

Using Web Parody To Criticize Your Opponents

How two guys with \$500 and a little free time skewered a multi-billion dollar industry in front of a global audience.

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Synopsis

In this case study we examine a parody website, www.amptp.com, created as a part of the labor conflict between the Writers Guild of America, West (WGA) and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).

Parody websites can be powerful weapons. Their impact can be magnified several times over if a domain name can be secured that is close to the target organization's domain name.

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Background

The first Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike since 1988 has been particularly contentious. The Writers Guild, feeling burned from the loss of DVD residual revenue in the last agreement, has decided to make sure its members don't make the same mistake with regards to residuals for content sold or displayed online. The stakes are high. Even though most people assume that the online channel hasn't fully matured, NBC Universal publicly disclosed that it generated \$700 million in revenue in 2007 and is aiming for \$1 billion by 2009¹.

The dispute has played itself out online as well as on television, in the press, and on picket lines.

The Tactic

Two striking writers, John Aboud and Michael Colton, got word in late November that someone working as a Hollywood firearms propmaster was holding the domain amptp.com and was offering it for use to the Guild. "Bill Davis had been trying to sell this [domain] to the AMPTP but they ignored him. He called the Guild to offer it to them, and someone recommended John and I to him." Apparently AMPTP had registered AMPTP.org, but either registered AMPTP.com and let it expire, or never got around to registering it at all. According to registrar records, Bill Davis² registered AMPTP.com on June 18, 2004, two years and two months after AMPTP obtained AMPTP.org on September 12, 2002³.

Aboud and Colton had a long history of building parody websites and writing humor for the web. "Mike and I began our careers with web parody," Aboud recalled. "That's how we, through a very circuitous route, entered show business." Their previous work included skewering figures such as Tina Brown and her Talk magazine. They then went on to start web comedy site ModernHumorist.com.

With time on their hands and a strong need to vent their frustrations, Colton and Aboud rented amptp.com⁴ from Bill Davis for \$500 for a week and set to work writing the parody. One of the early versions they showed their friends was pretty rough, and they were encouraged to focus less on the shock and more on the unsympathetic nature of their opponents. In our interview in January, Colton said, "We had a link 'Treating Writers With Respect' that took you to a gay sex video. John and I called upon some friends from the Daily Show and elsewhere who said, 'Don't publish that'. Our friends rightly pointed out that that [the video] was all anyone would talk about."

¹ http://weblogs.variety.com/on_the_air/2008/01/beth-comstocks.html

² Bill Davis declined to be interviewed for this article.

³ Although there is no historical archive for Whois records, amptp.org was used by another organization before the AMPTP used it.

⁴ By late December the rental deal with Bill Davis was over for AMPTP.com, and the parody site had been moved to <http://amptp.humortron.net/>

In subsequent drafts Colton and Aboud honed the humor in the parody to focus on the AMPTP's difficult to defend negotiating positions. Nonetheless, some bizarre and not-safe-for-work jokes still made it into the parody. The "About Us" section talks about how AMPTP president Nick Counter was once a Backstreet Boy. Less polished is the link "Just For Fun", that takes you to a website about people that like to have sex with other people while wearing furry animal costumes. Colton says, "We thought it would be funny to imply that the AMPTP was made up of people who were sexually attracted to animals."

When Colton and Aboud finally launched the site on December 10th, they had two of the three key elements of success in place. They had a funny parody. They also had a great domain name that made the real AMPTP look silly. Now all they needed was a reason for people to look at them. Students of parody will remember that GWBush.com was a parody of the real Bush presidential campaign website that labored in obscurity until the Bush campaign lawyers started filing legal motions against it⁵. The real publicity spike came when George Bush (the candidate) said of the parody, "There ought to be limits to freedom."

What Colton and Aboud needed was for the AMPTP to give people a reason to look at their site.

The Launch

On Friday December 7th, the AMPTP "broke off negotiations"⁶ with the Writers Guild. This effectively ended any chance of the strike being resolved before the holidays, which created a great deal of anguish among everyone on strike or sidelined by it. Colton and Aboud worked all weekend to revise their website to account for this new development and then launched it on Monday, December 10th. If the strike were a movie, what Colton and Aboud did was take a tense, angry moment and defuse the tension with humor.

The quickly revised parody site leads with an introspective explanation from the faux AMPTP about why talks have broken down.

Quite frankly, we're puzzled as to why this happened. We talked about it all the way home – after we walked into their hotel room, slapped our list of demands on the table and abruptly left the negotiating session – and none of us could figure out what went wrong.

That night, the Writers Guild sent out an e-mail to its membership telling them about the parody site. A vocal group who thought the parody was a Guild effort immediately went online to criticize the Guild. They thought it was inappropriate given the Guild's failure to resolve the strike, but judging from the number of positive compliments the parody received, these critics were a minority. Colton says, "That [email] is generally regarded

⁵ <http://rtmark.com/more/articles/bushdallas0522bush1bushsite.htm>

⁶ <http://www.deadlinehollywooddaily.com/2007/12/page/6/>

as a mistake on their part. This should not have been seen as a Guild production. We're not Guild officials. We just did this for fun. When that e-mail came out, it was flattering, but the way they should have handled it is they should have put something at the bottom saying, 'this is a funny parody'. I was upset they sent out an e-mail saying, check this out, it made it look like a Guild-sponsored parody."

For their part, the AMPTP wasn't pleased either. Glossing over the fact that they apparently had opportunities to purchase this domain, they sent an e-mail to their members⁷ criticizing the publicity-generating tactics of the Writers Guild:

[..] someone from the WGA offices happily distributed the link to a hijacked parody website that even many rank-and-file WGA members felt was over-the-top. All of this is happening right along with the WGA's continuing series of concerts, rallies, mock exorcisms, pencil-drops and Star Trek-themed gatherings.

The Reaction

Judging from the quantity and tone of the comments on Hollywood gossip blogs, people thought the site was funny and immediately got the irony in seeing the studio moguls lack of Internet experience put out for all to see. Said one commenter,

Wow. So much fury - and over what? A joke. And a badly needed one at that, in the face of the grim times ahead. When I was in the service, we lived for the next moment of ironic humor to get us through our days, and we never for a minute forgot the seriousness of our fight. The AMPTP leaving itself open in this day and age to have their website mocked, when the fight is over the Internet itself, is about as good as irony gets.⁸

For their part, Colton and Aboud had their hands full. They say the site received roughly 23,000 page views on December 10th, 36,000 page views on the 11th, and then it dropped to 20,000 page views on December 13th.

We find these numbers to be a little too round to be believable, so we went online to find independent confirmation. Compete.com told the entire story. Both the squatted domain name (amptp.com, which just had a "for sale" page) and the real AMPTP website (amptp.org) barely had any traffic in October. As the strike negotiations heated up, the real AMPTP website started picking up visitors in November.

In December, with the failure of the negotiations and the launch of the parody, they had nearly the same amount of traffic. The concept that a parody might actually match the traffic of its target while the target is in a high profile fight is a sad commentary on the real AMPTP, and a strong compliment to the writing talents of Colton and Aboud.

⁷ <http://www.deadlinehollywooddaily.com/amtp-hot-bothered-by-wga-needling/>

⁸ <http://www.deadlinehollywooddaily.com/welcome-to-amtpcom-not-amtporg/#comment-15199>

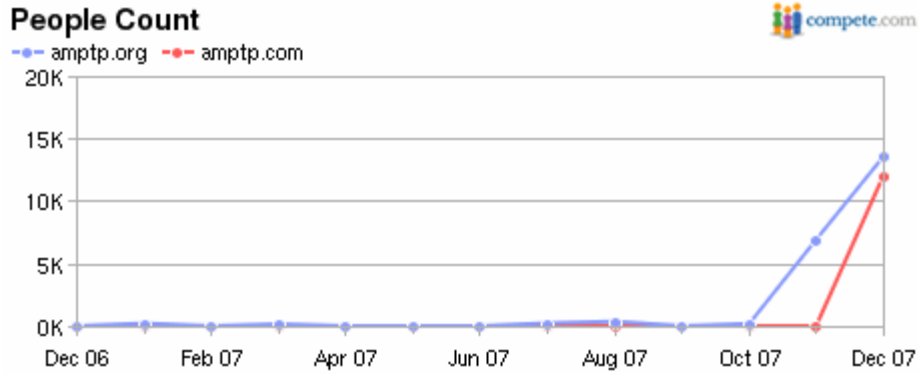


Fig. 1: Parody site traffic nearly matched the real trade association's traffic in December.

The parody was funny enough that it gained a copycat. The Guild refused to give an exception to writers who were employed by the Golden Globes, and so they had to be cancelled. The real AMPTP launched a one page website to protest, and again failed to purchase all their domain names. AMPTP registered the domain name WeWantTheAwards.com on December 21, 2007, and a page uploaded with a protest letter about the award shows. A call to action urged people to tell the Guild that the shows must go on, but it did not direct readers to an e-mail or phone number to contact.

One day later, on December 22nd, WeWantTheAwards.org was registered and a parody site was posted. Because the original site had no impact and no public profile, it and its parody languished in obscurity. One wonders whether the immediate appearance of a parody scuttled subsequent AMPTP plans to promote its campaign site, or if it just got lost in the holiday rush three days later.

The Aftermath

Because Colton and Aboud's parody of the AMPTP website was so subtle, they received e-mail from people who sincerely thought they were reading the real AMPTP website. When they sent in questions about their positions to the parody site, Michael Colton dutifully began answering, pretending to be Nick Counter in his responses to anyone who understood it was a parody.

However Aboud and Colton have no plans to enhance or update the website. Also judging from their previous work, Colton and Aboud's parodies tend to be one-shot deals, launched and forgotten as they move onto something new. Aboud has been devoting his time to writing for the unofficial Guild strike blog, www.unitedhollywood.com, and Colton is busy with a new baby. And someday, the strike will end and they'll be back with paying work. Given the large amount of traffic the parody received, failing to update it and harness the initial attention is a waste of a great deal of support.

And the domain amptp.com? At the end of the year, Bill Davis reset it to a "for sale" page with his phone number and e-mail address on it. John Aboud expected that their parody would result in the AMPTP buying the domain name from him, but that didn't

happen. Finally on January 22nd, 2008 while this article was in final edits, Bill Davis put up a protest page at AMPTP.com. The urging the writers to settle the strike with the AMPTP for the sake of the members of the film community who are neither writers, nor actors, nor producers, but film crew like himself.

Lessons Learned

Funny works. Don't forget that content is still king.

Colton and Aboud didn't have a large promotion budget for Google ads or any other kind of promotion. They had to depend on the fact that they're material was so funny that people would pass it around for them. This worked, and it should serve as an excellent remind to everyone trying to get attention for their online efforts that you don't need much in the way of promotion if your content is well-written.

Don't hand your critics an easy platform on which to attack you.

It is imperative that you register all domain names that a critic is likely to use as a platform for attacking you. It is possible that had they not secured a domain name that allowed for mistaken identity, their parody website might have been ignored. Instead the fact that the Internet is at the core of the dispute meant that this detail of the parody became part of the parody itself. The fact that while they're arguing over the Internet someone notices they don't even have all their domains registered and uses one against them is probably the funniest part of the parody itself.⁹

Once you've got attention, keep publishing.

Colten says his expectations about the impact of the strike were modest. "We didn't think this would end the strike." However, they allowed a perfect platform for ongoing criticism of their opponent to go fallow and their audience to diminish. As a result, they threw away opportunities to build support for the writers and built pressure on the producers to settle. Had they wanted to, they could have continued their tradition of mocking the AMPTP every time there was a significant news event in the strike with fake press releases and fake website postings, minimizing the loss of the domain. A significant audience would have followed, rendering the loss of the key domain not so important.

Additional references

The original parody website of the AMPTP.org now lives at <http://amtp.humortron.net/>

The real AMPTP website is at <http://www.amptp.org>

⁹ Well, except for the joke about Nick Counter being a Backstreet Boy. That was pretty funny too.

The squatted domain <http://www.amptp.com/> pointed to a domain sale advertisement with contact information for Bill Davis until January 22nd, when it contained a screed urging the strike to be settled immediately.

The undisputed kings of parody websites are a pair of anti-corporate activists who go by the name, “The Yes Men”.¹⁰ Their parodies have gone after George W. Bush (<http://gwbush.com>), the World Trade Organization (<http://gatt.org>), Dow Chemical (<http://www.dowethics.com/>), and many others. Their pranks are executed online as well as off, and they have appeared as spokespeople on television and at conferences for both the WTO and Dow. Several of their antics were recorded for the 1999 film, “The Yes Men”.

The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs (<http://fakesteve.blogspot.com/>) is Forbes editor Dan Lyons’ ongoing online parody of Steve Jobs and the personal computer industry. It is one of the most successful parodies in recent years, spawning its own book deal. Until he was finally outed by Brad Stone of the New York Times, guessing the identity of the author of “The Secret Diary” was a highly popular cocktail party game, and an obsession for some.

Although it’s been abandoned since 2006, critics of Kim Jong Il started a blog for him. Naming him “The Illmatic”, and using imaginary instant messenger conversations between him and other world leaders, the blog achieves a hysterical take on the imagined personal life of Kim Jong Il and the state of international relations with North Korea. It’s still up at http://users.livejournal.com/kim_jong_il_/, but probably not forever.

Disclosures

Neither author of this case study, nor the company they work for, is employed by either the Writers Guild of America or the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

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We leaned on Whois heavily for information about domain name registration dates and compete.com for site traffic numbers. We also spent a lot of time examining the comments on Nikke Finke’s blog, “DeadlineHollywood” to help piece together a chronology of the ending of strike talks and the reaction to the launch of the parody blog.

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_yes_men

Bill Davis, the current owner of the AMPTP.com domain, did not return our calls and e-mails until we called him on an emergency phone number. Then he declined to be interviewed. Jesse Hiestand, spokesperson for the AMPTP, did not answer our phone calls, but did reply by e-mail that he was too busy with the negotiations with the Directors Guild (begun in early January) to be interviewed.

About the Authors

Shabbir Imber Safdar (ssafdar@virilion.com) has been organizing people online for more than twenty years. He remembers organizing events among Bulletin Board Users in the early 1980s on his IBM PC AT with a very slow modem. Today he serves as senior strategist and founder of Virilion Inc., a ten year old interactive agency that helps major organizations and institutions transform their ideas and issues into results through digital media.

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