Flash mobs – a new way of protesting?

It is summertime at Times Square in New York City when a huge crowd of people entered the *Toys ‘R’ Us* flagship store. The, later so called, *mob* gathered inside of the *Toys ‘R’ Us* around a life-size Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaur, starred at him then suddenly slumped on their knees yelling and groaning with hands in the air towards the dinosaur. As the staff was about to call the security the mob discrete scattered as rapidly as it had gathered (Sahlholt, Unknown, p.2).

This was one of the first flash mobs that started in New York, 2003 initiated by Bill Waisk, cultural critic and former editor of *Harper’s Magazine*. He created eight different flash mobs and caught the attention of both the public and the media (Walker, 2013, p. 119). The new form of encounter, which, by the use of Internet, united new cultural collectives, started a performance that confused passers-by, security guards, and also the media (Kahn / Kellner, 2004, p. 93). A new way of communication was born. People who mostly did not know each other were able to coordinate and to adjust their behavior accordingly through mobile devices. This never happened in that way before (Berry, 2004, p. 651).

With the help of the Internet and mobile communication a group of people was able to communicate quickly and therefore was able to change situations within seconds collaboratively and in a nonhierarchal way (ibid.). Nowadays flash mobs are well known and occur frequently around the world for different kind of reasons. Whether their performances include pillow fights, freezes, dances, have political goals or made by companies for a commercial effect (ibid.)
What I would like to discuss in this Essay is the question if flash mobs do present new kind of protest form or are just an act of fun and if they are a way of demonstration will they still work in the future?

To discuss this question and to come to a conclusion I will give a explanation how flash mobs are define, then give some examples on different kind of flash mobs and in the end weigh up the disadvantages and advantages of flash mobs.

Only with the start of smart mobs, which were made by performance artists to bring attention to their own creative work around nine years ago, flash mobs appeared as well (Goldschmidt, 2011, S. 167). Today the word flash mob has its own definition. Published by the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary a flash mob is defined as

“a large public gathering at which people perform an unusual or seemingly random act and then disperse, typically organized by means of the Internet or social media”.

In general flash mobs are initiated and organized via social networks like Twitter and Facebook or online virtual communities (Brejzek, 2010, S. 118). Beside this definition it is also important to know that flash mobs tend to last no longer than 10 minutes and focuses on being trendy (Walker, 2013, S. 119). What kind of gathering, with which kind of people that take part in flash mobs can be totally diverse. To get an overview I will now mention three different styles of flash mobs: festively, commercial and political orientated.

A good example for a funny and festively flash mob is the one called “30th Street Station Freeze” that happened on April 1, 2010 in Philadelphia. At 6.30 pm around 500 students from Drexel University gathered at 30th Street Station and froze there for 3 minutes. A Facebook group initiated the flash mob, where every participant could find all the instructions. The police was present during the happening to prevent an outbreak of a violent flash mob, but it was harmless and peaceful the whole time (LoBasso, 2010).

This example of flash mob clarifies Gore’s statement (2010) that flash mobs mostly do not have a public statement and are more an act of fun rather than achieving any social, environmental, or political aim.
This example will be a commercial flash mob by the communication company T-Mobile. On January 2009 they started a flash mob called “The T-Mobile Dance” at London’s Liverpool Street Station that later won a prize at the Cannes film festival and turned out to be a television advertisement. A group of people gathered at Liverpool’s Street Station and suddenly as music starts to play the crowd started a dance performance for about 2 minutes and then disappeared. Even if this flash mob turns out to be a TV advert it got a lot of media attention for free as a lot of viewers, journalists and also the mass media uploaded videos and pictures of this flash mob, talked about it on different social networks and also published posts and articles on their own blogs, websites and magazines.


Coming from a festive and commercial mob to an example of a political flash mob, which happened in Teheran, 2003. According to Rheingold (2003) this flash mob was one of the first mobs that were political orientated. Thousands of anti-government protesters came together on the streets of Teheran, organized via smart phones, mobile phones, or Twitter. A huge appearance of mass media has been caused by this flash mob and showed the potential of influence by user-generated content for political and cultural authorization (Brejzek, 2010, p. 114).
Comparing this flash mob to Gore’s statement (2010) that I mentioned it is not true that a flash mob does not achieve any political goals and is rather more of a fun act.

Every shown example I gave included the main characteristic of flash mobs, a sudden appearance of a crowd who is performing a random act and then suddenly evaporate (Goldschmidt, 2011, p. 167). Even as we know that flash mobs were only used to entertain both the viewers and the participants in the beginning we also know, as the example proved, flash mobs now are also used in political contexts (Hartmann, 2003, p. 122, Rheingold, 2003, Sixtus 2003, Heise Online, 2009). The presentation of a performance, which is only temporary create a new form of sociality due to the disturbed flow of people and traffic (Gore, 2010, p. 125). The main inspiration to start a flash mob is a desire to create new forms, public space and to connect with the city (Brejzek, 2010, p. 109). This different way public space is used during the time of a flash mob also participants and passers-by of the flash mob use their environment in an alternative way and create different discursive spaces and allows different interpretations, also one that differ from the ruling political system (Sahlholt, Unknown, p. 9). Because of creating a new sociality and a discursive space, flash mobs do have the possibility to start a debate on a specific topic or give critical reflections (ibid., p.2). This is why flash mobs show their audiences that everyone is able to “resist the society of spectacle and its hierarchies” (ibid., p. 9). But also by commenting over mobile phones on social networks or online blog sites from the viewers and also the participants the whole activity of the flash mob is transmitting to the online world (Brejzek, 2010, p. 119). It is an anonymous and autonomous mass that is able to end the built up virtual home out of a sudden that only a small track is left behind (ibid., p. 118).

On the other hand it is quite hard to catch people’s attention as our society flooded with pictures, videos and other media content all the time (ibid.). As we experience a transition from media consumption to media presumption and an explosion of user-generated content more and more blogs, sites and other media content is filling the Internet so it is getting more difficult to have an overview what is going on (Meek, 2012, p. 1429). So it can be happen that a flash mob invitation, coming from an E-Mail, might not be read and the mob get lost in cyberspace or only a small crowd appears for the flash mob that you even can not
see a mob and the protest won’t be noticed by any viewers or the media (Plake / Jansen / Schumacher, 2001, p. 86). Even as we know that flash mobs occurs a shocking moment to the audience and you can be sure you will catch their attention it is not easy to spread this flash mob to the big crowd in the end by uploading videos, pictures and blog posts from that flash mob (Sahlholt, Unknown, p. 2).

Not to forget the point of violence. Although the given examples of flash mobs in this essay did not include any violent part it is important to know that violence can happen during a flash mob. Therefore the public health has to concern about this (Goldschmidt, 2011, p. 167). To be fair you have to keep in mind that violence can happen in every protest, demonstration or social movement.

Another disadvantage about flash mobs is the fact that also companies are using them for their own marketing strategies. In that way one can say, flash mobs lost some of its potential to criticize and debate on specific topics (Sahlholt, Unknown, p. 8). If talking about political battle one can say that they still might be fought in the streets with flash mobs, social movements and other protest forms but “politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will be so increasingly in the future” (Kahn / Keller, 2004, p. 94). Even if flash mobs have been a subculture and now turned out to be mainstream we see so many of them in our surroundings and in the internet it is yet not sure if it can last in the future as new technologies and other trends are popping up.

If you compare the disadvantages and advantages about flash mobs one can not clearly say if this is a new way of protesting but what’s definitely clear is that flash mobs reveal new possibilities as the rise of the digital media causes an alteration of traditional public space and therefore people must find new, alternative public spaces, which you create with flash mobs (Kluitenberg, 2006, p. 6). In the end you can say, flash mobs try to visualize the idea that was made up in the Internet in the real world by gathering a huge crowd in a public space (Sahlholt, Unknown, p. 7). They do show us that everybody is allowed to use public space in alternative ways (ibid., p. 10).
References


Sahlholt, K. (Unknown): *Flash Mobs – visualized bricolage in the urban sphere*. URL:
