

How the People's Climate March Became a Corporate PR Campaign

Business as Usual in Manhattan

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I've never been to a protest march that advertised in the New York City subway. That spent \$220,000 on posters inviting Wall Street bankers to join a march to save the planet, according to one source. That claims you can change world history in an afternoon after walking the dog and eating brunch.

Welcome to the "People's Climate March" set for Sunday, Sept. 21 in New York City. It's timed to take place before world leaders hold a Climate Summit at the United Nations two days later. Organizers are [billing it](#) as the "biggest climate change demonstration ever" with similar marches around the world. [The Nation](#) describes the pre-organizing as following "a participatory, open-source model that recalls the Occupy Wall Street protests." A leader of [350.org](#), one of the main organizing groups, explained, "Anyone can contribute, and many of our online organizing 'hubs' are led by volunteers who are often coordinating hundreds of other volunteers."

I will join the march, as well as the Climate Convergence starting Friday, and most important the "[Flood Wall Street](#)" direct action on Monday, Sept. 22. I've had conversations with more than a dozen organizers including senior staff at the organizing groups. Many people are genuinely excited about the Sunday demonstration. The movement is radicalizing thousands of youth. Endorsers include some labor unions and many people-of-color community organizations that normally sit out environmental activism because the mainstream green movement has often done a poor job of talking about the impact on or solutions for workers and the Global South.

Nonetheless, to quote Han Solo, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Environmental activist [Anne Petermann](#) and writer [Quincy Saul](#) describe how the People's Climate March has no demands, no targets, and no enemy. Organizers admitted encouraging bankers to march was like saying Blackwater mercenaries should join an antiwar protest. There is no unity other than money. One veteran activist who was involved in Occupy Wall Street said it was made known there was plenty of money to hire her and others. There is no sense of history: decades of climate-justice activism are being erased by the incessant invocation of the "biggest climate change demonstration ever." Investigative reporter [Cory Morningstar](#) has connected the dots between the organizing groups, [350.org](#) and Avaaz, the global online activist outfit modeled on MoveOn, and institutions like the World Bank and Clinton Global Initiative. Morningstar claims the secret of Avaaz's success is its "expertise in behavioral change."

That is what I find most troubling. Having worked on Madison Avenue for nearly a decade, I can smell a P.R. and marketing campaign a mile away. That's what the People's Climate March looks to be. According to inside sources a push early on for a Seattle-style event—organizing thousands of people to nonviolently shut down the area around the United Nations—was thwarted by paid staff with the organizing groups.

One participant in the organizing meetings said, "In the beginning people were saying, 'This is our Seattle,'" referring to the 1999 World Trade Organization ministerial that was derailed by direct action. But the paid staff got the politics-free Climate March. Another source said, "You wouldn't see Avaaz promoting an occupy-style action. The strategic decision was made to have a big march and get as many mainstream groups on board as possible."

Nothing wrong with that. Not every tactic should be based on Occupy. But in an email about climate change that Avaaz sent out last December, which apparently raked in [millions of dollars](#), it wrote, "It's time for powerful, direct, non-violent action, to capture imagination, convey moral urgency, and inspire people to act. Think Occupy."

Here's what seems to be going on. Avaaz found a lucrative revenue stream by warning about climate catastrophe that can be solved with the click of a donate button. To convince people to donate it says we need Occupy-style actions. When the moment comes for such a protest, Avaaz and [350.org](#) blocked it and then when it did get organized, they pushed it out of sight. If you go to [People's Climate March](#), you won't find any mention of the Flood Wall Street action, which I fully support, but fear is being organized with too little time and resources. Nor have I seen it in an Avaaz email, nor has anyone else I've talked to. Bill McKibben of [350.org](#) began promoting it this week, but that may be because there is discontent in the activist ranks about the march, which includes lots of Occupy Wall Street activists. One inside source said, "It's a branding decision not to promote the Flood Wall Street action. These are not radical organizations."

Branding. That's how the climate crisis is going to be solved. We are in an era of postmodern social movements.

The image (not ideology) comes first and shapes the reality. The P.R. and marketing determines the tactics, the messaging, the organizing, and the strategy. Whether this can have a positive effect is a different question, and it's why I encourage everyone to participate. The future is unknowable. But left to their own devices the organizers will lead the movement into the graveyard of the Democratic Party, just as happened with the movement against the Iraq War a decade ago. You remember that historic worldwide movement, right? It was so profound the *New York Times* dubbed global public opinion, "the second superpower." Now Obama has launched an eighth war and there is no antiwar movement to speak of.

Sources say Avaaz and [350.org](#) is footing most of the bill for the People's Climate March with millions of dollars spent. Avaaz is said to have committed a dozen full-time staff, and hired dozens of other canvassers to collect petition signatures and hand out flyers. Nearly all of [350.org](#)'s staff is working on climate marches around the country and there is an office in New York with thirty full-time workers organizing the march. That takes a lot of cheddar. While the grassroots are being mobilized, this is not a grassroots movement. That's why it's a mistake to condemn it. People are joining out of genuine concern and passion and hope for an equitable, sustainable world, but the control is top down and behind closed doors. Everyone I talked to described an undemocratic process. Even staffers were not sure who

was making the decisions other than to tell me to follow the money. It's also facile to say all groups are alike. Avaaz is more cautious than 350.org, and apparently the New York chapter of 350.org, which is more radical, is at odds with the national.

But when the overriding demand is for numbers, which is about visuals, which is about P.R. and marketing, everything becomes lowest common denominator. The lack of politics is a political decision. One insider admitted despite all the overheated rhetoric about the future is on the line, "I don't expect much out of this U.N. process." The source added this is "a media moment, a mobilizing moment." The goal is to have visuals of a diverse crowd, hence the old saw about a "family-friendly" march. Family friendly comes at a high cost, however. Everything is decided by the need for visuals, which means organizers will capitulate to anything the NYPD demands for fear of violence. The march is on a Sunday morning when the city is in hangover mode. The world leaders will not even be at the United Nations, and they are just the hired guns of the real climate criminals on Wall Street. The closest the march comes to the United Nations is almost a mile away. The march winds up on Eleventh Avenue, a no-man's land far from subways. There is no closing rally or speakers.

An insider says the real goal was to create space for politicians: "If you can frame it as grandma and kids and immigrants and labor you could make it safer for politicians to come out and support. It's all very liberal. I don't have much faith in it."

When I asked what the metrics for success for, the insider told me media coverage and long-term polling about public opinion. I was dumbfounded. That's the exact same tools we would use in huge marketing campaigns. First we would estimate and tally media "impressions" across all digital, print, outdoor, and so on. Then a few months down the road we would conduct surveys to see if we changed the consumer's opinion of the brand, their favorability, the qualities they associated with it, the likelihood they would try. That's the same tools Avaaz is allegedly using.

Avaaz has pioneered clickbait activism. It gets people to sign petitions about dramatic but ultimately minor issues like, "Prevent the flogging of 15 year old rape victim in Maldives." The operating method of Avaaz, which was established in 2007, is to create "actions" like these that generate emails for its fundraising operation. In other words, it's a corporation with a business model to create products (the actions), that help it increase market share (emails), and ultimately revenue. The actions that get the most attention are ones that get the most petition signers, the most media coverage, and which help generate revenue.

Avaaz has turned social justice into a product to enhance the liberal do-gooding lifestyle, and it's set its sights on the climate justice movement.

The more dramatic the emails the better the response. It's like the supermarket. The bags and boxes don't say, "Not bad," or "kinda tasty." They say "the cheesiest," "the most delicious," "an avalanche of flavor," "utterly irresistible." That's why climate change polls so well for Avaaz. It's really fucking dramatic. But it's still not dramatic enough for marketing purposes.

One source said the December 2013 email from Avaaz Executive Director Ricken Patel about climate change was a goldmine. It was headlined, "24 Months to Save the World." It begins, "This may be the most important email I've ever written to you," and then says the climate crisis is "beyond our worst expectations" with storms and temperatures "off the charts." Then comes the hook from Patel,

“We CAN stop this, if we act very fast, and all together. And out of this extinction nightmare, we can pull one of the most inspiring futures for our children and grandchildren. A clean, green future in balance with the earth that gave birth to us.”

Telling people there is 24 months to save the world is odious, as is implying an online donation to Avaaz can save the planet.

The same overblown rhetoric is being used for the People’s Climate March: It’s the biggest ever. There is “[unprecedented collaboration](#)” with more than 1,400 “partner” groups in New York City. Everything comes down to this one day with the “future on the line and the whole world watching, we’ll take a stand to bend the course of history.”

Presumably the orderly marchers behind NYPD barricades will convince the governments of the world that will meet for the Climate Summit that won’t even meet for another two days that they need to pass UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s “ambitious global agreement to dramatically reduce global warming pollution.”

Moon is now joining the march. But it’s hard to find details, including on the [Climate Summit](#) website, as to what will actually be discussed there. The best [account](#) I could find is by Canadian journalist Nick Fillmore. He claims the main point will be a carbon pricing scheme. This is one of those corporate-designed scams that in the past has rewarded the worst polluters with the most credits to sell and creates perverse incentives to pollute, because then they can earn money to cut those emissions.

So we have a corporate-designed protest march to support a corporate-dominated world body to implement a corporate policy to counter climate change caused by the corporations of the world, which are located just a few miles away but which will never feel the wrath of the People’s Climate March.

Rather than moaning on the sidelines and venting on Facebook, radicals need to be in the streets. Join the marches and more important the direct actions. Radicals need to ask the difficult questions as to why for the second time in fifteen years has a militant uprising, first Seattle and then Occupy, given way to liberal cooptation. What good is your radical analysis if the NGO sector and Democratic Party fronts kept out-organizing you?

Naomi Klein says we need to end business as usual because climate change is going to change everything. She’s right. Unfortunately the organizers of the People’s Climate March didn’t get the memo. Because they are continuing on with business as usual that won’t change anything.

One prominent environmental organizer says that after the march ends, “The U.N. leaders are going to be in there Monday and Tuesday and do whatever the fuck they want. And everyone will go back to their lives, walking the dog and eating brunch.”

The future is unwritten. It’s not about what happens on Sunday. It’s what happens after that.

Arun Gupta contributes to outlets including *Al Jazeera America*, *Vice*, *The Progressive*, *The Guardian*, and *In These Times*.

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