Reflecting On My Unstructured Journey With Activism: Building Relationships, Being In Too Deep, and Making Space for Action.

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Abstract

This paper offers reflections from my journey with activism within academia. I start with a summary of my experiences surrounding activism within academia and then go on reflect on the activist activities that are recognised within academia, relating to activism outside of the academy, and finish by reflecting on some of the tensions and hurdles that I have faced.

Author Keywords

Activism; reflection; personal experiences

Finding my own activism

At CHI 2014, the first year I presented, I was interviewed by a colleague who is part of the Sustainable HCI community. He asked whether I thought I was an activist. Without a formal definition of activism in my head it was difficult for me to reconcile my interest in critiquing and changing how environmental sustainability was thought about in the HCI community. *At the time I said I wasn't an activist.*

Reflecting on this, it's clear now that I was already becoming an activist. Whilst at the time I struggled to find a voice in workshops and gatherings of more established and prominent figures in the HCI community, I had the realisation that I wanted to speak up and try and change things.

Through my PhD research I had been frustrated by the

lack of series academic discussion about growing environmental impacts of digital technology. More data, more technology, more resource consumption. I wanted that to change. I found collaborators and friends who shared these frustrations. We had ideas of how we wanted to change things and we used academic writing to articulate a space in which HCI should be tackling serious issues of unsustainable digital technologies and climate injustice. I went from paper writing, to community leadership. And then I began to struggle. *What do you do as an early career academic? What can you change? How do you mobilise people with influence?*

Since then my activism has grown in different ways. I've realised that my personal values drive my research and that my research and activism is entangled. I want to work on topics that are close to my values such as technology's impact on environmental sustainability and more recently how digital technologies are having negative impacts on workers in precarious arrangements such as the gig economy, fixed term contracts or zero hour contracts. Surrounding these topics of social and environmental injustice is a drive to not just write academic work but also to help change industry practice and support others. With my more recent work around gig economy workers I have been working with activist communities and trade unions which has revealed it's own challenges. This is not something that I've managed to find much guidance on within my institution and has led to some frustrating dynamics that I will briefly discuss later in the paper.

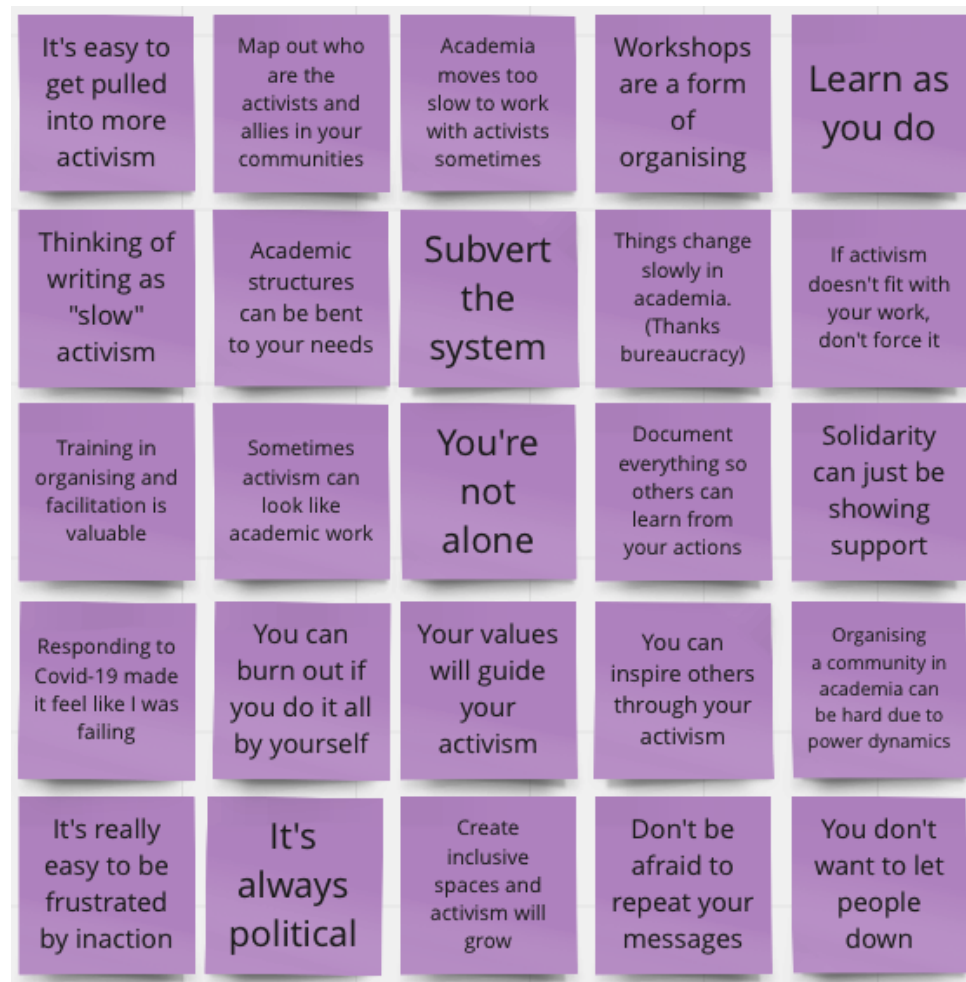## What kinds of activities and actions are recognised as activism?
Here I share some thoughts about activism within academia. I believe that through building communities, facilitating difficult conversations and critical thinking is core to activism

within academia. This can be at scales within our own institutions, at international conferences, across SIGCHI and even beyond academia. As academics we also have the ear of important stakeholders such as policy makers who have wide reaching influence. We can even use our teaching as a site for activism by inviting activists to give guest lectures or supervise students.

Speaking up or taking a stand against injustice is activism to me. This may not be recognised as activism in academia, as it can seem that many people within an institution are often outspoken. Often those speaking out against things are those in secure positions of privilege. It can be much harder for precarious, junior, and non academic staff to speak up within academic institutions for fear of standing out or repercussions.

Organising is a core activist activity that can be branded as 'leadership' within the structures of academia. The act of bringing a group together around an issue and then formalising the groups presence is a fairly common place activity in our institutions (e.g. working groups at Universities, Special Interest Groups (SIGs) in HCI conferences). This recognition can help quickly formalise a group and build a network of activists and allies. From my experience, not all activism has to be about changing entire institutions, it can start at a smaller scale (e.g. getting involved in environmental and racial justice efforts at your own institution).

I've learned that there are is a broad range of activities that can be seen as activism in academia. It can be speaking up a particular issue, organising and building a network, starting a petition, attending or organising a demonstration or taking action in solidarity. In my experience to have these activities formally recognised within academia it requires aligning action with existing agendas making it easier to convince those higher up in an organisation to make space

Figure 1: A cluster of thoughts that I had whilst thinking about my activism and academia. This stream of conscious represents some of the emotional responses that I have surrounding my own activism. It's not an exhaustive list, rather an unstructured outburst at the time of writing considering topics that might be interesting to discuss in the workshop. Core themes include: collaboration; support networks and mapping; organising; training and learning; values; starting small and local.

for change.

Tensions and Hurdles

I conclude with a summary of risks and hurdles that I've come in to contact with.

What are some of the cultural, political, and social risks surrounding activism?

- Alienating communities and activists through letting people down or being too slow to engage. Engaging at the wrong moment with a group of activities (e.g. they're already busy) or missing the boat can frustrate activist causes.

- Speaking on behalf of communities that you aren't part of (e.g. tensions around white leaders in de-colonisation of academia).

- Antagonising people with power within the institutions you participate in or work for. Often activism is political, which means that some people will disagree with you. This can lead to long lasting professional tensions.

- Starting something and not seeing it through can impact your relationships with activist communities. Given the slow starts, length of some research projects, and how we often have to move with the funding, building sustainable connections with activists can be challenging.

What structural and/or disciplinary hurdles and difficulties exist to create frictions in our activist-academic practices?

- It can be difficult to build in the right mechanisms and time-frames for engaging with activists in your research.

- Funding activist projects can seem hard on larger projects due to funding cycles not aligning with activist projects. Successful research bids can take as long as 1 year to fund from submission (e.g. EPSRC funding body in the UK).

- There are limited mechanisms by which to remunerate activist speakers/participants. Sometimes you have to get creative with the funding, but sometimes you are bound by institutional policy.

- Established power-dynamics and structures that prevent activists from having a platform.

- It can be tricky to document and publish your activism if there's not an obvious 'academic' contribution within your discipline.

- Sometimes activism fails or we struggle making progress, but there's not often a space for talking about failure or struggle in academia, particularly for research/activism that doesn't sit neatly in a single discipline.

- Politically activism can be frowned upon in some disciplines, especially in topics (e.g. Computer Science) that can be aligned with conservative values and a neoliberal political ideology.