Rather, they reveal distinct modes of action. The appropriation of an election poster is tactical (de Certeau, 1984) but it is further argued that culture jams are a form of withdrawal from the dominant order in contrast to moral outrages that voice discontent with current circumstances. Subverting and negating the meaning of an election poster indicates a counter-hegemonic stand. For activists, the current situation is a negative “intuitive horizon” (Bohnsack, 2013). This definition of the situation guides their practical actions with the consequence of disrespecting and rejecting the representational function of the posters. They either (partly) destroy or reuse a poster to undermine its presence or to disseminate utopian and alternative ideas. Moral outrage, in contrast, documents an attitude to maintain the current political circumstances. Activists voice their discomfort and expect corrections, but no turnovers. Corresponding appropriations of posters serve to criticise and to question the contents of the posters but not to subvert or negate them.

However, the study on the streets of Leipzig was not conceived to be representative of Germany or of Western political systems in general. Since the two German electoral districts studied are characterised by distinct socio-spatial attributes (e.g. a specific electoral system and urban settlement structure) it is difficult to compare them with other kinds of areas. The frequency of renewing defaced posters and the scope of local protest activities, for example, may be distinct from rural election districts or from election districts in other countries. Despite this, the chosen setting is an example of how campaigning strategies and tactical interventions interrelate. While earlier investigations suggest the prevalence of subtle, ironic and subversive defacements of election posters, this exploration shows that such interventions in the streets are exceptions rather than the rule. However, the explanatory power of the empirical investigation is limited if generalisations for countries or political systems come into question. Future research might increase the region-specific informative value if the selection of the areas under investigation is directed by the characteristics of the respective country (as in the case of a stratified sample) or if areas in different countries should be chosen.

Finally, the analytical distinction between strategically operating campaigners and tactically defacing activists may help to explain the distinct modes of action, but this is in fact too simple. In practice, campaigners sometimes also act tactically and activists strategically. In Leipzig, for example, the SPD distributed their election posters a few hours before the official campaign start in order to get the best spots, thus they tactically undermined the electoral regulations. Future research should, therefore, focus on actions and reactions during election campaigns and how the struggle affects its outcome. Moreover, attention should also be directed to questions about how different kinds of voters perceive and interpret defaced election posters.

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Endnotes

¹ On request, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior provided the data on politically motivated crimes. The figures showed a constant increase during federal elections since 2002. Recorded damage to property, such as the destruction and appropriation of election posters in particular, grew from 624 cases in 2002 to 1,683 in 2013.

² In the 1980s, some members of Germany's Greens advocated the legalization of sex with minors.

³ LVZ (newspaper: *Leipziger Volkszeitung*), 30 August 2013.

⁴ Since the total number of election posters is not known, a projection was made on the basis of party-related information. See LVZ, 10 August 2013.

⁵ The small election posters are of paper size A1 (59.4 by 84.1cm).

⁶ The size of the large posters is 370 by 290cm.

Authors

Axel Philipps is an Associate Professor at the Leibniz University of Hannover. He teaches aspects of qualitative methods in social research and social movements. His special interests are qualitative methods, sociology of knowledge, visual sociology, resistance and protest.

Hagen Schölzel is lecturer in Sociology at the Faculty of Law, Social Sciences and Economics at the University of Erfurt, Germany. His research interests include sociology of political activism and political communication, post-structuralism and actor-network-theory.

Ralph Richter is research fellow at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) in Erkner, Germany. His fields of research are urban and regional sociology, the social construction of space and social innovation research.