

Lessons for Activists in “Black Like Me”



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Overview of *Black Like Me*

- In 1959, John Howard Griffin, a white author in the USA:
 - Used pills, a sun lamp and skin dye to darken his skin
 - Lived as a black man for 4 weeks
 - Experienced racism in ways that most white people never witness
 - Afterwards, he reported his experience in magazine articles and TV interviews

- Result:
 - The author received death threats for the rest of his life
 - In 1961 he published a book, *Black Like Me*, about his experience
 - It sold 10 million copies and was translated into many languages
 - It is required reading in many schools in the USA
 - Many people describe the book as “life changing”

Effectiveness

- Which is more effective for raising awareness of racism?
 - An autobiography, spanning decades, written by a black person
 - A 4-week autobiography written by a white person disguised as black
- Surprisingly, the 4-week autobiography is arguably better:
 - Latent racism in many white people means they will trust a white author more to provide non-biased information about racism
 - This is unfortunate but true. *Black Like Me* takes advantage of this
 - Some readers might suspect a book spanning decades is cherry picking the racist incidents it reports to make racism seem worse than it is
 - A 4-week book, written in diary format, clearly shows the frequency of racist incidents
 - The 4-week autobiography provides some marketing opportunities:
 - Novelty of a white person disguised as black
 - Shortness of a 4-week autobiography is appealing to casual readers

Effectiveness (cont')

There is one other reason why *Black Like Me* is “better”...

- Somebody who is an expert in a particular topic might:
 - Think some information is obvious and not worth mentioning
 - Not realize the same information provides great insight for non-experts
- Likewise, a black author might:
 - Think some aspects of racism are obvious and not worth discussing
 - Not realize that such a discussion would be insightful for white readers
- Griffin, disguised as a black man, was able to identify and report on some of these often overlooked aspects of racism

Opportunities for activism

- The tactics used to write *Black Like Me* could be reused
- For example:
 - A white man in the USA could repeat Griffin's experiment
 - Might show changing levels of racism over a 50-year period
 - A black person could keep a 4-week diary of racism experienced and publish it as an autobiography
 - Would not have the novelty of a white person disguised as black
 - But the 4-week diary format could highlight the frequency of racist experiences better than a multi-decade autobiography
 - A Christian could pretend to be, say, Muslim for a few weeks and write a book on the experience
 - *Lowest of the Low* by Gunter Wallraff and M. Chalmers is a *Black Like Me*-style experiment to highlight racism faced by Turks in Germany

Opportunities for activism (cont')

- Many non-X people would like to fight anti-X intolerance but do not know how
 - *Black Like Me* provides one example of how to do this
- Before you undertake a *Black Like Me* project ensure you have good writing skills
 - See the *Scalable Communications* chapter for advice on improving your writing skills