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The Mayhem Is the Message



Ad (In)vert: An *AdBusters* parody ad

'Culture jammers' use guerrilla media to put 'pimples on the retouched cover of America'

By [John Whalen](#)

Once it would have been difficult for a freelance troublemaker like [Joe Matheny](#) to tick off so many people. But here he is, in his San Francisco atelier, in bad boy black denim, annoying the White House, the makers of SPAM, and Bay Area radio junkies with e-mail "bombs," media hoaxes, and other digital mischief.

Matheny--who received a bundle of automated thank-you letters from the White House after he bombarded Bill Clinton's e-mail address with hundreds of pictures of frogs (a re-enactment of the Biblical rain of frogs)--is part of a budding movement of techno-tuned pranksters who use the latest in digital technology to "jam" the formerly one-way signals of the mainstream media.

"Culture jammers," they call themselves. The term was coined by the San Francisco audio collage band [Negativland](#) in tribute to ham radio "jammers," transistorized geeks who clog the airwaves with foul-mouthed Mickey Mouse impersonations and other audio filth. But digital-age jammers like Matheny have a more ambitious goof in mind. Their bag of tricks includes pirate radio and TV, computer hacking, counterfeit desktop publishing, media hoaxing, and, of course, billboard editing.

Click [here](#) for more about Negativland and its battles over fair use copyright law.

Among Matheny's exploits (he calls them "experiments" in guerrilla media), he has gulled alarmist TV journalists into reporting that San Francisco hackers had perfected a way of seizing control of cable TV transmissions; and he has taken to the public radio airwaves to announce his "discovery" of secret Vatican documents proving that Jesus Christ faked his death.

Call it cultural terrorism, media vandalism, or "clueless asshole-ism" (as one of Matheny's critics has), but jammers prefer to see themselves as dissidents of mainstream media. And not surprisingly, advertising is a favorite target. "If a corporation puts up a billboard you don't like," says Negativland's Don Joyce, "you can't afford to put one up next to it saying the opposite," he submits. "Sometimes people just go up and change the one that's there to mean more what they would like it to mean." To quote from Negativland's *Jamcon '84* CD, culture jammers want to add "pimples to the face on the retouched cover photo of America."

Which brings us into the shifty hours of a San Francisco morning. Jack Napier, of the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF), is about to add three-foot-high rhetorical zits to an urban canvas. Napier--a *nom de guerre* copped from Batman's arch-nemesis, the Joker--and a couple of BLF "field operatives" linked by hand-held CB radios to cop-spotters below, have scrambled up the face of a billboard using rock climber's gear. Dangling in front of an advert for the Plymouth Neon, Napier uses a can of red spray paint to restyle to billboard's message, transforming the word "hip" into "hype."

Don't get Napier wrong. "I really have nothing against billboards," he says, "and we don't damage the property. I don't want to cut billboards down. It's just that I'm kind of tired of being communicated to constantly by advertisers who want me to buy their product."

"Frankly, it sounds juvenile," counters Dave Martin, who runs PentaCom, the agency that buys Plymouth's ad space. "If their goal was to hurt sales, they failed. Neon sales are up 60 percent."



Billboard Liberation Front strikes again in San Francisco

But BLF members have no illusions about stopping the advertising juggernaut dead in its tracks. They merely aim to catalyze a few doubletakes--same satirical deserts that the old *MAD* magazine used to serve to *MAD* ison Avenue.

There are other BLF actions on the drawing board, including a plot to tap into the giant diamond-vision screen at the Oakland Coliseum and a scheme to send pirate messages to the Jumbotron astride the Goodyear blimp. For now, that may be the stuff of gonzo R&D, but according to the BLF's "graphics department"--a guy known as Lance, AKA Dogboy--PCs, design software, and color inkjet printers are revolutionizing jamming. "Essentially, you're using the same stuff as the real advertising industry uses," says Lance, a freelance graphics designer by day. "A reasonably intelligent person who has some training in graphics and access to a Macintosh can do wonders."

Lance and company use Mac desktop publishing to scale replacement letters to Brobdingnagian sizes. They plan to use the technology in their next strike: A renovation of those "Kerouac wore khakis" GAP billboards may soon inform San Francisco motorists that "Hitler wore khakis."

The tools may be going cyberpunk, but jamming is as old as political dissent, itself. "It's media criticism as a vernacular art form," says Mark Dery, author of a manifesto on the movement subtitled, "[Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs.](#)" "There is

a continuum all the way from the medieval Carnival through the Zurich dadaists through the French Situationists in 1968 through the Yippies in America-- people like Abbie Hoffman, with a wonderful sense of humor and talent for media manipulation."

In Canada, a jamming collective called Guerrilla Media raided the Vancouver Sun's newspaper boxes and wrapped 6,000 copies with a parody doppelganger called the *Vancouver Stump*, shellacking the broadsheet for its less-than-green coverage of logging on Vancouver island. The above-ground *AdBusters Quarterly* magazine works within the bounds of the law, filling each issue with mock ads it dubs "uncommercials," including its controversial parodies of the Absolut Vodka campaign, dubbed "Absolute Nonsense." Also based in Vancouver, [AdBusters](#) recently infected the Net with its own World Wide Web site.

The Internet--which gives any frustrated technophile the means to unleash his *own* brand of saturation broadcasting--is shaping up to be a popular venue for jammers. On the anniversary of SPAM last year, a gang of ne'er-do-wells (including Matheny) from the alt.spam Usenet newsgroup decided to "spam" the folks at Hormel. "Spamming" (the term comes from a Monty Python skit in which the word "Spam" is canted ad infinitum) is net-speak for packing an e-mail address tighter than canned meat-ish product with electronically multiplying messages.

According to *AdWeek* columnist Barbara Lippert, a generation of savvy TV brats with access to powerful media tools may pose a brand new challenge to advertisers. "By now, the advertising world is familiar to everybody," she says, "and sometimes its manipulation is so obvious that clever people can't help themselves from revealing the truth."

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