We Are What We Do
Reflexive Environmentalism in the Risk Society

Author: Amy Chin
Supervisor: Per Lindquist

MV109A Miljövetenskap III, 30 hp/ 30ECTS
Kultur och samhälle, Malmö högskola
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Abstract

This study aims to examine the environmentalism of We Are What We Do, a social change movement which aspires to making social impacts through aggregated individual actions. Through a qualitative single case study, the author analyses the movement’s strategies at inspiring and motivating people to take small actions, how it uses branding to mobilise collective actions and build a community, and the movement’s visions in the context of subpolitics. The study concludes that the We Are What Do embodies a reflexive form of environmentalism, as it chooses to deploy politics outside the conventional political arena, aims to engage new political agents and embraces self-organising and decentralised developments.

Keywords: environmentalism, social movement, environmental movement, subpolitics

Sammandrag

Studien syftar till att undersöka ekologismen i den sociala rörelsen We Are What We Do, som försöker förverkliga samhälleliga förändringar genom kollektiva små handlingar. Genom en kvalitativ fallstudie analyserar författaren rörelsens strategier som ska inspirera och motivera människor att agera, hur den utnyttjar märke och marknadsföring för att mobilisera kollektiva handlingar och bygga en gemenskap, och rörelsens visioner i det subpolitiska sammanhaget. Studien har slutsatsen att We Are What We Do är ett uttryck av den reflexiva ekologismen, eftersom den utvecklar politik utanför den traditionella politiska arenan, samt syftar till att engagera nya aktörer och omfamnar självorganiserande och avcentraliserade utvecklingar.

Nyckelord: ekologism, social rörelse, mljörörelse, subpolitik
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Foreword

How I came to know of *We Are What We Do* can serve as a testimony to its successful branding. It was the launch of “I’m Not a Plastic Bag”, the £5 canvas bag designed by Anya Hindmarch, that caught my attention. I did not manage to get the bag, but since then I have kept an eye on the movement’s developments. I believe it is important to study a movement like We Are What We Do because its implications are often overlooked by people who consider small actions as nothing but rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

I would like to thank Mr. Nick Stanhope at We Are What We Do for coordinating the email interview. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my thesis supervisor Dr. Per Lindquist, for all the inspirations and constructive criticisms he gave me, and for the many delightful and meaningful conversations we shared.
1 Setting the stage

1.1 Introduction

Modern environmentalism emerged in the 1960s as a result of heightened social awareness of the implication of human activity on the environment and in turn the negative effects of environmental deterioration on human life. Environmentalism can be expressed in many forms, e.g. a protest against genetically modified organisms, a government’s environmental policy, or a company’s launch of shoes made with recycled materials.

*We Are What We Do* is a social change movement co-founded by community worker David Robinson and former publicist Eugenie Harvey in London in 2004. Its aim is “to inspire people to use their everyday actions to change the world” (WAWWD 2009b). The movement believes big social change will happen when small actions are performed by lots of people. The list of simple actions it advocates currently consists of 130 actions with the environment being a core issue addressed by these actions (see Appendix 1).

The types of activities We Are What We Do engages in are varied. So far it has published three books (*Change the World for a Fiver*, *Change the World 9 to 5* and *Teach Your Granny to Text*) in Britain; together they present the 130 actions advocated by the movement. The movement also launches products and campaigns that aim to bring certain actions to life (e.g. in 2007 it launched a designer canvas bag to discourage the use of disposable plastic bags) and runs education programmes and community projects (e.g. the Young Speakers programme trains 16-18 year olds as public speakers to introduce school children to social and environmental engagements). The movement has created an online community through its website (wearewhatwedo.org) with interactive functions that facilitate users to take part in the movement from around the world, around the clock.

Besides in Britain, where it originated, the movement has also published books with a similar concept (presenting everyday actions that people can do to change the world) overseas, including Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. To date, We Are What We Do has sold almost one million books worldwide (WAWWD 2009b).
Although its development has gone beyond Britain to overseas, the organisation of We Are What We Do is far from resembling a transnational NGO. As of March 2009, its base remains a small team of eight full-time staff at an office in London (WAWWD 2009a).

1.2 Aim of the study and research questions
This study aims to examine the environmentalism of We Are What We Do. Through a qualitative single case study, with empirical material comprising books, the We Are What We Do website, documents (speech, news updates and press releases), email interview scripts and mass media features, the study endeavours to answer the following questions: What are the movement’s ways to inspire and motivate people to perform small actions? What are its ways to mobilise collective actions? What is nature of the movement’s politics?

1.3 Disposition
Chapter 1 presents the movement We Are What We Do, the study’s aim and research questions. Chapter 2 presents a brief account of modern environmentalism and the theories on which the analysis is based. The research approach, materials and research process are presented in Chapter 3. How We Are What We Do inspires people to perform small actions and how it mobilises collective actions are examined in Chapter 4, while the nature of the movement’s politics is analysed in Chapter 5. A summary of and reflections on the study, and suggestions for future research are presented in Chapter 6.
2 Risks, environmentalism and reflexivities

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to modern environmentalism and the various perspectives used to explain its emergence. I then use Ulrich Beck’s risk society theory to explain the connection between environmental problems and industrialisation, and elaborate on Beck’s theory of reflexive modernisation to examine the development of modern environmentalism. The chapter ends with a presentation of this study’s aim and research questions.

2.1 Modern environmentalism and the risk society

Modern environmentalism has evolved from the Preservation and Conservation movements that began in Britain and the United States in mid 19th century, and the reform environmentalist campaigns – advocating clean water, safe disposal of sewage and other waste, and better health care – that emerged in the industrialised areas of Europe, the United States and Australia in the early 20th century (Rootes 2003). In the immediate post World War II period, concerns with nature and resource conservation began to change into a new kind of environmental consciousness. The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 is widely regarded to have marked the beginning of modern environmentalism. Detailing the effects of the misuse of synthetic chemical pesticides and insecticides, *Silent Spring* heightened public awareness of the implications of human activity on the environment and of the cost in turn to human society. Perhaps more importantly, it took the pesticide issue “out of academic circles and technical journals and into the public arena (McCormick 1995: 67).

Backed by increasing scientific understanding of environmental impacts and faced with “the unintended consequences of rampant industrialisation and by individual’s experience of environmental degradation” (Rootes 2003), a new socio-economic developmental perspective came to be articulated. The concerns of a few scientists, administrators and interest groups “blossomed into a mass movement” (McCormick 1995: 56). By the late 1960s, the environment was recognised as an arena for public dispute and state policy intervention, and environmentalism had became a broad movement of social and political opposition (Jamison 1996).

Why did modern environmentalism emerge at this particular time (the 1960s) in this particular space (the industrialised countries)? The realist perspective attributes
the rise of modern environmentalism in the 1960s to objective conditions, i.e. increasing signs of environmental degradation supported by scientific evidence, including not the least *Silent Spring*. However, as McCormick observes, Carson’s book also exposes some of the “social, economic and scientific infrastructure that had knowingly permitted ecological degradation to occur” (1995: 65, emphasis original). This brings out an explanation from the *structuralist* perspective, which sees the 1960s as an era when industrial countries were teeming with profound dissatisfaction with established political structure. Environmental problems were seen as reflections of an unhealthy, unjust and uncomfortably materialistic society; the environmental movement leveraged on the social climate and channels of political protest opened up by the civil rights movement (Anderson 1997). The *social-cultural* perspective, on the other hand, sees environmentalism as part of a large-scale transformation of value systems in advanced industrial society. Inglehart holds the thesis that the rise of environmentalism was a result of environmental degradation colliding with increased concern for quality of life in the affluent post-war society (Anderson 1997; McCormick 1995).

In this study, I will use Ulrich Beck’s theories of *risk society* and *reflexive modernisation* to explain the emergence of the new environmental consciousness. Beck contends that in the later half of the 20th century (an epoch that also witnessed the beginning of modern environmentalism) the industrial society has begun to head towards becoming the risk society – this is not a brand new society, but “a developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society” (Beck 1994: 5).

The risk society is not an option, states Beck, it arises as a result of the modernisation processes being “blind and deaf to their own effects and threats” (ibid: 6). When modernisation produces wealth through industrialisation, it also produces risks – “risks are an *incidental* problem of modernisation in *undesirable abundance*” (Beck 1992: 26, emphasis original). Environmental problems such as chemical residues the soil, toxins in foodstuffs, pollutants in the air and radioactivity all have their basis in *overproduction*; they are risks of modernisation (ibid).
2.2 From systemic reflexivity to social reflexivity

Throughout history the human society has been confronted with risks, but Beck argues that the risks of modernisation are distinct due to their inescapability, incalculability and systemic reflexivity.

The risk society is confronted with threats at unprecedented magnitudes. Risks have become global – they can no longer be delimited spatially, temporally or socially (Lupton 1999). Through the statement “[p]overty is hierarchic, smog is democratic” Beck (1992: 37) points out the inescapability of environmental risks: polluted air does not care about how fat your wallet is; it affects the lungs of everyone, the rich and the poor alike.

Beck also believes that the new dangers have removed the conventional pillars of safety calculation. It is hardly possible anymore to blame definite individuals for such damage; if the worst should happen, there are no plans for aftercare (Beck 1996a). Because of their non-localised nature and potential long-term effect, the risks of modernisation are incalculable, “the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even born yet” (ibid: 31).

The most significant feature of the risks of modernisation, nevertheless, is its systemic reflexivity. Ecological risks such as pollutions and toxins are outcomes of human actions, “principally the related events of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation” (Lupton 1999: 65). The risks contain a boomerang effect in the sense that sooner or later ecological disasters strike back to hit the centres of wealth production (which also are the centres of risk production). Such boomerang-nature of risks also indicates a self-destructive turn of the dynamics of industrial society, the irony being it is the victories of modernisation that produce the risk society (Beck 1994). As industrialisation systemically produces wealth, it at the same time systemically produces risks that erode its wealth – such risks are hence systemically reflexive.

Beck believes that the industrial society’s systemic reflexivity – “the reflex-like threat to industrial society’s own foundations through a successful further modernisation which is blind to dangers” – should give rise to a social reflexivity – “the growth of awareness, the reflection on this situation” (Beck 1996b: 34, emphasis original). Society becomes reflexive when, recognising the inescapability and incalculability of threats, it can reflect on “the bases of the democratic, national, economic model of the first modernity, and to examine prevailing institutions” (Beck
In other words, social reflexivity is essential in tackling systemic reflexivity, and social reflexivity is a form of reflexive modernisation – the process of modernity coming to examine and critique itself.

Awareness and reflections on risks inevitably lead to oppositions, as can be seen in the debates among experts belonging to different disciplines, between politicians and citizen groups, between corporations and consumers. Nevertheless Beck (1996b) points out that confronted with threats that are generated through technological-industrial development, oppositions can take two paths. The kind of opposition that takes place “by recourse to the old offerings of industrial society” (Beck 1994: 11), demanding more technology, more market, more government and so on, is opposition down the linear path. The kind of opposition that embodies “a rethinking and a new way of acting”, that accepts and affirms the ambivalence found in risk society, is opposition down the reflexive path (ibid: 12). Only when it is reflexive, Beck stresses, the opposition can then have far-reaching consequences for all areas of social action.

If we examine modern environmental problems in the context of the risk society, we can clearly see them as risks of modernisation. However, if we examine modern environmentalism – an opposition that confronts environmental problems – in the same context, do we see it as an opposition down the reflexive path?

2.3 Linear environmentalism and politics
In the 1960s and 70s, modern environmentalism represented a new worldview that pointed to a new way of organising society. Prominent environmental movement organisation like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace argued that the solution to environmental problems lay in fundamental social changes; the green movement at the outset aimed to “reorder the basis of human society and its internal values and relationships”, and demanded “more than amendments to existing political ideologies and economic philosophies” to tackle environmental problems (McCormick 1995: 214). As environmentalists formulated a more explicit collective identity and asked people to get involved in the process of changing society, the environmental debate developed into the environmental movement (Jamison 1996).

Ironically, environmentalism’s “social movement” phase, i.e. 1970s and 80s, was also a period marked by active institution building, increasing politicisation of the environmental lobby as well as the emergence of green politics (Anderson 1997;
Jamison 1996). Environmental policies, Departments of Environment, commissions and committees to deal with environmental problems were popping up in almost every industrialised country. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of countries with established environmental management institutions increased from 15 to 115 (Anderson 1997). By 1988, 15 Western European countries had national green parties with 118 green representatives sitting in nine national assemblies (McCormick 1995). Environmental issues became embedded in the programs of mainstream political parties, while environmental research, education and technological development were organised in new institutional forms (Jamison 1996; Rootes 2003).

Such rapid politicisation of environmental issues would not have happened were it not for the social reflexivity among environmentalists. Visions and strategies on tackling the risks of modernisation did not originate from politicians and governments, they were put on the social agenda by an “unexpected renaissance of a political subjectivity” and citizen-initiative groups that were “[g]rass-roots-oriented, extra-parliamentary, not tied to classes or parties, organisationally and programmatically diffuse and feuding” (Beck 1994: 18-19). It was the environmental movement’s awareness and reflections on industrial society’s risk productions that resulted in significant political impacts. However, by resorting to parliamentary politics, i.e. demanding more government, more technology, I will argue that the environmental movement could only be regarded as linear, not reflexive opposition (see section 2.2). It was environmentalism’s social reflexivity that resulted in environmental issues being recognised, debated and dealt with, but the co-optation of environmental issues by political parties and institutions also meant that such reflexivity was being eroded.

As pro-environmentalism parties made their entrances into the political arena, non-governmental environmental organisations also underwent significant transformation. By the early 1990s environmentalism was characterised by environmental organisations becoming increasingly incorporated into the policy-making process, mostly in the form of transnational NGOs (Anderson 1997). Such institutionalisation resulted in environmentalists involving directly in major research and development programmes as expert consultants, publicists, problem formulator and knowledge producers (ibid). While this kind of development could be seen as a sign of success, it could also be seen as a backlash, because “institutionalisation tends to be accompanied by greater bureaucracy, which may dampen more radical strategies
for change” (ibid: 81). Being included as part of the institutions can also become a source of weakness – how can environmentalism continue to inspire when all the environmental organisations require from their supporters is continuous payment of membership fees? To support their growing scales, organisations have also become increasingly dependent on funding, a large portion of which come from corporations. “Who or what do these NGOs actually represent?” wonders Jamison (1996: 242). There is a risk that organisational expansions of environmental NGOs mean that their interests will continue to converge with those of the multinational corporations, which means that the critical role that NGOs or the environmental movement should still play would be seriously weakened. Consequently, the environmental movement may have lost an important part of its critical identity (Jamison 1996).

2.4 Reflexive environmentalism and subpolitics
Despite evidence of institutionalisation, Rootes (2003) points out that there have been recurrent waves of environmental mobilisations that have revitalised the movement by introducing thematic and organisational innovation. In the same way as a systemic reflexivity could bring out a social reflexivity in the risk society, there are also actors within modern environmentalism who explore the possibility of a reflexive form of environmentalism. If linear environmentalism means activities within conventional politics, where is the arena for reflexive environmentalism?

Beck (1996a: 18) proposes the concept of subpolitics: “politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of nation-states”. Subpolitics entails direct and ad hoc individual participation; it tends to “set all areas of society in motion” (ibid). The private sector, business, science, towns, and everyday life – areas previously “protected by the political in industrial capitalism” are all “caught in the storms of political conflicts in reflexive modernity” (Beck 1994: 18). Self-organising, subpolitics can change the rules and boundaries of the political, thus setting politics free, making it “more open and susceptible to new linkages” (Beck 1996a: 18).

Risks are “politically reflexive” because confrontation with risks drives society to pose questions about current practices (Beck 1992b: 21). When “dangers are being produced by industry, externalised by economics, individualised by the legal system, legitimised by the natural sciences and made to appear harmless by
politics”, the power and credibility of institutions start to break down, giving room for subpolitics to emerge (Beck 1996a: 18).

Participation in subpolitics can be realised in the most inconspicuously ways: “[p]olitical elements were discovered and deployed in everyday activity” (ibid: 19). That is to say, by choosing which brand of coffee to buy, by preferring public transportation to driving, a person is making political statements. In subpolitics, agents outside the political system – “citizens, the public sphere, social movements, expert groups, working people on site” are allowed to engage in social design, in “shaping society from below” (Beck 1994: 23, emphasis original). Subpolitics represents a kind of social reflexivity that does not exclude anyone or anything – applied to environmentalism, subpolitics would be embracing alliances of all agents “for a cause that is in the higher sense legitimate: the saving of the world environment” (Beck 1996a: 20).

How does one set subpolitics going? How does one inspire agents who usually stand outside of the political system to believe they can shape society by buying an organic apple? Subpolitics does not rely on ballots cast at the voting booths, nonetheless its success would not be possible without solidarity. In the risk society, the biggest obstacle is inaction caused by anxiety, which is in turn caused by the nature of risks and individualisation.

The inescapability and incalculability of risks mean that outcries of “I am afraid!” echo from all corners in the risk society (Beck 1992: 49). Society is overwhelmed by worries and doubts: Have the pesticides on the surface of the paprika been completely washed off? Does the filling of my pillow contain toxic chemicals? Risks could exist anywhere in life. There could come to a point when too much anxiety paralyse actions, because “[w]here there is no escape, people ultimately no longer want to think about it”; feelings of shock eventually turn into rage, hopelessness and apathy – ecofatalism prevails when people accept inescapable risks as their fate (ibid: 37).

It is terrifying to be living in a world teeming with risks; it is even more terrifying to be living in a risky and individualised society. The risk society is also an individualised society because the modernisation processes have reduced the influence of the traditional structuring institutions of society in the formation of personal identity (Lupton 1999). Living and acting in uncertainty becomes a basic experience in the risk society yet individuals are expected to perceive, interpret and
handle things all by themselves (Beck 1994). Individualisation is the new type of conducting and arranging life in the risk society; each person is presumed to be the “actor, designer, juggler and stage director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions” (ibid: 14). Individualisation is a source of anxiety, because the usual frames of references, such as families and traditions, are gone – “Life becomes less certain even while it is placed more under one’s control” (Lupton 1999: 71).

Nevertheless, Beck (1992: 47) believes that the risk society could produce a new type of community where “members of divergent classes, parties, occupational groups and age groups organise into citizens’ movements”. Faced with common hazards, prospective victims of global risks tend to unify; in this way, risks becomes a binding force. The solidarity that arises from anxiety could become a political force, claims Beck, although “how the binding force of anxiety operates” and “[i]n what form of action will they organise” remain open questions (ibid: 49).

2.5 We Are What We Do – a movement embodying reflexive environmentalism?

If subpolitics means that political elements are discovered and deployed in everyday activity, is it possible that reflexive environmentalism and subpolitical environmental actions could be found in a movement that firmly believes in changing society through small everyday actions – a movement that goes by the name as straightforward as We Are What We Do?

The aim of this study is to use Beck’s theory of reflexive modernisation, in particular the notion of subpolities, to examine the environmentalism of We Are What We Do. What are the movement’s ways to inspire and motivate people to perform small actions? What are its ways to mobilise collective actions? What is nature of its politics?
3 A study with the case in focus

This study applies Beck’s theory of reflexive modernisation to examine the environmentalism of the social change movement We Are What We Do. Beck believes that the modern industrial society is heading towards becoming the risk society, where “risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection” (1994: 5). Beck contends that faced with risks that escape institutional monitoring and protected, society needs reflexive modernisation. Instead of politics, society needs subpolitics which entails a rethinking, a new of acting and involves the participation of new actors.

The research is based on a qualitative single case study with empirical materials including books, the We Are What We Do website, documents (speech, news updates and press releases), email interview scripts and newspaper features. Content analysis is the method used in analysis.

3.1 Case study as research approach

A case study is “a research approach in which one or a few instances of a phenomenon are studied in depth” (Blatter 2008). One can further differentiate this approach by looking at the number of case(s) being studied (single or multiple) and the analytical aim, i.e. whether the case study aims to describe, explain or explore a certain issue (Blaxter et al 2008).

Data in a case study is collected from real life experiences and practices. The strong sense of reality works to make the data “more persuasive and accessible” (ibid: 74). As information is collected across a wide range of features, a case study enables the generation of thick, rich and detailed explanation of the phenomenon being investigated (Hammersley 2003; Wolff 2007). However, a case study could risk being biased in its account and offering a narrow understanding of a specific event or group (Wolff 2007). The researcher must also be careful not to lose track of the focus of the analysis, as the abundance of information generated in a case study might make analysis difficult (Blaxter et al 2008). It is often difficult to make generalisations from the findings of a qualitative case study, as situations are often specific to each individual case.

A case study can provide data that “support or refute existing social theory” (Wolff 2007). When a case study is designed to test or illustrate a theoretical point,
the case is treated as an instance of a type and described in terms of a particular theoretical framework; when the study is exploratory or concerned with developing theoretical ideas, it is likely to be more open-ended in character (Hammersley 2003).

This study is a “theory consuming” study in which a particular case takes centre stage (Esaiasson et al 2004: 40). I make use of Beck’s theories of risk society and reflexive modernisation and apply them to the We Are What We Do movement in an attempt to examine the nature of the movement’s environmentalism. The aim is not to generalise but to understand a real life case with the help of existing theories. This study is therefore designed to be carried out through a single case exploratory case study.

3.2 Collection and organisation of empirical data
A large portion of the empirical materials come from primary sources, which include the three books *Change the World for a Fiver*, *Change the World 9 to 5* and *Teach Your Granny to Text*, the movement’s official website and an email interview with a core member of the We Are What We Do team. Materials from secondary sources (newspaper features on the movement from the Britain and Australia) serve a complementary function as they include interviews of the movement’s founders whom I was not able to interview personally. Additional facts are extracted from the newspaper features, which I use to complement the information gathered from primary sources.

Applying the model suggested by Esaiasson et al (2004), I see that together, the primary and secondary sources fulfil the criteria for valid and reliable sources materials, i.e. authenticity, independence, contemporariness and tendency. While the primary sources provide the study with materials that are authentic and contemporary, materials from secondary sources provide a balance in terms of independence and tendency which materials from primary sources might lack.

3.2.1 Document collection
The focus of document collection for this study is work-based (Blaxter et al 2008), i.e. I drew on materials produced by We Are What We Do in order to understand its vision and activities. Documents collected are in the form of news updates, press releases, books, a transcript of a speech as well as newspaper features.

The books serve a duo purpose of both providing information about the social change actions the movement advocates and being the sources for the analysis of the
movement’s visual and rhetoric presentations. A total of 130 actions are presented in the three books (50 actions in Change the World for a Fiver, 50 actions in Change the World 9 to 5 and 30 actions in Teach Your Granny to Text). The actions are numbered, but the order in which they are presented is not a result of a specific logic; they are put in the current order to “make sure that the journey through the book is an inspiring and enjoyable one” and “how the ideas can complement each other” (WAWWD 2009a). After reading through the books, I identified three main issues the actions intend to address: the environment, human relationships and personal well-being. I then compiled all the actions into a list in electronic form. Since environmentalism is the focus of my study, I also created a separate list of actions for environmental issues to help me maintain my focus during analysis. Actions like Turn off applications at the mains (Action 12) and Use a mug not a plastic cup (Action 25) were put on the environmental issues list.

From the movement’s website wearewhatwedo.org I collected a total of 135 news updates and 33 press releases. Both sets of information are presented on the website in chronological order. I printed out every entry, took a quick look at the contents and identified several themes such as “Organisation”, “Books” and “Campaigns”. I then read through the entries again and filed the entries under the appropriate theme. Other documents collected from the website include profiles of the movement’s co-founders David Robinson and Eugenie Harvey, and a transcript of a speech given by David Robinson in 2006. I also found a number of news clippings and features available for download; they were complemented by further newspaper features which I located through Internet search engines.

Document study is “a relatively unobtrusive form of research” (Blaxter et al 2008: 168) which allows me to understand the origin, history and activities of We Are What We Do. Considering the constraints posed by physical distance, time and financial resources, this method provided me the information needed for the study without a visit to the movement’s base in London. It proved to be an invaluable tool in the research process. The documents I collected comprise mostly primary data. The secondary data are useful to the study in the sense that they contain interviews of the movement’s founders whom I was unable to get into direct contact with. I am aware that the newspaper features might be produced as publicity for the movement; however, I believe that given a chance for an in-depth interview with the movement’s founders, I most likely would get similar information – from the movement’s point of
view, whether it is talking to a journalist or a researcher, they would still be explaining to interested parties why they do what they do and how they do it. Blaxter et al (2008) argues that it makes sense to turn to secondary sources if the data a researcher wants already exist in some form. The use of secondary data, in this case, has provided me with cost-effective resources. It may also be used as cross-references to confirm, modify or contradict findings from primary data.

3.2.2 Email interview
A face-to-face interview with the We Are What We Do team would be ideal. Unfortunately I could not afford a trip to London. It was therefore decided from the onset of the study design that I would pursue to conduct an interview through email.

Differences between email an interview and a face-to-face interview can be considered in terms of asynchronicity, reduced cues and anonymity (Egan 2008). Communication in an email interview is asynchronous because the interview subject responds to the researcher’s questions at a time and setting of his/her choice. It allows more time for reflection which may produce a richer quality of data, but the spontaneity of a face-to-face interview will be missing (ibid.). Since my objective for conducting an interview was mainly to gather information about the movement’s activities and strategies, I do not think the quality of data gathered is compromised due to the lack of spontaneity. Instead, the interview subject could have the time to provide more elaborated answers to my questions.

I began an initial contact with We Are What We Do on the 22nd of February 2009. From the movement’s website I found the contact email address. In the first message I introduced myself, the purpose of my study and my request for an email interview (see Appendix 2). A couple of days later I received a positive response agreeing to my request. I replied with a more detailed explanation of the study’s aim and informed the contact person when I should be able to send the interview questions through. Drafting of interview questions took a couple of weeks as I needed time to formulate the theoretical framework before I could decide on the concrete questions to ask. The questions were sent on the 22nd March 2009 together with a formal introduction, which included a description of the study, the aim of the interview and my contact information (see Appendix 3). The interview subject was given two weeks’ time to answer the questions, and I checked in on the status a week after the
questions were sent to make sure that things were on track. I received the answers on the 6th April 2009.

The interview conducted was semi-structured. I compiled a list of questions with some expecting specific answers and some expecting open-ended answers. An example of a question expecting a specific answer is “How many people (both full-time and part-time) currently work at the We Are What We Do office (as of March 2009)?”; an example of a question expecting an open-ended answer is “What do you want to achieve through this launch [of a new website]?” (see Appendix 4).

Email interviews in this case proved to be economical and time-efficient; it saved me travel costs and transcription time, and at the same time provided me with abundant data. I was aware of the possibility of technical failure, i.e. my computer or the email server might crash. I therefore printed out the messages and saved a couple of back up files at different locations.

3.3 Systematic and objective data analysis

The aim of the study is to examine the environmentalism of We Are What We Do. My chosen method of analysis is content analysis, which entails a substantial amount of close reading.

In qualitative research, content analysis is “typically inductive” (Julien 2008); researchers begin with close reading before attempting to uncover the latent contents. As this is an interpretive approach, it is important for researchers using content analysis to acknowledge the fact that the text is “open to subjective interpretation, reflects multiple meanings and is context dependent” (ibid.) – a text (or even one single sentence) may be relevant to more than one theme.

To explore a concept through an empirical study, the concept needs to be operationalised, i.e. the researcher has to come up with concrete ways (“operational indicators”) to analyse the empirical data (see Esaiasson et al 2004: 62-69). To examine the environmentalism of We Are What We Do, I came up with three operational indicators to structure the analysis: (1) What are the movement’s ways to inspire and motivate people to perform small actions? (2) What are its ways to mobilise collective actions? (3) What is nature of its politics?

I went through the data piece by piece and sorted the data which I believed would be relevant for discussion under each of the above mentioned questions. For example, when going through the book Change the World for a Fiver, I would cite a
sentence from its Preface ("We are trying to show the power of a simple shift in attitudes and day-to-day behaviour") and put it under indicator 1; when I thought the layout design of *Shop locally* (Action 39) would be a good example to illustrate how the movement presents its information, I put it under indicator 2. During this sorting process, my point of departure was the data, i.e. I read through the data and tried to understand its nature and what information it could provide to the study. Afterwards I went through another round of sorting, this time with the operational indicators as my points of departure, e.g. with indicator 3 (nature of the movement’s politics) in mind, I read through the news updates and focused on lifting out citations and activities that could be used to illustrate its political vision. I found this switch of perspective strategy very useful in safeguarding the extraction of relevant data for analysis, especially for a study involving only one researcher as I had no partner to cross-check my findings.

It is important for the researcher to maintain a distance from the data in order not to get “too embedded and bound up” (Blaxter et al 2008: 219). As a measure to maintain a high level of objectivity, I supported the analysis with as much empirical materials as possible, citing from interviews and news articles. I also deliberately took breaks during the analysis phase. After each draft I would leave the text aside and occupied myself with other activities. Sometimes the break was a few hours, sometimes a couple of days. Such distancing proved to be very helpful as I could go back to the text with a fresh pair of eyes.

### 3.4 Ethics

Ethics is of particular importance in qualitative research due to the closer relationships between the researcher and the researched (Blaxter et al 2008). The researcher should exercise ethical responsibilities throughout the research design, data collection, analysis and information dissemination stages of a study. Ethical issues that need to be considered include privacy, anonymity and confidentiality.

A large part of my empirical materials, including the primary data, are already available to the public either in the form of consumer goods or information available of public Internet websites. I was able to obtain them without having to receive any consent from We Are What We Do. I believe no issue of confidentiality or privacy was compromised when information drawn from these sources were revealed in the study.
Before the email interview was conducted, I asked for consent and explained clearly the purpose of the study before I sent the questions. To identify myself as a student from Malmö University, I provided the contact person with a link to the university’s website and both my personal and student email addresses. In the introduction to the interview, I stated clearly that the respondent will be kept anonymous and information collected would be used solely for the purpose of this study. Contact information was also provided for the interview subject in case of enquiries.
4 We are en route to BIG change

This chapter examines the strategies and activities of We Are What We Do. The movement “live[s] by the maxim small actions \( \times \) lots of people = big change” (WAWWD 2009b), i.e. simple actions undertaken by enough people can change the world (WAWWD 2005b). In the context of the risk society, where people are becoming symptomatically anxious because of inescapable, incalculable risks and increasingly individualised lifestyles, this seemingly simple formula implies great challenges. How does the movement attempt to inspire and motivate people to start taking actions? How does it attempt to convince people that collectively, even the smallest action can result in big impacts?

4.1 Promoting small actions

4.1.1 Solutions are all around us

By launching a movement that encourage people to “make a difference to some of the biggest problems facing the world; climate change, poverty, crime, mental illness, community breakdown etc” (WAWWD 2007d), We Are What We Do implies that the world we currently live in is loaded with problems. However, instead of putting the spotlight on the problems, it chooses to direct people to focus on the solutions. Gloomy portrayals of melting ice blocks, rising sea levels and miserable polar bears would only heighten a sense of helplessness and hopelessness; We Are What We Do rather puts its effort in telling people what can be done. It is essentially a movement driven by imminent risks, but it refuses to indulge in fear and anxiety – the current condition can be changed, it is saying, and the ways to change it are simple.

The movement has suggested 130 actions, all of which could be considered as “the simplest actions where small adjustments could be undertaken by almost everybody without significant sacrifice”, explains co-founder David Robinson (2006b: 4). Decline plastic bags whenever possible (Action 01), Take public transport when you can (Action 06), Photocopy on both sides (Action 78), Don’t charge your phone overnight (Action 122) – in the words of Tim Ashton, creative director for the book Change the World for a Fiver, these actions are so simple and deeply embedded in everyday life that they could be considered “blindly obvious” (West 2004).

Such simplicity and obviousness are a deliberate choice. We Are What We Do tries to understand the reason behind low interest and participation in collective
actions for social changes: “why is it so difficult? Perhaps it is the scale of the problems which induces the state of paralysis” (WAWWD 2004b: Preface). The movement’s other co-founder Eugenie Harvey (cited in Caesar 2007) explains that while they are convinced that “people really do want to make a difference”, they also believe that people are “overwhelmed by the information and the scale of the problem”. As a result, We Are What We Do intentionally offers “simple, digestible, easy-to-do actions” (ibid).

Another reason the movement chooses to promote actions that are “hardly rocket science” is because its goal is to encourage “more to do something” and “to engage many not the few” (Robinson 2006a and 2007). Actions like Turn off unnecessary lights (Action 12) and Avoid waste (Action 86) are examples of what the movement considers as simple solutions that are easily forgotten in busy lives (WAWWD 2007b). The ideas are not original and they are not meant to be. Robinson explains that these actions are conceived to be “sticky, simple, engaging, symbolic expressions of timeless values” (2006b: 5) that can communicate, explain and reinforce the movement’s core message, i.e. small actions times lots of people equals BIG change.

In other words, We Are What We Do pays attention and makes the effort to make saving the planet feel simple (O’Dwyer 2005). By being commonplace, these actions – already embedded in everyday life – have the familiar qualities that do not intimidate people. Changing the world, saving the environment are not something only experts can do – a child can turn off unnecessary lights as diligently as a physicist, a retired person can shop locally as often as a brain surgeon. We Are What We Do chooses to inspire and motivate people to take actions by reminding them that there are many things in everyday life that can be done to improve the status of the environment and life in general. This approach could be just what the anxiety-laden risk society needs, because no matter how worried a person is about climate change, it would not be too difficult to shut down the computer properly.

4.1.2 Small actions are fun actions
Promoting small, everyday actions is We Are What We Do’s tactic to inspire and motivate people who feel anxious about environmental and social problems to begin doing something. It is, however, not enough. People may identify with these actions, they may already know what they can do, but still they may not want to do them, for
reasons as simple as “It’s boring”. Hence the movement needs another tactic to show people that changing the world is fun, not a chore.

The conception and design of *Change the World for a Fiver*, the book that launched the movement, are epitomes of the movement’s presentation strategies. Creative director of the book Tim Ashton explains, “Our aim was to communicate some very simple actions in a way which was *fun, cool and engaging* rather than worthy and dull” (WAWWD 2004a, emphasis added). In fact, in the newspaper features of *Change the World for a Fiver*, its presentation has often been given special mention. It is described as a book of simple ideas “packaged seductively, with snappy copy and illustrations” (Ley 2006: 29); a book that takes a fairly serious subject and deals with it in a light and engaging way, as “[t]he suggestions are presented with a mix of bluntness, whimsy and memorable wit” (West 2004).

The fun, cool and engaging style is consistently found in the other two books *Change the World 9 to 5* and *Teach Your Granny to Text* as well as in the movement’s official website. In the following sections I will analyse how this style is executed by means of visual design, rhetoric and interactive tools.

**Visual design**

The covers of *Change the World for a Fiver, Change the World 9 to 5* and *Teach Your Granny to Text* are characterised by bright colours, hand-drawn logotype and comic book style illustrations that resemble children books (see Figure 1). The feelings of fun and casualness they convey would immediately draw the attention of the curious reader and invite him/her to read the books in a relaxed mood.

![Book covers](image_url)

**Figure 1**

Book covers (left to right): *Change the World for a Fiver, Change the World 9 to 5* and *Teach Your Granny to Text* (WAWWD 2004; 2006a; 2008)
The 130 actions are illustrated in witty and intuitive ways that connect strongly with the messages. For *Get fitter, feel better* (Action 11), a red traffic light shows a silhouette that suggests an overweight person. Even without reading the text, a reader could easily understand the argument that we should exercise to keep the body in good shape (see Figure 2). For *Shop locally* (Action 39), the text is incorporated into the familiar images of the “We’re open/ closed” signs; on the “We’re closed sign” is a message that explains the shop will no longer be in business because not enough people shop locally (see Figure 3).

![Figure 2](image1.png)

**Figure 2**
Action 11 Get fitter, feel better (AWWWD 2004)

![Figure 3](image2.png)

**Figure 3**
Action 39 Shop locally (AWWWD 2004)

A dynamic colour scheme is applied to the interface design of We Are What We Do website (wearewhatwedo.org). Each section has a different colour as the background colour, e.g. blue for “Home”, green for “Do something”, violet for “Our products” and red for “About us” (see Figure 4). Intuitive icons are used for easy understanding.
e.g. a sharp “tick” is used for the Action Tracker (see Figure 5. For explanation on the function of Action Tracker see section 4.2.2). As the Action Tracker enables people to keep track of the actions they have completed; the “tick” icon creates a direct connection to a checklist.

![Figure 4](image_url)

**Figure 4**
Interface designs for www.wearewhatwedo.org (AWWD 2009b)

![Figure 5](image_url)

**Figure 5**
The Action Tracker icon (AWWD 2009b)

**Rhetoric**
The 130 actions are also presented by a style of writing that has been reviewed by journalists as “optimistic, inspiring, never finger-wagging” (Ley 2006: 30). The texts are written in a style that after reading them, a reader gets concrete information about why a certain action is worth-doing as well as a chuckle. For example, *Find out where your lunch has come from* (Action 51), which encourages people to think about the environmental cost of their food, begins like this:
The average kiwi fruit flown in from New Zealand travels 12,000 miles to be part of your lunch.

And, according to the experts, that kiwi fruit creates five times its own weight in greenhouse gases, getting here.

Which might lead you to imagine that the little fruit spent the entire trip farting […] But in fact it's just because of the fuel employed in getting the fruit here.

(WAWWD 2006a)

Reading the farting joke, the readers will probably have a little laugh picturing a farting kiwi as they reflect on their consumption behaviours. The decision to cut down on purchase of non-seasonal, non-locally grown fruits could then be motivated by an equally humorous reason – “I’d rather take the English apple; it does not fart as much as the kiwi”.

For *Photocopy on both sides* (Action 78), the reader is confronted with a couple of borderline-ridiculous questions: “How would you feel if your hairdresser only cut the hair on the left-hand side of your head? How would you feel if Top Shop sold you a pair of trousers with only one leg?” (WAWWD 2006a). After that, comes the serious argument, “There are two sides to every story – and two sides to every pieces of paper” (ibid). Again, through rhetoric, the seriousness of the issue is toned down so it becomes approachable; the issue however is never brushed aside because stern information is also provided alongside the humour, “[t]he amount of waste paper buried in the UK each year would fill 103,448 double-decker buses” (ibid).

**Interactive tools**

Besides making the actions *look* fun (through visual design) and *sound* fun (through rhetoric), *We Are What We Do* takes a step forward and provides interactive tools to the readers so that they can perform the actions as if playing games. Anyone who wants to plant a tree (Action 05) can begin by using the five Scots Pine seeds provided in *Change the World for a Fiver* (WAWWD 2004); students who decide to test their teacher on his/her green living habits (Action 106) can conveniently use the test paper printed in *Teach Your Granny to Text* (WAWWD 2008); office workers who would like to spread Mahatma Gandhi’s message “We must be the change we want to see in the world” (Action 98) can simply put up the poster that comes with *Change the World 9 to 5* (WAWWD 2006a) anywhere in the office (the book suggests the bathroom as an ideal location); anyone who wants to stop pizza flyers or other junk mails being stuffed down his/her mailbox (Action 121) can make the wish
clear by putting one of the stickers that come with *Teach Your Granny to Text* on the door, e.g. “I love trees. No junk mail please” (WAWWD 2008).

### 4.2 Engaging lots of people

We Are What We Do firmly believes that “change is possible, on an unimaginable scale” and urges people to “imagine, believe and begin” the change process (WAWWD 2006a: Preface). However, even when the movement has managed to convince people that small actions could be the solutions to the problems facing the world today and it is fun to take these actions, there is still one major obstacle to overcome – people need to believe that the small actions they take will have an impact. The movement needs to find ways to engage lots of people to believe in and take small actions in order to make *small actions X lots of people = BIG change* a reality.

In the risk society, certainties of industrial society disintegrate, conventional frames of references and communities such as traditions and the family play much minor roles in forming personal identities; individuals are presumed to be the “actor, designer, juggler and stage director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions” (Beck 1994: 14). There is the compulsion in each individual to “find and invent new certainties” for him/herself as well as for other people; this signifies new interdependences, need for new kinds of community which will cater to new kinds of solidarity (ibid). In an increasingly individualised society, how can one convince people to believe in collective actions, and to stay loyal to collective behaviours?

From his 30 years of experience in community work, the co-founder of We Are What We Do David Robinson (2006b) sees a paradox,

“I have seen how it has become more difficult to recruit volunteers for the sort of *formal* opportunity that demands *regular* commitment. At the same time, there is no shortage of enthusiasm for *episodic* participation, team challenges and *informal* support” (Robinson 2006b: 1, emphasis added).

As he ponders over how to change attitudes and behaviours, Robinson (2006a) believes that success is only attainable when one understands and works within the contemporary context, where it is increasingly more difficult to motivate individuals through “weekly meetings, a membership badge and a rule book”. To launch a successful social change movement, he and his colleagues need to “redefine [their]
understanding of community and reinvent [society’s] sense of belonging with a category-shifting vision” (Robinson 2006b:2).

Instead of past social movements, Robinson decides to turn to an unusual source for inspiration: the world’s most successful commercial brands. To recruit followers – loyal followers – We Are What We Do would be launched as a brand “as instantly recognisable as Nike or MTV” (Robinson cited in O’Dwyer 2005: 26). A brand like Nike has managed to capture people’s imagination and provide them with a label to identify with, recognise fellow aspirations and feel part of an identifiable community (Robinson 2006b). He argues that commercial brands and social movements basically have the same objectives: to shape attitudes, to influence behaviour and to create a sense of community (ibid); the fundamental difference being a commercial brand aims to raise financial capital while a social movement aims to raise social consciousness (Robinson cited in O’Dwyer 2005: 27). The “sustainable global brand” We Are What We Do is hence conceived to “inspire simple changes in attitudes and social behaviour”; it is to become “a brand to believe in, a mechanism for converting belief into behaviour and, ultimately, a new kind of community not of joiners but of independent doers” (Robinson 2006a and 2006b: 2, emphasis added).

Harvey (cited in Ley 2006:29) describes We Are What We Do as “a unifying thing” – it is a brand with a timeless aspiration (“We must be the change we want to see in the world” by Mahatma Gandhi) as its core value promoted through “trendy executions” of books, website, products and activities” (ibid). The messages of We Are What We Do are not new, as the journalist Ley comments, what is new is how its founders understand the nature of an individualised world, takes inspiration from unlikely sources and turns “ethical living into a brand – something aspirational like the Nike swoosh or the Coca-Cola logo” (Ley 2006: 29). In the year of its launch, 2004, We Are What We Do was chosen as one of 50 Creative Business entries by Financial Times because of its strategy that “the movement should connect with people by creating a brand they could identify with” (Financial Times 2004).

4.2.1 Branding for social consciousness – “I’m Not a Plastic Bag”
What characterises the We Are What We Do brand? Robinson (2006b:3) envisions it to be “brilliantly communicated, technically savvy, serious but simple”. The “I’m Not
“a Plastic Bag” campaign, launched in 2007, would serve as an example to illustrate this point.

In February 2007, We Are What We Do announced the launch of its first non-book product – a canvas bag named “I’m Not a Plastic Bag” (see Figure 6) designed by the British upmarket accessories designer Anya Hindmarch. At its launch, only 30,000 bags were produced and the retail price was set at £5. This is an unbelievably low price point for an Anya Hindmarch bag, since a typical Hindmarch bag rarely costs under £100 – the ROCK canvas bag (see Figure 6), from the 2009 Spring/Summer collection, has a retail price tag of £385 (Hindmarch 2009). Coupled with the fact that it was available on limited offer, the bag became a highly coveted product even before it went on sale. The abundance of emails sent to We Are What We Do’s website to order the bag caused a halt in the system for almost three days (WAWWD 2007b).

The zealous response to the bag might be out of the movement’s expectation, but it was never unexpected. The bag was meant to be “a walking billboard” for Action 01Decline plastic bags whenever you canas much as it was meant to be a branding tool for the movement (WAWWD 2007c). To raise public interest, celebrities were offered the bag so that it would be “carried by some of the most photographed people in the world and seen by millions” (ibid). Chosen as the official goodie-bag for guests at the 2007 Vanity Fair Oscar-night party, the bag was “the must-have fashion accessory of the year” (Caesar 2007).
Offered as an alternative to plastic bags, the “I’m Not a Plastic bag” canvas bag is “stylish, affordable and influences people to make small changes that help to make a major difference” (WAWWD 2007a); it is also an epitome of the ethos of We Are What We Do, i.e. worthy causes presented in desirable ways. As Harvey (cited in Caesar 2007) explains, desirability is a key tool in getting the movement’s message across, “If you make doing good attractive, achievable, desirable, successful, people are not silly – they’ll do it”.

Why a product designed by an upmarket designer? Why ask celebrities to model the bag? Don’t these branding tactics go against the grassroots nature of a social movement? Robinson (2007) responds to criticisms and queries by reiterating that We Are What We Do sets out to reach new audience and therefore needs new ways, “[w]ith We Are What We Do we are trying […] to use the tools of marketing and branding for a social purpose”. He wonders: to engage people who reads celebrity news on a daily basis but rarely hesitate at taking a free plastic bag at the grocery store, which way will generate more debate, more media coverage and draw new engagement – that the bag be seen on the arms of “a few ageing hippies”, or on the arms of film stars and socialites (ibid)? He contends that to generate “real change”, discussions must be taken “out of the committee room out to the playground, the bus stops and the queue at the bar” (ibid). The “I’m Not a Plastic Bag” campaign illustrates what the movement hopes to achieve through branding – to draw attention to issues the small actions set out to tackle, to stimulate debate and to reach people “who’ve not thought about these things before” to reflect on their day to day behaviour (ibid).

To sustain the momentum gained by “I’m Not a Plastic Bag”, We Are What We Do launched the “Plastic Ain’t My Bag” campaign a couple of months later in May 2007. The aim of this campaign was to convince shops and consumers to cut down plastic bag usage in the hope to achieve “long-term, permanent behavioural change with the desired result that the disposable plastic bag becomes a thing of the past” (WAWWD 2007c). In similar fashion with “I’m Not a Plastic Bag” and “Plastic Ain’t My Bag”, campaigns that aim to bring the actions to life through products will be a core focus engaging the movement over the next couple of years (WAWWD 2009a). The products will vary, but several principles will be applied throughout – functional and desirable, ethically produced, with a We Are What We Do sense of fun etc. – all to make sure that the products are “consistently branded” (ibid).
4.2.2 Separate but together – the We Are What We Do community
While branding is crucial for We Are What We Do to raise awareness and recruit new “independent doers”, it is of equal importance that the movement provides a space for people who have become regular doers to meet so that a community is created and a sense of belonging maintained. The movement’s official website (wearewhatwedo.org) is the space where fellow We Are What We Do doers from around the global can meet.

The first version of the website was launched in 2004 with only static information, i.e. it functioned like “an electronic notice board” providing information about the actions which could also be found in the books (Robinson 2006b: 6). The second version (the current version available at the time of writing) was launched in August 2005 with interactive functions added, signifying a transformation from “broadcast to dialogue” (ibid).

The Action Tracker is the most prominent interactive function on the website. It can be set up by individual users through a simple registration. Each time a user has completed one or more of the 130 actions, he/she can click the checkbox and the action(s) will be registered. On the page for each action, a figure shows how many times that particular action has been performed, e.g. at the time of writing, Action 85 “Support small business” has been completed for 10,204 times. At the top right hand side of every page on the website, a figure shows the current number of actions being completed. As of 20 May 2009 2:32 am, 3,193,210 actions have been completed (WAWWD 2009b).

The Action Tracker is a key tool for a new kind of community like We Are What We Do: it allows individuals to be connected with others while at the same time giving them enough room to be the directors of their own commitments and convictions. A person who supports small business can see that there are at least 10,203 people doing the same thing, which makes his/her purchase at an independent grocery shop in this sense a collective action (ibid). At the same time, this kind of participation is by no means formal or regular, users are given the freedom to participate on each his/her own terms. User A may choose to perform all 130 actions once each, while User B may prefer to perform five actions 20 times each; there are no rule books to follow. There is also no pressure for regular meetings and compulsory attendance: if a user is busy with something else this week and has no
time to recycle waste paper, he/she does not have to provide any reason, nor will he/she be made to feel guilty for not doing the action.

Within this virtual community, users can also share their views and experiences on the discussion boards provided for each action. Action 130 “Name your own action” is a space for people to suggest new actions (alternative ways include emailing We Are What We Do directly or posting a message in the Soapbox). There are also animations, short films, wallpapers and images – all related to the 130 actions – for users to download. Specifically for schools are lesson plans for teachers to, together with their students, calculate the impact of lots of people making small changes to their lifestyles. A third version of the website, planned to be launched in September 2009, will include the addition of a Campaign section, where tools will be provided to help users to run their own campaigns (WAWWD 2009a).

4.3 Next stop: BIG change?

From the discussions above, we see the efforts We Are What We Do has made to turn the formula small actions X lots of people = BIG change into reality. The movement encourages people to take small actions by reminding people that the solutions to some of the most serious problems facing the world can be found easily in everyday life, and by presenting these solutions as pleasant and fun. In order to attract a lot of people to become doers, the movement launched itself as a desirable brand. To create a community that meets the needs of the individualised society, the movement uses its website to facilitate participation in collective actions while not demanding formal and regular commitments.
5 We are subpolitical

In this chapter, the visions of We Are What We Do are examined in the context of subpolitics. Beck (1994; 1996a and 1996b) defines subpolitics as politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political systems of nation-states; politics that sets all areas of society in action and entails direct and ad hoc participation; politics that is self-organising and shapes society from below. Beck believes that subpolitics is needed for society to deal with incalculable, inescapable and systemically reflexive risks. For We Are What We do, where is the arena for social change? Who does it engage as the agents for social change? In what forms does it realise social change?

5.1 Social change without lobbying

The activities of We Are What We Do are varied. The movement publishes books, launches campaigns to bring some of its 130 actions to life (e.g. the “I’m Not a Plastic Bag” and “Plastic Ain’t My Bag” campaigns were designed to facilitate Action 01 Decline plastic bags whenever you can), operates a website and runs a series of education programmes (e.g. the Young Speakers programme trains teenager as public speakers to present the idea of social change to younger school children). Yet, none of its activities involves protests or lobbying directed at politicians. The list of 130 actions does not include anything like Vote for a party with the most promising environmental policy. The movement deliberately stands outside formal politics. It states clearly that it is not “a campaign that is dependent for its success on persuading politicians” (WAWWD 2005a). In fact, Robinson (2006b: 9) stresses the movement is “about creating change by doing things in numbers”, and it can be done without the politicians – when enough many people do the same small actions, big changes will occur, leading social change “from the ground up”.

The movement puts its faith in citizens instead of politicians, because it believes that ultimately, it is the aggregate of individual actions that shape society (Robinson 2006a). It is citizens who fashion the climate of opinions; the government that rules a country and the businesses that exist in the market are reflections of citizens’ attitudes and behaviours – “we get the governments and the businesses and the consequences we deserve” (Robinson 2006b: 4). For any change to happen, it has to begin with the people: voters who care greatly about the environment will vote for
politicians that respond to their concerns; consumers who prefer organic produce will create demands that the market cannot afford to ignore.

It has been pointed out that We Are What We Do seems to mark a trend away from “grand narrative” politics and signifies a new kind of politics that is “personal, practical, pick’n’mix” (Caesar 2007). Instead of asking politicians to bring about changes through policies and legislations, We Are What We Do prefers to inspire citizens to take actions directly. When the movement wanted to change society’s habitual usage of disposable plastic bags, it offered a desirable alternative – a reusable cotton bag called “I’m Not a Plastic Bag”. Harvey (cited in Caesar 2007) uses the example of fur to illustrate the do-it-yourself philosophy: To take a stance against fur, one can launch a protest walking down the streets naked, or one can simply choose not to wear fur at all. The former approach is creating noises for society (the government and companies included) to hear, in the hope that production or trade policies will change. The latter, despite being more discreet, is effecting real changes: one fewer person buying a fur coat equals one fewer fur coat sold. In the (political) vision of We Are What We Do, citizens are the leaders and the role of governments and politicians is to embrace “citizen involvement outside the parties and other structures” and to “work alongside these civil initiatives” (Robinson 2009: 9).

5.2 New agents in social change
Participation of lots of people is crucial to the success of We Are What We Do. The movement focuses on citizens – more specifically, it focuses on a new audience that has rarely been spoken to before. As Harvey explains to a journalist, the movement’s targets are people who have never donated money or volunteered their time (O’Dwyer 2005). We Are What We Do believes that it is these people, who have hardly considered social engagement or participation in collective actions, who will be the agents in social change.

Why does the movement want to inspire people who have never shown interests? Robinson (2006a and 2006b) explains the idea with the image of a funnel. If social engagement is seen as a funnel, he says, the activists are standing on the narrow end, representing a tiny portion of the population. Despite the small number, they are responsible for the majority of all social engagement actions. While most NGOs are still focusing their communication on these activists, We Are What We Do is about “getting people who haven’t thought of these issues to start thinking” (Robinson cited
The movement deliberately positions itself at the mouth of the funnel (i.e. the much wider end) so as to get the attention of the majority of non-activists, hoping to inspire many of them to take small actions, hence making big change a reality (Robinson 2006a).

The majority of non-activists is an “underserved market”; if the movement can find a way to tap into it and inspire and mobilise people, “the aggregated effect of shifting their attitudes and behaviour would be significant” (Robinson 2006b: 3). Robinson also believes that if a movement hopes to achieve significant social change, it might be “more productive to encourage the largely inactive to become a little more aware” (ibid). At the beginning, the level of participation might still be low and superficial, but from his own community development experience, Robinson is confident that once started, there are high chances involvement will get deeper and more sustained (ibid). The co-founder of We Are What We Do Eugenie Harvey’s story is a perfect illustration of such potential. Harvey used to be a person who had never joined a march, never recycled. After listening to a talk given by Robinson at a meeting organised by her then employer, Harvey became so inspired that she resigned from her job, volunteered for Robinson and together the two created We Are What We Do. Today Harvey is a movement’s founder; she has transformed from someone who never recycled to someone who never takes plastic bag when shopping. Her story is symbolic of the kind people the brand hopes to attract – as she explains, the movement’s goal is to inspire the majority of non-activists to begin a process (O’Dywer 2005).

5.3像涟漪，变化向各方向扩散

We Are What We Do believes that people’s aggregated actions could result in significant social changes, and it dedicates its effort to engage the usually non-active people to begin a process of change. Does the movement have a well-defined blueprint of what changes it will accomplish then?

Essentially, Robinson (2006b) explains, the change the movement aims to bring about is fundamental but subtle: it aspires to redefine common sense. “Behaviours which threaten the well-being of the individual and of the planet are commonplace but can be changed” (Robinson 2006b: 9); the key is to make behaviours which benefit individual and environmental well-being appear to be the most obvious and natural things to do, i.e. common sense. Travelling alone in private…
cars has been for a long period of time considered as a normal thing to do, but if taking public transport, sharing cars and riding the bicycle are perceived as obvious and natural options, then people might think twice about driving alone. Robinson believes that “a new social movement can, little by little, infect society with a different set of natural or normal values which eventually become a new common sense” (ibid).

Exactly what kind of behaviour should be introduced as common sense? The movement is open to possibilities. We Are What We Do is guided by an overarching faith in aggregated small actions, but the movement’s specific content is fluid and self-organising. This can be seen by the way the current list of 130 actions is compiled. Before Change the World for a Fiver was created, Robinson and Harvey put up a small black and white advertisement in the Guardian newspaper, posing the question “What would you ask one million people to do to change the world?” (WAWWD 2009a); some answers they received become the content of Change the World for a Fiver. Actions included in Change the World 9 to 5, a book target at office workers, were generated from meetings with thousands of corporate employees (ibid). Actions found in Teach Your Granny to Text, a book aimed at children between the ages of eight and 12, came from a national campaign in which Britain’s schoolchildren were asked to answer the question “What would you ask one million people to do to change the world?” (ibid). Instead of outlining a picture of “this is how the world should look like” and imposing the action from top down, the movement leaves it to the people – who also happen to be the agents for social change – to decide what changes should take place.

In the larger context of the social change process, We Are What We Do sees itself playing only a small part: that of throwing a pebble into a pond. When a pebble hits the water, it creates ripples that spread out in different directions. By putting up a list of 130 actions, the movement aspires to inspire people to adapt the actions to fit their lives and even develop their own initiatives so that a global community could grow organically (WAWWD 2005b).

So far, adaptations of the We Are What We Do actions have taken place in several ways. In Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Spain and the United States, the movement has partnered with publishing companies to develop localised versions of Change the World for a Fiver (in Australia, an adapted version of Change the World 9 to 5 has also been published). Working under the same
guiding principle, the books contain actions that address problems facing respective countries. Individuals have been inspired by actions on the list to start their own initiatives, e.g. In 2006, an English customs officer Diana Green decided to turn Action 42 *Recycle your specs* into a campaign. She began by sending an email to her colleagues, sharing the idea; together they collected thousands of old spectacles which were sent to developing countries (WAWWD 2006b). Further away in Uganda, Africa, when headmaster Dismas Ootari discovered We Are What We Do, he was captivated by the idea and decided to launch his own We Are What We Do activities (WAWWD 2005a). Not many of the original We Are What We Do actions were relevant to his community, as Robinson (2006b: 7) recalls, “[h]e told us that our website was no use because no one in his community had access to computers. The books weren’t much help either as his people rarely read and most of the 50 actions were inappropriate”, but he appropriated the spirit and created the ‘anti-bigamy’ action”. It was the universal relevance of the idea that “individual attitudes determine personal behaviour and the aggregate of personal behaviour shapes the world” that captured the imagination of Dismas Ootari (ibid).

**5.4 The subpolitics of aggregated small actions**

From the above discussions, we can see that the visions of We Are What We Do can very well be described as subpolitical. The movement deliberately chooses to place its activities outside the conventional political circle; it is directed at inspiring citizens to take real actions instead of persuading politicians to pass new laws, because it believes social change could be accomplished without formal politics. Not only does it want to set all areas of society in action, the movement in particular wants to engage the population that has rarely been spoken to about social actions. It wants to connect with these new agents, who, in term of numbers, represent the majority; their taking small actions would complete the formula *small action X lots of people = BIG change*. Last but definitely not the least, the movement believes that shaping society from below can take many forms, and it embraces adaptations by inspired individuals. As can be seen from the examples cited, from Britain to Uganda, changes are happening and they are happening in self-organising ways.
6 We are reflexive environmentalism?

6.1 Conclusions

This study aims to examine the environmentalism in We Are What We Do, a movement that aspires to achieve social change through aggregated individual actions. I have chosen Beck’s theories of the risk society and reflexive modernisation to be the framework for analysis.

Beck claims that as the industrial society is heading towards becoming the risk society, a new kind of modernity is required to deal with the changed nature of risks, which have become inescapable, incalculable and systemically reflexive. Society needs to become socially reflexive, to question current practices, to embody a rethinking and a new way of acting. Attempts to deal with risks through conventional politics – demanding more government and more technology – would not be enough. A social reflexivity would give rise to subpolitics, which has its arena outside the usual political circle, engages new agents and shapes society from below, i.e. the civil society.

How does the social change movement We Are What We Do inspire and motivate people to perform small actions? How does it mobilise collective actions? What is nature of its politics? Through the analysis in chapters 4 and 5, we can see that:

1. The movement attempts to direct people’s attention to what can be done to tackle the problems facing the world today, instead of keep talking about the problems. This solution-oriented approach, coupled with its upbeat and cheerful presentations, are instrumental in easing anxiety, which is symptomatic of the risk society. (See Chapter 4)

2. Its founders take inspiration from some of the most successful commercial brands and launch the movement as a desirable brand. In an individualised world where people have become reluctant to commit to formal and regular engagements, branding could be more effective in creating loyalty, a collective identity and a sense of belonging. (See Chapter 4).

3. The movement does appear to be practising what Beck calls subpolitics: it deliberately chooses to run its activities outside the conventional political circle, attempts to engage new agents (the non-activists) to join the process, and places
great faith in shaping society from below and in self-organising forms. (See Chapter 5)

Beck believes that risks could become a binding force, forging solidarity among anxiety-laden people, but he has not explicitly explained how this binding force will operate and in what form such social actions will be organised. The story of We Are What We Do may have provided Beck with a reassuring answer. There is opportunity in every crisis; modern environmental crisis is a major reason why a movement like We Are What We Do emerged. Environmentalism is a core driving force behind the movement, but it is not just any environmentalism – it is reflexive environmentalism that makes We Are What We Do what it is: a social change movement that understands and works within the risk society’s context, connects to people in ways they want to be connected, inspiring them to take the first step to change the world, to create the society they want to live in.

6.2 Reflections

By analysing the We Are What We Do’s vision and its strategies, this study has examined the nature of the environmentalism the movement embodies. There are, however, many other aspects of the movement that are worth further studies.

Despite the fact that We Are What We Do seems to embody a reflexive form of environmentalism which, according to Beck, is needed for the risk society, it does not necessarily mean that all risks and problems can be tackled this way. What are the pitfalls of small actions? Can the branding strategy really mobilise lots of people into collective actions in the long run? What happens when a bag designed by a famous designer eventually becomes just another collector’s item to be sold at a high price on the Internet? While we should appreciate We Are What We Do for its new way of thinking and acting, we should also remain critical of how it can move on from its initial success.

As We Are What We Do believes in changing society from the ground up, it would be interesting to do a comparative study of We Are What We Do and another contemporary social movement which aspires to change society from the top down. How do they differ in strategies and activities? Do they engage the same agents? What do they achieve respectively? Can their efforts complement each other?

At barely five years old, We Are What We Do is a young movement that is constantly evolving. It is not easy to foresee what it will look like in five or ten years’
time. Perhaps it will become one of the most well-known global movements, perhaps
it will be remembered as the movement that has launched a canvas designer bag. This
uncertainty may seem unsettling, but at the same time such uncertainty reflects
precisely the essence of the risk society. Nobody can say for sure what is going to
happen next, the only thing we can do is to keep doing something. Only by trying to
confront the problems in new ways can we can maintain the hope that perhaps one
day society will find the ways to take us out of the muddles of risks.
References


Jeffries, Stuart (2004) Let’s be nice to each other. In: guardian.co.uk (accessed 2009-05-22) http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/30/1


Robinson, David (2006a) The big idea.


------------------- (2007) A response to the Anya Hindmarch “I’m not a plastic bag” project.


------------------- (2005a) We Are What We Do is launched in Uganda.

------------------- (2005b) Welcome to our new website!


------------------- (2006b) Recycle your specs.


------------------- (2007b) Anya Bag Q & A

------------------- (2007c) This is not about one bag.


------------------- (2009a) Email interview, 2009-04-06.


Appendices

Appendix 1 – The We Are What We Do actions

1. Decline plastic bags wherever possible
2. Read a story with a child
3. Fit at least one energy-saving light bulb
4. Learn basic first aid
5. Smile and smile back
6. Take public transport when you can
7. Plant a tree
8. Have a bath with someone you love
9. If it says 30 mph, do 30 mph
10. Turn your thermostat down by 1°
11. Get fitter, feel better
12. Turn off appliances at the mains
13. Recycle your mobile phone
14. Spend time with someone from a different generation
15. Register online as an organ donor
16. Give your change to charity
17. Try watching less TV
18. Learn to be friendly in another language
19. Learn a good joke
20. Find out how your money is invested
21. Turn off unnecessary lights
22. Use your will to good effect
23. Have more meals together
24. Put your gum in the bin
25. Use a mug not a plastic cup
26. Give blood
27. Give more when you buy at charity shops
28. Seize the moment
29. Recycle your computer
30. Bake something for a friend
31. Turn off the tap whilst brushing your teeth
32. Do something you think you are unable to do
33. Recycle your books
34. Buy fairly traded products
35. Write to someone who inspired you
36. Take time to listen
37. Let at least one car in on every journey
38. Don’t overfill your kettle
39. Shop locally
40. Join something
41. Hug someone
42. Recycle your specs
43. Grow something with a child
44. Report dumped rubbish to your council
45. Give your phone number to 5 people in your street
46. Use both sides of every piece of paper
47. Buy a copy of this book for a friend
48. Send us an action
49. Learn more, do more
50. Do something for nothing
51. Find out where your lunch has come from
52. Recycle waste paper
53. Calculate your carbon footprint
54. Don’t be an ideas killer
55. Use a biro from start to finish
56. Start a car pool
57. Enjoy a Fairtrade brew
58. Pull the plug on mobile phone chargers
59. Praise people
60. Remember people’s name
61. Speak rather than email
62. Make a radio request for the person opposite you
63. Practise good manners
64. Recycle your printer cartridges
65. Pass this book around
66. Take breaks
67. Share your lunch with someone
68. Try a job swap
69. Shut down your computer properly
70. Give as you go
71. Practise mobile manners
72. Lose the plastic cup
73. Leave work on time at least once a week
74. Turn away from your screen and…blink
75. Be nice to temps
76. Use one of these email signatures
77. Show empathy
78. Photocopy on both sides
79. Give up some spare time
80. Choose your friends wisely
81. Challenge your business about its ‘lights on at night’ policy
82. ‘Aspire not to have more, but to be more’
83. Learn to save a life
84. Smile when you answer the phone
85. Support small businesses
86. Avoid waste
87. Play bullshit bingo
88. Get off one stop early
89. Ring the IT help desk just to see how they are
90. Send this to your boss
91. Take the stairs
92. Bring your kids into work for the day
93. Don’t judge someone by the job they do
94. Make a coffee for someone busier than you
95. Earn fewer air miles
96. Blow the whistle on workplace bullies
97. Say thanks
98. Spread the word
99. Know how to fit into the bigger picture
100. Fail
101. Make someone smile
102. Walk your dad
103. Grow something and eat it
104. Stand up for something
105. Switch things off when you leave the room
106. Test your teacher
107. Look closer
108. Be friendly in sign language
109. Layer up
110. Cook a meal from scratch
111. Love our stuff
112. Go to more parties
113. Ask “Why?”
114. Love where you live
115. Teach your granny to text
116. Find out about your food
117. Read with a pal
118. Don’t sing in the shower
119. Play
120. Give lots of compliments
121. Stop junk mail
122. Don’t charge your phone overnight
123. Don’t start a wall
124. Don’t worry if you make a mistake
125. Talk rubbish to your parents
126. Write a letter
127. Recycle your toys
128. Involve everyone
129. Speak football
130. Add your own action
Appendix 2 – Introductory message to We Are What We Do

From: Amy Chin acyating@yahoo.com
To: xxxx.xxxxxxxx@wearewhatwedo.org
Date: Sunday, 22 February 2009, 12:50:23 PM
Subject: Thesis on We Are What We Do

Dear Xxxx,

Hello, my name is Amy Chin. I am a student reading Environmental Studies at Malmö University (www.mah.se) in southern Sweden. I am in the process of writing a thesis regarding ethical living and I would like to conduct an empirical study with WAWWD as my focus.

To gain a profound understanding of the movement, I will study all the available materials that are related to WAWWD, including the products, the website, media reports and interviews etc. More importantly though, I would like to see if it will be possible to get into more direct contact with the people behind the movement.

Due to resource constraints, I do not see a high likelihood of me travelling to England to conduct a face-to-face interview (though that would be the best option!) with Ms. Harvey, Mr. Robinson and/or other people working on the movement. I wonder if it would be possible to conduct an alternative form of interview via email correspondence?

I will be very grateful if my request is considered. I have been following WAWWD for quite some time now (since the launch of "I'm not a plastic bag" - which also inspired me to write a term paper on Modbury's plastic ban campaign), and I share your philosophy to a very large extent. It is an honour to write my thesis on the movement, and any direct insights from the movement will be invaluable and greatly appreciated.

Thank you for reading this message. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

I can be contacted via the following email addresses:
acyating@yahoo.com
and/or
tmm07007@stud.mah.se

Yours faithfully,
Amy Chin
Appendix 3 – Introduction to the email interview

Hello!

Thank you for reading this message. I would like to conduct an unusual form of interview with you. It is part of a research process for a thesis that I am writing at the Department of Urban Studies at Malmö University in Sweden.

The aim of my study is to explore how a social movement can capture, address and respond to the contemporary zeitgeist. I have chosen *We Are What We Do* as my field of study because of the movement’s distinguishing traits in terms of its motivation, presentation and strategies.

Below are my interview questions, which have been grouped into four parts. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the movement through its activities as well as the way things are organised. My expectation is that answers given can be interpreted as coming from *We Are What We Do* the organisation and the movement.

Please send your answers to the email address acvating@yahoo.com. I would appreciate if you could return with your answer latest by Friday 3rd April 2009.

Once again, my heartfelt thanks for doing this interview. I look forward to receiving your answers!

Best regards,

Amy Chin
Appendix 4 – Email interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: We Are What We Do – the organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How many people (both full-time and part-time) currently work at the <em>We Are What We Do</em> office (as of March 2009)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How would you describe WAWWD in terms of its structure?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Is there any plan to expand the current workforce and structure?</td>
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<td>4. How many people volunteer for WAWWD?</td>
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<td>5. How would you describe the relation between WAWWD London and WAWWD overseas – are you partners or a group with London as the “headquarter”?</td>
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<td>6. How did WAWWD expand from London to overseas?</td>
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<th>Part 2: We Are What We Do – the books</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. How did you collect ideas for the small actions included in the books?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How did you decide which 50 (or 30) actions to be included in each book?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Is there any specific reason(s) to list 50 (or 30) actions in each book?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Are the actions put in a particular order? If so, what are the criteria for putting them in the current order?</td>
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<td>5. Is there any plan to publish more books?</td>
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<th>Part 3: We Are What We Do – the website</th>
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<td>1. What was the website like when it was first launched?</td>
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<td>2. What is the traffic of the current website on a daily/weekly basis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you know from which countries the website’s visitors are?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. How many emails do you receive via the website on a regular basis? Do you give personal answers to enquiries?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Is there any plan to launch a new version of the website? How will it differ from the current version?</td>
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<td>6. What do you want to achieve through this launch?</td>
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<th>Part 4: We Are What We Do - other activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Besides the books and the website, can you explain to me some other tasks that are involved in WAWWD on a regular basis?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. In the past, WAWWD has driven campaigns to promote the actions mentioned in the books (e.g. Anya’s bag and Plastic ain’t for me). Are there more campaigns of such nature planned for the future?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I read about a “social experiment” in the Newham borough. Have you had more social experiments like that in other boroughs? Did they take the same form and what results did they achieve?</td>
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