

# Activated: Decentering activism in and with academia

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## ABSTRACT

Who is an activist? With the advent of activism-related scholarship in HCI and CSCW, the current challenge involves thinking about what activism is, who an activist is, and the opportunities and limitations of activism. Recently, researchers in academia and industry, such as Timnit Gebru, demonstrate a commitment to stay activated for the structural changes we need, for example, diverse and inclusive scholarship, to address overlapping problems, e.g., sexism, racism, and tokenism. Additionally, there is a continuing dominance of Western, formally educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) perspectives. Countering this requires collective efforts in, citational justice and decolonial computing, among others. But such complex issues do not yet cover the inner conflicts that we face, such as mental health struggles while dismantling the prejudices stemming from the ivory tower, locating our privileges as academics while traversing less privileged locales of research sites, or the dilemmas on whether we are doing enough to fulfill our responsibilities to the people who have trusted us enough to work with us in the face of "publish or perish" culture. This workshop explores what activism means within the CSCW community and how we can remain activated while harboring doubts and hopes in calling ourselves "activists".

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **HCI theory, concepts and models**; *Natural language interfaces*.

## KEYWORDS

activism; collective action; social justice; academia

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Who can call themselves activists or call what they do activism? CSCW as a community has seen an increase in diverse types of activism as a topic and practice [4, 8, 14, 15]. These works more broadly connect with efforts regarding prefigurative design [5], disability justice [16], feminist HCI [6], postcolonial [10] and decolonial computing [2], citational justice [11], among others. Researchers have also countered anglo-centrism in our discipline, e.g., Latin HCI [3] or Arab HCI [1], which are a part and parcel of how we should be addressing our diversity and inclusion commitments in a grassroots manner, e.g., CHIiversity [17]. Given this wide array, activism as a topic and practice has become what many scholars can get behind.

However, less discussed may be first-person perspectives regarding activism and how one aligns with activist struggles considering activism as a collective endeavor. Carole Boyce Davies, in her work on Afro-Caribbean feminist and communist Claudia Jones, critically outlines some of these relations, including the presentation and development of some language about how we can understand activist-intellectual work, such as "the 'accommodationist-reformist' intellectual, who aligns with popular struggles but cannot communicate with people the ideas of the academy, the 'commoditized intellectual', whose entire exercise of academic production is hypermarket-driven and in the benefit of the state; or the 'radically transformative intellectual', whose entire praxis is organised around the production of knowledge directed at transforming the social contexts in which we live and operate in and out of the academy" [7].

To critically understand the relation between academia and activism, the problematic aspects also need to be addressed, such as the risk of tokenism. There is a danger in labelling works as, e.g., "activist CSCW", due to the potential co-optation or commoditization of people we work with or the topic we want to address. The allure of short-term radicalism can forgo long-term groundwork, when activism may be a "thankless job". Thus, the research vs. practice of activism as a collective, multi-faceted pursuit should also include critiques and a more nuanced understanding of activism in our field, alongside opportunities to "look within". Our one day workshop builds on the existing substantial discourse within the CSCW community that has studied activism as a subject or engaged in activism-leaning work, to reflect on the experiences and difficulties CSCW researcher and practitioners have with activism. Together, we aim to *decenter* activism in order to make room for

ways to stay activated [9] with humility, in considering boundaries of activism within and outside of academia from various points of view.

Though we remain sensitive to thinkers who have laid out the groundwork, we see a need to center on the shared struggles and potential critiques in decentering activism through the workshop. Within the context of CSCW, we are interested in hearing from aforementioned and additional perspectives, as well as others that we have not been able to include here. We welcome papers that reflect on personal experiences regarding one's first-person account of activism as well as a discussion on the collective labour of activism, e.g., how one's activist experience impacts the collective cooperation and vice versa. Specifically, we ask interested individuals or collectives to contribute 1-4 page position papers that outline thoughts related to one or more of the themes we outline below. The themes are (1) defining and understanding activism, (2) the academic-activist role(s), and (3) unsettling activism by critiquing community fetishism [12].

## 2 WORKSHOP THEMES

The workshop will address a variety of aspects related to activism in CSCW and HCI work. Together, we will explore disparate but related topics such as understanding what *activism* is and how we can integrate it in our research, but we will also address the need to unsettle our understandings thereof within the academy. While the final themes we will discuss at the workshop will partially depend on participant submissions, we present three themes below which we have identified and which should serve as inspiration to potential participants.

### 2.1 Understanding activism

In this theme, we are interested in exploring different notions, understandings, and definitions of activism and how it relates to our academic work. What is understood and recognised as "activism" and which goals are recognised as legitimate might depend on the historical and political particularities of specific contexts as well as preferences for individualistic or collectivist approaches. To better understand activism, we have subdivided it into three sub-themes: (a) understanding differences in activist practices and reasons why we can or cannot call ourselves activists, (b) harms caused to ourselves and others because of our activism (and conversely also the positive aspects that come along with calling ourselves activists), and (c) explorations of the invisible work of activism and its impacts.

Position papers may respond to questions such as: What activities do we understand as activism? How do regional, cultural, geographic, language or other contexts shape our understanding and goals of activism? What kinds of activities and actions are recognised as activism, and why may or may they not be recognised as such? What are some of the cultural, political, and social risks surrounding activism?

### 2.2 Academic-activist relationships

In our second theme we move beyond our understanding of activism and instead address the impacts that this way of working has. It relates to the different ways academic work can relate to activist work, but also to the relationships that come about when engaging

in activist-leaning work in our academic spaces. This relates for example to our interpersonal relationships with others inside and outside academia, as well as our more structural approaches to relationships in our research groups, departments, or university administration and management. This theme also relates to the relationships we have with the structures that govern our work on disciplinary, structural, or institutional levels. We also consider various burdens, e.g., psychological trauma, that academic activists carry.

Position papers may address questions such as: What are the actual and potential relationships that exist between activism and academia? How do academics and academic institutions engage with or relate to activism within and outside the academy? What structural and/or disciplinary hurdles and difficulties exist to create frictions in our activist-academic practices? And in what kinds of cases are these kinds of frictions useful or harmful to our activist-academic practices? What kind of support can be offered in both academia and outside to ameliorate individuals' "activism fatigue" that can leave physical, psychological, and emotional scars?

### 2.3 Unsettling activism and critiquing community fetishism

The third theme deals with often unintended side effects as well as motives behind activism. There are various forms of activism (e.g. guerilla activism), and what goals are attached to diverse forms of activism in different places and communities require a greater reflection. Hence, while a researcher's motivation may be to better understand a specific form of activism of a locale, this can be seen as "community fetishism" by people within that locale. Tokenism, in addition, may be at play in two ways: a tokenistic involvement of an "insider" as a community member and/or researcher and a tokenistic treatment of the ethos of specific activist efforts without in-depth and committed understanding of why such activism exists in the first place. This can lead to (false) labeling and shallow engagement. For instance, we greatly lack a "follow up" on which (academic) technologies have been appropriated by grassroots initiatives, i.e., traces of activism as a long-haul and collaborative effort that is not based on publication cycles.

Position papers may address questions such as: Given the different ways that activism is understood and recognised within and outside of academia, how can we be truly inclusive of local perspectives rather than risking tokenistic involvement? What value conflicts may arise during different phases of activism, e.g., Western ideas of democracy vs. local norms? How can we avoid fetishizing diverse communities, norms, and abilities as academic activists? In what ways can we better support long-term activism efforts with and through CSCW as a community?

## 3 EXPECTATIONS AND RECRUITMENT

We aim to have at minimum, ten contributions as extended abstracts or pictorial abstracts. Like extended abstracts, pictorial abstracts are short, but focus on integrating visual expressions with text. Since we welcome participants' personal perspectives, we believe that pictorial abstracts will allow for more free-form and creative contributions about their experiences of activism, which can be difficult to only express with words. We also are open to audience

members who can join us without submitting extended pictorials, with  $\pm 20$  participants in total.

The organizers met at their shared CHI 2021 session in presenting their work [12, 13], which had an active audience engagement that showcased an interest in and need for this workshop. Hence, our recruitment strategy involves personally reaching out to activist-scholars we met at our session and beyond. We will also recruit participants through existing activist networks (such as [fempower.tech](https://fempower.tech)<sup>1</sup>, Designs of the Oppressed<sup>2</sup> and others) as well as through SIGCHI and EUSSET mailing lists and social media channels.

## 4 GOALS

With the workshop, our goals are (1) to build solidarity and community among researchers who are engaged in or interested in learning more about the relationship between activism and academia in our field, (2) to share expertise among people and communities who engage in different forms of activism (such as, but not limited to disability justice, gender justice, racial justice, or workers rights), (3) to give early career researchers an understanding of and tools to engage with an activist academic practice, (4) to encourage senior academics to step into their privilege and power to tackle injustices at their institutions, within the ACM, and in other spaces, (5) to better understand some of the risks involved in this kind of work, and to unsettle our own perceptions of the 'activist' impact of our academic work. We host all material and information on [www.activatingacademia.community](http://www.activatingacademia.community).

### 4.1 Activities

Our day-long workshop will be split into three sections: (1) getting to know one another; (2) discussing our themes in small groups; and (3) planning next steps for our reflections and community-building. We will also have an invited speaker, Katta Spiel, who has incorporated and empowered marginalized perspectives in HCI research. Throughout the day, we will use co-creative activities to guide our discussions and to simultaneously allow us to document our polyvocal and multilayered thoughts. All workshop activities will be guided and documented on a shared online whiteboard with participants. The final schedule will be posted on our website.

**4.1.1 Getting to know one another.** First, the workshop organisers will provide an overview of the day, including brief introductions to who they are. After this, we will split workshop attendees into small groups (3-4 people per group) so they can start to get to know one another. In these small groups, participants will be asked to create portraits of one another to illustrate their identities as a scholar and to find out how they relate to the label of being an 'activist'. We will provide starting points for this on our shared whiteboard, but participants will also be invited to use any materials they may have at home to create a physical art piece as well. This activity will allow those in the small groups to quickly build rapport and to get to know each other. The illustrations will allow everyone else in the workshop to also get an in-depth look at what a person wanted to share about themselves with others in the workshop,

creating as a good starting points for building trust for the rest of the workshop.

**4.1.2 Discussing and documenting themes.** In the second part of the workshop, we will have a round of group discussions. This will give people a chance to go into in-depth discussions about one of the pre-determined themes as outlined in this proposal, or any new topics that arise based on identity proposals. Participants will document their discussions on our shared whiteboard and we will ask the groups to feed back what they have discussed to the rest of the workshop. After the break, participants will be divided into small groups again. In this second round of discussion, attendees will be asked to add another layer of reflection on the notes from the previous group, and to create two collages that document their insights: (1) to document the 'state of the world' of the relationship between activism and academia in CSCW research; and (2) to document a 'future' of what the relationship of activism and academia in CSCW research could look like.

**4.1.3 Planning next steps.** We hope that our workshop will be an impetus for developing future thinking, (un)learning, and collaborative work. As such, it is a starting point for developing a community of practice at the intersection of activism and academia. Our final stage of the workshop will be dedicated to developing work streams and continued collaborations. This will align with activities that will be pursued through communities that the organizers are a part of (e.g. [fempower.tech](https://fempower.tech)). Also, we will compile a self-published manifesto or zine, documenting our reflections on activism in and with academia, which can lead to an Interactions article (eg. on the blog or the 'Meaningful Design Processes' Forum).

Workshop participants will be integral to determining next steps, but these may relate to developing future workshops at SIGCHI venues to further define the topic and challenges, the development of an activism in HCI manifesto, or a series of questions and provocations for researchers working in this space. We also plan to work towards collaborative publications, including interactions articles or a Special Issue for TOCHI or JCSCW (or a similar journal) in the long run. For instance, we will be following the footsteps of the CSCW Journal Special Issue on Materializing Activism that was the result of an ECSCW workshop.

## 5 ORGANIZERS

**Minha Lee** is an assistant professor at the department of Industrial Design at Eindhoven University of Technology who dwells on the intersection of philosophy and HCI. She researches on morally relevant interactions with technological agents like robots or chat-bots. While she struggles with calling herself an activist from a first-person standpoint, she recognizes that specific activities she takes on, e.g., addressing racism at a technical university in the Netherlands, reflect activism.

**Cristina Zaga** is an assistant professor, speaker, and maker of poetic robots. At the Human-Centred Design Group (Design and Production Management department) and the DesignLab of the University of Twente, Cristina's research bridges engineering, design, and social science to develop technology responsibly. She is particularly interested in developing co-design and speculative

<sup>1</sup><https://fempower.tech/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.designeopressao.org/>

design methods to imagine, ideate, and design robots responsibly. Cristina believes in the power of poetic computation to bring about future-oriented reflection on the technology we want to develop. Cristina is an intersectional feminist and advocates for technology that is diverse, inclusive and equitable.

**Angelika Strohmayr** is co-director of the Design Feminisms research group and a senior lecturer at Northumbria University's School of Design. Her anti-disciplinary research sits at the intersection of justice-oriented and feminist theorising and in-the-world research with communities, third sector organisations, and activists using collaborative and creative research methods.

**Max Krüger** is a researcher and PhD student at the University of Siegen. His research focuses on issues of (forced) migration and arriving. He is interested in the role of care and participation in design processes, the interplay between them and in 'unsettling' both of them.

**Débora de Castro Leal** is doing her Ph.D. in Alternative Economics and Human Computer Interaction at the University of Siegen (Germany). In her research, she is interested in how communities experience and deal with economic and technological pressures in areas of post-conflict and social instability, especially communities in the Brazilian and Colombian Amazon rainforest.

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