PROTESTING @ AUCKLAND PRIDE

When a community stakeholder becomes alienated

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In 2015, the Police and Corrections departments were given permission to march in the Pride Parade. In response, activist group No Pride in Prisons staged a protest against the history of mistreatment of transgendered people by these organisations. Additionally, another group staged a number of paint-splash attacks on a corporate sponsor, claiming Pride had been commodified. In the aftermath a polarising debate emerged in online queer community forums, one which perfectly encapsulated the bind that Pride organisers found themselves in: the high cost of Pride necessitates the creation of strategic and politically pragmatic relationships with sponsors; in doing so, members of the queer community had become alienated from processes of Pride celebration.

This chapter presents a netnographic case study of the protests, providing a pertinent demonstration of what happens when municipalities’ strategic use of festivals comes into conflict with the communities being festivalised. It synthesises key ideas from event management and queer theory discourses: the implicit tension between corporate and community stakeholders, and critiques of the heteronormativity and commercialisation of Pride events.

Introduction

In 2015, in Auckland, New Zealand, the country’s Police and Corrections Department (who operate state-run prisons) were given permission to march in the city’s recently inaugurated Pride Parade. In response, a small group of activists disrupted the Parade, protesting against a history of mistreatment of transgendered people by these organisations. Additionally, another group staged a number of graffiti attacks on a Parade sponsor, highlighting the perceived commodification of the event. In the aftermath, a vociferous and polarising debate emerged in queer community forums. This debate encapsulated the bind that Pride organisers found themselves in: the Parade’s high costs necessitate the sourcing of income and sponsorship; in doing so, some members of the queer community (or perhaps more appropriately, communities) had become alienated from the celebration of Pride.

This chapter presents a case study of the protests, providing a pertinent demonstration of what happens when the strategic use of festivals by municipalities comes into conflict
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with the communities the festivals are supposed to celebrate. It synthesises key ideas from event management and queer theory discourses: the implicit tension between corporate and community stakeholders, and critiques of the homonormativity and commercialisation of Pride events (and queer culture more broadly). I argue that in spite of the recognised necessity of sponsors in the contemporary events environment, the communities being festivalised must remain central to stakeholder management, for without community support, the sustainability of events is ultimately threatened. I begin by providing an overview of key literature and the method employed. I then move on to the context of Auckland’s Pride Parade before outlining the protests that took place. Finally, I present illustrative examples of community reaction before offering some concluding remarks.

Literature review

From an event management perspective, this is a case study centred on stakeholders, and tensions between these parties that lead to what Allen, O’Toole, Harris and McDonnell (2012, p. 64) would categorise as an example of negative social impacts, via community alienation. This tension is driven by increasing competition between municipalities to be known as ‘eventful cities’ (Richards & Palmer 2010) by using event portfolio strategies to drive economic development (Antchak 2016). These priorities can cause friction when not aligned with community expectations.

This is a dominant theme in event stakeholder research: tension inevitably arises between heterogeneous stakeholder groups, and deft relationship management skills become a key measure of successful event managers (Getz & Andersson 2009). Larson and Wikström (2001), for example, demonstrated that stakeholder relationships can be understood as consensus or conflictive, where inconsistent goals or stakeholders working to achieve their goals at the expense of others can lead to tension, distrust, and ultimately, can risk event sustainability. Larson (2002) furthered this, proposing the concept of ‘political market squares’ to illustrate how stakeholders interact politically to achieve their goals. Indeed, as Getz (2012, p. 116) recognises, power is a crucial issue: as events become larger, more complex and institutionalised (or professionalised), organisations rely more and more on external stakeholders for sustainability (p. 280). Achieving consensus with such diverse interests is fraught with difficulties, although strategies are often proposed (e.g. Moital, Jackson & Le Couillard 2013; Reid 2011).

Andersson and Getz (2008) zero in on the key source of stakeholder tension: to become financially sustainable, trade-offs are required. Sustainability involves attracting powerful and resource-rich supporters; in doing so, while mitigating existential threats, event organisers are likely to lose some autonomy. Ultimately, the needs and goals of community stakeholders – who Tiew, Holmes and de Bussy (2015) propose have neither asset, resource nor network/referral power – can become compromised. Quinn’s (2006) study of well-established arts festivals demonstrates this well. The organisers’ desire to grow the events as tourist attractions, enhancing their attractiveness to state and corporate sponsors, began to undermine the links to and support of local communities. Higgins-Desbiolles (2016) concluded likewise from an indigenous festival context that tension arose because communities value events in vastly different ways than those stakeholders driven by economic and tourism imperatives. These values, as George (2015) found, are centred around the degree to which communities feel events reflect (or not) their identity, and thus these stakeholders should be incorporated into planning and design processes to ensure congruence.

Building on this, recent research has also begun to problematise stakeholders being categorised into monolithic units. Instead, there is much heterogeneity within stakeholder
groups. Lau, Milne and Chui (2017) highlight this well in their study of the 2011 Rugby World Cup, and how the ‘host community’ was conceived narrowly. In exploring the event’s social impacts on the Chinese community in New Zealand, they show that not only was there a desire by community members to be involved, but that the measured impacts occurred outside of any strategy by planners to engage with diverse communities. They argue that migrant communities should have been considered unique stakeholder groups, and nuanced engagement strategies created. The point is thus made that a more holistic approach is needed to account for the complexity of subcommunities within communities, which may be based around ethnicity, or gender, or reflect a multiplicity of other perspectives (Deery, Jago & Fredline 2013). These points are especially salient here. Problems arose at Auckland Pride because of a belief that queer communities can be considered homogeneous, and not enough consideration was given to the vast social, economic and ideological differences that exist.

Within queer studies, these differences are accentuated. Early theorists highlighted a mainstream culture ‘riddled’ with heteronormativity, privileging and centring heterosexuality as normative (e.g. Berlant & Warner 1995, p. 349). In doing so, queer became a reactive category, positioning queerness in opposition to heteronormative markers. However, in creating this dualism, these theorists failed to account for true diversity (e.g. Spargo 2000). The result was homonormativity, the privileging of educated, middle-class, white, masculine, gay males as idealised representations of queer acceptability. With increasing tolerance, integration was achieved though the consumptive power of the so-called ‘pink dollar’ and queer identities and bodies made respectable by processes of gentrification and urban development (e.g. Mattson 2014). The imperative to be ‘Proud’ has been reimagined as civic pride, and this has, in turn, led to the exclusion of ‘shameful’ queer identities in the normalisation and commodification of queer spaces (e.g. Bell & Binnie 2004).

In this context, Pride festivals, as public representations of queer space, have been particularly criticised as perpetuating homonormativity and commodification. Both Browne (2007) and Ammaturo (2016), for example, position Pride events as sites of tension, where a disruption of heteronormativity is desired but ultimately denied; it is the heteronormative political and economic apparatuses, after all, that provide these events with crucial support. Pride is thus depoliticised through co-option into city-led event strategies and transformed into spectacle; safe, respectable homonormative queerness dominates. The key issue arising from this is one of dependency, and the risk ‘goal displacement’, where the interests of sponsors take precedence over festivalised communities. As a critique, Taylor (2016) discusses the emergence of ‘gay shame’ festivals, where, while still employing narratives of celebration, these smaller community-led events subvert both hetero- and homonormativity. In doing so, they illustrate the privileged homonormative forces that dominate mainstream queer spaces (see also Bailey (2013), who discusses race and queer spaces).

Method

The method employed for this research is one that combines a case-study approach – a long narrative compiled from various sources in order to illustrate contemporary issues and phenomena (Remenyi 2012) – with additional insight from what has become known as ‘netnography’. This method evolved spontaneously. As a member of the communities involved, I initially observed the protests and their aftermath with concern about the detrimental and polarising impacts they were having on community discussion; something publicly expressed at the time (Mackley-Crump 2015). As an emerging event management academic,
I observed with fascination the ‘real world’ case study playing out in our backyard. Sensing its value as a teaching resource, I began to collect media reports and examples of the discussion that was taking place on social media, primarily Facebook comments posted in local queer community pages, like the Pride Festival page and local queer media.

This observation of media and social media forms the centre of the netnographic method, one gaining increasing currency (e.g. Li & Wood 2016; Whitford & Dunn 2014). Netnography was first proposed by Robert Kozinets (2002), who argued that it is simply an extension of the flexible ethnographic approach, ‘replacing information gleamed online for the information gleamed in the field’ (p. 62). As a qualitative approach, netnography employs key strengths of content-analysis methodologies, using thematic identification techniques to uncover meaning from data collected. Additionally, netnography is suitable for investigating possibly sensitive topics, as it enables the researcher to gain insight into actions and feelings in an unobtrusive way (Morgan 2008).

This is true of the data collected here, which was obtained without making my presence known (I did not add to discussions, merely observed them taking place). In terms of reliability – a key concern raised by Kozinets and others (e.g. Mkono 2013) – the data collected primarily came from Facebook, where anonymous commenting is hard to achieve (due to the number of steps necessary in establishing a profile). Additionally, the forums on which the conversations occurred are directed at the queer communities in Auckland. They are small, self-regulating and frequently contain discussion between posters who demonstrably know each other offline. This is true of the discussions presented here, and it seems likely therefore that the data collected are a valid representation of reactions to the protests. This raises a final pertinent point. Morgan (2008) asserts that the netnographic method is not designed to generate a sample that can be generalised across entire populations. This is also true here. It is not intended to be read as a definitive account of the protests and subsequent reaction. Rather, it is a richly detailed account that allows us to reflect on critical event management issues.

**Pride in Auckland**

As its largest cosmopolitan centre, it is unsurprising that Auckland has historically been and remains the centre of gay community and culture in New Zealand (Herkt 2013). The origins of Pride parades there can be contextualised within the post-Stonewall, queer liberation era of Pride protests, which started in New York and Los Angeles in 1970, before spreading to other global cities and evolving into hybridised protest-celebration events (D’Emilio 2013). 1980s queer New Zealand was marked by two key experiences, one global and the other local. As elsewhere, the AIDS epidemic began to have a range of impacts, although its full devastation was limited by comparatively low infection rates (Dickson, Lee, Foster & Saxton 2015). The hard-fought law reform of 1986, decriminalising homosexual acts between consenting men, marked a turning point in the sociopolitical acceptance of queer identities within the New Zealand state and eventually by broader society.

These two experiences created a desire to establish an event to celebrate progress and visibility, and it was within this broader environment that the Hero events began, first with a party in 1991, before becoming the Hero Parade (and accompanying festival) a few years later. While publicly popular, Hero maintained an antagonistic relationship with Auckland City Council and, with subsequent mayors refusing to support or help finance the event, this ultimately lead to its demise in 2001 (Johnston & Waitt 2015). Over the next decade, queer community leaders continued to agitate for the return of Hero. This was given a significant boost in 2010, when Auckland’s seven existing city and district councils were amalgamated.
into one ‘super city’. As part of this, a number of ‘council-controlled organisations’ (CCOs) were established. One of these, Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development (ATEED), brought together these distinct areas into one organisation and, employing an ‘eventful city’ strategy (Richards and Palmer 2010), began aggressively bidding to host a range of major profile-building events that would complement a portfolio of local events (Antchak 2016). The goal was to make Auckland a ‘global events destination’ that would drive local and national growth, as well as social outcomes (ATEED 2013, p. 3).

After a number of public meetings, and with support from key local and central government figures, an Auckland Pride Festival Trust was established. They were able to capitalise on ATEED’s strategy and argue that a global events destination was one that portrayed a queer-friendly image. A business case put forward the positive tourism and economic figures that could be achieved by initiating a high-profile Pride festival, and thus, with key details in place, it was publicly announced that an inaugural Pride festival would be held in February 2013 and supported by the council via ATEED (Tasman-Jones 2012).

It is important to highlight ATEED’s role in managing the return/establishment of Pride. It prioritised from the outset an approach that was driven by their event strategy. Structure for the festival’s governance and organisation was quickly formalised. In addition, sponsorship was expected to cover over 50% of event costs (Tasman-Jones 2012). Indeed, in the aftermath of the 2015 protests, Megan Cunningham-Evans, co-Chair of the festival trust, pointed out that Pride ‘takes money and I don’t know how to get around that. We need commercial relationships, without them Pride would just not be possible’ (GayNZ.com 2015b). This reality immediately established the possibility of conflict between the priorities of commercial event management practices and the queer communities; it took only two years to surface.

**Pride and protest collide**

The incidents that took place in 2015 were driven by two groups. Although similarly motivated, the actions were carried out separately and directed at distinct targets. Unravelling these separate protest actions makes this clear and helps to paint a more complete picture.

In 2014, the local University of Auckland staged an inaugural ‘Pride Week’ on campus. In response, a group of queer activists established ‘Petty and Vindictive’ with the explicit intention of trying to radicalise the event. Although ultimately failing, members of this group went on to form the two groups at the centre of the Pride 2015 protests: No Pride in Prisons, and Queers Against Injustice. No Pride in Prisons (hereafter NPIP) was established with the broad aim of prison abolition, and it remains an active lobbying organisation to this day (see www.noprideinprisons.org.nz). Their actions at Pride were primarily focussed on its opposition to the participation of the New Zealand Police and Corrections departments, who they charge with an ongoing history of mistreatment of the queer communities, especially transgendered people (GayNZ.com 2015a). Queers Against Injustice (hereafter QAI), by contrast, were less formally organised and have not been active since 2015. Their actions focussed solely around concerns about ‘pinkwashing’, the commercialisation of Pride by corporate sponsorship and interests.

QAI were first to strike. As part of its sponsorship, ANZ bank had decorated four ATM machines in central Auckland, relabelling them ‘GAYTMs’ for the duration of Pride. Two days before the Parade, the GAYTM on Ponsonby Road, along the Parade route, was vandalised. Although QAI later stated they had left a poster at the scene explaining the protest, the paint colour was identified as white and the attack labelled homophobic in press reports.
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(e.g. ONE News 2015; Suckling 2015). The GAYTM was cleaned up, police notified, and no further action occurred.

On Saturday 21 February, the Pride Parade began its march down Ponsonby Road at 7.30 pm. As the Parade got underway, led by the Police and followed by Corrections, a small group of NPIP members jumped over event fencing and onto the Parade route, carrying a large NPIP banner, and attempted to disrupt the flow of the event. A video of the incident shows event security, organisers and Police quickly moving in to remove protestors, achieved after a disruption of only about one minute.1 The scuffle continued off the Parade route,2 and one protestor was eventually taken to hospital with a disputed fractured/broken arm.

In the context of the larger event the protest was a momentary incursion at best and did not ever threaten the Parade. The legitimacy of the violence experienced, and the claims and counterclaims that followed are not of central concern to the analysis here. Rather, it is the politics of the protest actions and the public discussion that took place in the aftermath. This discussion quickly became polarised and was fanned by a number of reports and contradictory eyewitness accounts that emerged (e.g. Oates 2015).

Additionally, in the midst of the growing vitriol, QAI released a statement about its attack on the GAYTM. Their central allegation noted that

we object to the representation of queer identity in terms of consumptive and wealthy citizens…reduc[ing] the queer subject to a bourgeois, cis-gender, white, male subject…We sought to draw attention to the lack of representation of bodies that counter the racist, classist and cis-biased nature of Pride.

(Queers Against Injustice 2015)

Despite the overall festival having concluded, the group carried out another attack on Monday 23 February, splashing pink paint on the ANZ bank branch in Ponsonby, on two police stations and two further ANZ bank ATMs. Statements left at the scene this time left no room for confusion about the rationale for the attacks (Newton 2015). After this time, QAI conducted no further actions.

Online reaction

The online reaction was swift, especially to the protest actions by NPIP. It was, perhaps, inflamed by public statements made by Parade organisers, who did not acknowledge the issues raised and instead attacked the actions of the protestors. Parade director Richard Taki, equating progress with his position as a married gay man, focussed on the amount of hours worked by volunteers and claimed that protesters had ‘made a mockery’ of this (GayNZ.com 2015c). Ironically, he also stated that the parade was about ‘community… [and] us being supportive of each other’ (GayNZ.com 2015c).

Supportive is not a word that describes the general tone of online reactions. It should be acknowledged that a reasonable number of commenters engaged in largely civil discussion, and some commenters and replies were incredibly lengthy and detailed. However, the discussion quickly polarised around two extreme positions, with a large number of argumentative repeat commenters, and conflicting accounts from people who claimed to have been at the scene of the protests.

Comments on the Facebook page of GayNZ.com, under the posting of the eyewitness account by Oates (2015), demonstrate this polarisation well. Critical of the protest,
a self-identified trans woman commented that ‘the Parade is a celebration of all our communities not a soapbox to push political, religious or racial agendas.’ Comments like this were met with opposing views, such as one commenter who noted,

there’s nothing more mainstream than siding with the apparatuses of the State and victim blaming members of your own community. Or aren’t they part of your community? Is it that you’ve got what you wanted and the Trans community are now expendable?

Another commenter, sarcastically, summarised the thread well:

‘I hate that this woman got hurt, but how dare she interrupt our fun time. This is for US’ – the majority of what I’ve seen from most people here. Yeah, god, what an inclusive and welcoming community. You’re all extremely brave for Standing Up For Yourselves and throwing more vulnerable queer people under the bus. You should be proud.

Similar positions, albeit more aggressively, were put forward when GayNZ.com posted their story about NPIP public statements (2015a). A commenter, who identified as a trans person of colour, put it bluntly: ‘ya’ll can continue being thrilled that some of us are…still dying and being incarcerated … go ahead. Enjoy your fucking glitter.’ Just as bluntly, someone else noted that, ‘they brought shame to a fun day out and again like the weirdos who threw paint on an ATM have successfully given the LGBT community a bad name,’ thereby also reflecting on the QAI protest. Someone else asserted that ‘this amateurish group doesn’t need even more exposure for there [sic] confused ideas.’

And on the festival’s Facebook page, posters demonstrated the same polarisation. Compare, for example, a well-known trans artist’s comment (‘Amazed at the amount of ignorance from what I thought was an understanding part of society’) with a gay man who contributed to multiple threads of discussion (‘Sad that a couple of thugs try and ruin the Auckland Pride Parade Festival. Well done everyone … who put on a wonderful show’).

The QAI protests received less attention overall, and the commentary was far more critical than supportive. When GayNZ.com posted a story on Facebook about the second graffiti attacks, for example, they received comments like ‘grow up you wankers and protest something with value instead of a company that has your rights in mind’ and ‘they have a point. Capitalism doesn’t coincide with civil rights’ were fairly typical of the polarisation. Interestingly, the critiques included comments like ‘obviously have never been on a committee to help organise a community event. Events like this don’t happen without sponsorship’ and ‘let’s be honest if they didn’t bankroll us everyone would complain no one supports us, yet they support us and it’s capitalism.’ This can be read as a tacit approval, or at least recognition, of the convergence of events and sponsorship that the contemporary events environment makes necessary, and is also something that the literature is beginning to explore (e.g. Close & Lacey 2014)

Concluding discussion

The themes visible in online commentary show that while some tried to discuss the protests within a broader historical, sociopolitical and economic context, others viewed the disruption as an affront to the fought-for freedoms and social change that has occurred since prior civic hostility towards Hero. In other words, to their perceived right to view Pride as a depoliticised celebratory spectacle (Browne 2007). While many have benefited greatly from
acceptance, this celebratory-progress narrative works against the original impetus of Pride, and both protests were attempting to point out that for some queer people, social acceptance and mobility is not their reality.

This case study demonstrates how divisive the politics of identity can become. Most often referred to as a community, the reality is that the queer communities are as stratified on the basis of race, gender, class, education and consumptive power as the societies of which they are a part (if not more so, given the communities’ diverse sexual identities). For event organisers, this makes trying to achieve consensus difficult: identity and cultural politics are deeply personal, and it can be hard to navigate these issues objectively. The economic importance of sponsorship along with perceptions that this represents the commodification of these identities adds an additional layer of tension, something visible in Pride events across the world.

Ultimately, it falls to event organisers to manage diverse stakeholders. In failing to first recognise the tensions within its community stakeholders, and then adequately address those concerns after the protests raised them, Pride management was forced to reckon with the negative fallout from assuming the ‘host community’ was homogeneous. To their credit, this lesson appears to have been learnt, and a more queer-diverse range of voices have been sought in subsequent years, and in the granting of applications to march in the parade (Furley 2017; GayNZ.com 2015d). This reinforces the argument put forward here: ‘host community’ – indeed all stakeholder groups – should be viewed as heterogeneous; no single voice should be assumed to speak on behalf of a stakeholder, and a diversity of voices should be sought out and incorporated into processes of festivalisation. In this sense, ideally, a range of voices, issues and concerns can be brought to the attention of event organisers and realistic, acceptable outcomes negotiated. At the very least, discussion occurs, stakeholders feel heard, and organisers become aware of issues that may threaten to disrupt their events.

Notes

1 Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJS5_mclIHY.
2 Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJXr-JdynBM.

References


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(NB: www.gaynz.com closed in early 2017. At press time, its content is being transferred to the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand (LAGANZ), hosted in the Alexander Turnbull Library at the National Library of New Zealand, but currently no web-accessible versions of these references exist. Digitised copies of the stories were made by the author, and are available on request.)