What is Activism?
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Recently there has been much discussion of the nature of civil disobedience; of what it is for an action to be an instance of civil disobedience. But there has been very little discussion of what it is to engage in actions that fall under the broader category of activism. This paper aims to fill this void. Work addressing the question, ‘what is civil disobedience?’ has enabled us to better understand, and get clearer in our thinking about, when civil disobedience is justified, and whether we in fact have an obligation to engage in civil disobedience. Similarly, by ascertaining what activism is we might get a better grip on (i) the justification of forms of activism and activist tactics, as well as on (ii) whether we have an obligation to be activists, and if so, whether there are any particular ways in which we must discharge this obligation.

In this paper, we argue that figuring out what it is for an action to be an instance of activism also allows us to shed light on the distinctive value of activism. The question of whether activism is distinctively valuable is important because it is related to issues of current public controversy. For many people, being an activist is an important part of their identities and is a constructive way of participating in and contributing to political life. For others, activism is at best a nuisance and at worst ought to be illegal. For instance, Scott Morrison, the current prime minister of Australia, has a generally negative view of activists. He has called them ‘apocalyptic’, ‘indulgent and selfish’, and ‘un-Australian’, and he has attempted to introduce new laws to curtail activism. If we can show that activism has distinctive value, this would challenge negative attitudes, such as Morrison’s, towards activism.

The first three sections of the paper are about the nature of activism. In section 1 we outline the scant extant work on what activism is. We show that there are reasons to reject extant accounts of what activism is. And in showing this we explain two desiderata for a plausible account of activism. In sections 2-3 we consider three accounts of activism which hold that activism is a form of (political) communication. According to the first account, activism is intrusive political communication; according to the second, activism is political communication that is (in a sense we’ll explain) independent of the state. The third account combines the first two. We argue that all of these accounts have the two desirable features outlined in section 1 and we consider further advantages and disadvantages of each account. The final section of the paper, section 4, is about the value of activism: We suggest that all of the accounts of activism that we consider shed (a similar) light on the distinctive value of activism.

1. Two Desiderata for an Account of Activism

One of the few accounts, or statements of, what activism is that we have found is made by the activist Gina Martin in her recent book-length guide to being an activist. Martin says that an activist is ‘[a] person who campaigns to bring about political or social change’. On this view, activism involves campaigning to bring about political or social change.

This campaign account of activism is, we believe, too narrow because it implies that certain kinds of direct action, such as open rescue and ecotage, are not activism.

Open rescue is a kind of direct action practiced by animal activists in which they directly free animals who are in pain and suffering in factory farms. Activists who know that certain animals are being poorly treated at a particular facility—due to, e.g., information from workers at the facility—break into the facility and free the animals to be rehoused elsewhere; when all goes well the animals are rehoused somewhere

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See e.g. Murphy (2019).
Martin (2019, p. 21)
where they will not be in pain or suffer—or at any rate will be susceptible to less pain and suffering. The act of open rescue does not necessarily involve campaigning to bring about political or social change. Open rescue may be, and is sometimes, just intended to directly alleviate animal suffering because social and political change will not come about quickly enough to alleviate the suffering of particular animals the open rescuers know to be suffering.

Ecotage and monkey wrenching—which are synonyms—are analogous forms of direct action practiced by environmental activists. In these forms of direct action, environmentalists try to stop certain things happening to the environment. A paradigm example of monkey-wrenching is the direct action of Julia Butterfly Hill. She sat in a Californian treetop for 738 days until Pacific Lumber Company, which was attempting to cut down the 1000 year old redwood tree she was in, agreed to refrain from felling the tree. Examples of ecotage include stopping companies from polluting rivers with sewage by plugging the sewer outlets they own, and vandalising or otherwise sabotaging extremely polluting vehicles and facilities such as dams. Those engaged in ecotage and monkey-wrenching are not always thereby campaigning to bring about a social or political change rather than just attempting to take matters into their own hands to mitigate a particular environmental harm.

However, many activists and commentators explicitly claim that forms of direct action such as open rescue and ecotage are forms of activism. Other things equal, we should not hold that they are mistaken about this. For, other things equal, we should not accept an account A of what it is to be an X that implies that certain plausible candidates for things that are Xs are in fact not Xs unless we have good reason to accept A. For instance, we should not accept accounts of what it is to be a museum or a legal system that imply that certain plausible instances of museums and legal systems are not in fact museums and legal systems unless we have good reason to accept these accounts. So, in lieu of such a reason to accept the campaign account of activism over possible alternatives, we should instead seek a broader account that is more consistent with commentators’ and activists’ claims.

An account of activism that resembles Martin’s campaign account has been recently suggested by Julinna Oxley, who says that ‘Activism is a type of engagement that attempts specifically and efficaciously to bring about the desired goal of public persuasion, which is generally for the ultimate purpose of social and political change.’ It seems reasonable to classify Oxley’s account as a version of the campaign account (insofar as a campaign just is an attempt to produce social and political change through public persuasion). Oxley’s account, like Martin’s account, implies that open rescue and ecotage in many cases fail to be forms of activism. Specifically, Oxley’s account implies that open rescue and ecotage are not forms of activism whenever they directly attempt to address wrongs or perceived wrongs and do not aim to persuade others.

We’ve seen that we have reason to reject the campaign account. Our discussion to this point suggests that it is a desirable feature of an account of what activism is that it should not be too narrow: specifically, it should allow that open rescue and ecotage are instances of activism even in cases where these are not

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2. See e.g. ibid., Griffin (2015), O Sullivan, McCausland, and Brenton (2017), and Direct Action Everywhere (2019).
5. It might seem that Oxley’s account does not imply this because her account only holds that activism activism is ‘generally for the ultimate purpose of social and political change’. But her account holds that activism always attempts ‘specifically and efficaciously to bring about the desired goal of public persuasion’, and open rescuers and monkeywrenchers do not always attempt to do this with their activist actions. Furthermore, it would be no good to respond to this objection by holding that activism generally attempts ‘specifically and efficaciously to bring about the desired goal of public persuasion’. Moving to such a view would not imply that open rescue and monkeywrenching are not forms of activism but nor would it imply that they are because it would not give an account of what activism is just what activism generally is. Furthermore, many activist actions are direct actions which may have such explicit persuasive aims, so it is not entirely clear that this would be a good account of what activism generally is.
part of a campaign aimed at public persuasion. Now we'll discuss a second desirable feature of an account of activism: the account should not be too broad. For there are many different sorts of actions that are politically, socially, and morally important in some of the same ways as activism, yet do not count as forms of activism.

Take the example of voting. Intuitively, voting for the political party that you want to win an election or believe ought to win an election is not a form of activism. (Of course, this does not imply that attempting to get people to vote is not a form of activism.) However, once we move away from giving an account of activism in terms of campaigning, it becomes surprisingly tricky to build an account that has this second desirable feature.

It may seem that there is an easy way to avoid one’s account of activism implying that voting is activism. Heather Draper claims that “[a]ctivism requires vigorous, concerted effort.” If this is right, then, one might think, voting is not activism because voting does not involve such concerted effort. But there are cases in which voting does require such concerted effort. Suppose that the only way for you to cast your vote in an election is to undertake a difficult 3-day walk through the desert to the polling station. In this case, voting will require a lot of planning and vigorous concerted effort. But it does not seem that this would establish that in casting your vote you would be engaged in activism. We’ll return to this point in Section 3.

2. Activism as Political Communication

Although we think the campaign account is mistaken for the reasons we’ve given, we also think that the campaign account is on to something. We believe that campaigning and activism are similar in that both of these forms of activity have an essential communicative role. Yet we think that the communicative aspect of activism differs in an important way from that of campaigning.

The general proposal we want make in this paper is that activism is a form of political communication. In this section we will explain why this view is plausible and how it helps to satisfy the first desideratum (not too narrow) discussed in the previous section: showing that open rescue and ecotage are instances of activism. In the rest of the paper we will discuss two ways of supplementing this account of activism so that it meets the second desideratum too.

Many forms of activism involve intentional communication: think of street protests, animal activists chanting in steakhouses, canvassers knocking on doors, anti-racists calling out racists on twitter, and athletes lobbying governments (e.g. footballer Marcus Rashford’s successful campaign to persuade the UK government to give free school meals to disadvantaged children this summer). This observation perhaps motivates the campaign account. Open rescue and ecotage, however, are not necessarily part of a campaign, and do not necessarily involve intentional communication. But we believe that in order to understand the nature of open rescue and ecotage, it is crucial to recognize that both open rescue and ecotage are essentially communicative—even when they are not intentionally so.

In general, if you do X in a situation where doing X makes sense only if P is the case, then doing X can serve as a way of communicating that P is the case. Suppose Sue hands Bob a napkin while they are having dinner. Given that doing this makes sense only if Bob has food on his face, handing Bob the napkin is a way for Sue to say (wordlessly) that Bob has food on his face. This form of communication can communicate either a fact, a belief, or a desire. If Bob sees Sue as reliable and trustworthy, then Sue’s handing him the napkin can straightforwardly reveal to Bob that he has food on his face. If Bob thinks Sue is a poor judge of these sorts of things, then Sue’s handing him the napkin may only show

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* Note that Martin (2019) does not explicitly claim that ecotage or open rescue are not activism, and neither does anyone she cites or any other literature that we have found; though for some relevant discussion see Draper (2019, p. 862).

* Draper (2019, p. 862)

* See e.g. Bardowell (2020).
to Bob that Sue believes he has food on his face. If Sue is a practical joker who often likes to convince people they have food on their face when they don’t, then Sue’s handing Bob the napkin may show to Bob that Sue wants Bob to believe that Sue believes he has food on his face. In any of these scenarios, handing Bob the napkin communicates something to Bob. Furthermore, Sue can communicate one of these things to Bob by handing him the napkin even if she doesn’t intend to communicate anything. Suppose Sue hands Bob a napkin as a simple courtesy, without intending to communicate anything to Bob. Maybe Bob doesn’t even have any food on his face. Nevertheless, in that act, Sue might unintentionally communicate to Bob that Bob has food on his face.

Open rescue and ecotage are similarly communicative even if those involved do not intend to communicate anything. Invading a farm to rescue animals makes sense only if the animals are being mistreated, are in danger of being harmed, or are in some way in need of rescue—or if one believes this or desires that others believe this. Given that it only makes sense to engage in open rescue and ecotage if one wants to save the animals, wants to communicate this, or believes that they ought to be saved, when someone engages in open rescue they communicate that they believe that the animals would be better off away from the harm—or that one desires that others believe this.

One might worry that if communication without intent is possible, there will be no interesting distinction between communication and mere evidence-provision. To see the issue here, take two cases:

**Proud murderer.** A murderer who is proud of his work intentionally leaves a bloody knife at a crime scene as a way of letting investigators know about his murder; **Negligent murderer.** A murderer who simply wants to get away with the crime accidentally leaves a bloody knife at a crime scene, thus unintentionally letting investigators know about his murder.

In the first case, it seems plausible to say that the murderer is saying something to the investigators; in the second case, it seems better to say that the murder is only unwittingly providing evidence to the investigators. And the difference seems to be made by whether communication is intended. This suggests that communication occurs only when communicative intent is present.

There are two ways to maintain this distinction between the proud murderer and the negligent murderer without invoking the claim that communication requires intent. We will argue that whichever way we distinguish between the proud and negligent murderers, we can still hold that open rescue and ecotage are communicative actions in the sense required by our account of activism, even when they lack communicative intent.

The first way of distinguishing between the proud murder and the negligent murderer begins with the idea that a given action counts as communicative only when it has a communicative function. An action can acquire a communicative function from the agent’s intention: when one intends one’s action to communicate, then the action has a communicative function. But an action can also acquire a communicative function in other ways, in the absence of communicative intent.

For instance, suppose that whenever a given bird is in her nest, she feels a powerful, unexplained urge to sing a particular song. Unbeknownst to her, the evolved biological function of this song is to let other birds of her species know the boundaries of her turf. Then it seems plausible to say that the bird’s song is a form of communication without communicative intent. In this case, the bird’s song has the function of communication in virtue of a biological teleology.

In human cases (and perhaps in some animal cases too), an action can acquire a communicative function in virtue of social conventions: we expect certain utterances, gestures, and other actions to

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At least when these are not your animals or are not animals that one knows anything about and when you have means of otherwise getting such animals.
communicate certain sorts of things, and that’s why those utterances, gestures, and other actions count as communications rather than mere provisions of evidence.

In the negligent murderer case there is no agential intention, biological teleology, social convention, or anything else that serves to give leaving a bloody knife a communicative function. In the proud murderer case there is an agential intention that establishes communicative function. This may explain why there’s communication in proud murderer but only evidence-provision in negligent murderer. This sort of account can also make sense of what’s happening in the Bob-and-Sue case: when Sue hands Bob a napkin, social conventions make it the case that handing someone a napkin is a way of communicating that one has food on one’s face, and that is why Sue’s handing Bob a napkin can be a way of saying to Bob that he has food on his face (and not merely providing evidence to Bob that he has food on his face), even if that’s not Sue’s intention.\(^{11}\) Similarly, we might argue that there are social conventions that give meaning and thus communicative function to breaching property rights to free animals or damage a dam to do something that is not in one’s own self-interest. Doing this communicates that the legal procedures are not working in the interests of animals.

Black Lives Matter protestors plausibly communicated something similar when they pushed a statue of slave trader Edward Colston into Bristol harbour (in the UK) this year.\(^{12}\) Many commentators claimed that the protestors should have taken the legal routes to getting the statue removed; seemingly showing that the protestors had communicated that an extra-legal solution here was the right approach. But some commentators disagreed that an extra-legal solution was the right solution here because legal means had not been exhausted (the latter claim is contentious in part because a legal attempt to remove the statue of Colston had been underway for several years, to no avail).\(^{12}\)

Alternatively, we might hold that what distinguishes the proud from the negligent murderer is that the negligent murderer would prefer not to communicate anything to the investigators; in contrast the proud murderer prefers to communicate something to the investigators. The thought here is that although both the negligent and proud murderers do communicate in a certain sense, there is an important distinction between them in terms of their preferences regarding their communication and this is what we are latching onto when we judge that there is an important difference regarding the communication in these two cases.

This last way of distinguishing the proud from the negligent murderer suggests a particular view about a necessary condition of activism. We might say that A’s \(\varphi\)-ing is an instance of activism only if (i) A’s \(\varphi\)-ing communicates a moral or political conviction of A’s or a moral or political message to another B and (ii) A does not prefer that this message or conviction were not communicated to B.\(^{13}\) This view allows that open rescuers and those engaged in ecotage are generally engaged in activism. For open rescuers and those engaged in ecotage do not prefer that their moral and political convictions, motivations, or messages not be communicated to others via their action. In fact, on the contrary, many animal activists explicitly wish to communicate a moral and/or political message with their open rescuing.

The foregoing considerations suggest that communication without communicative intent is possible. And this, we think, is of central importance in understanding the nature of activism.

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\(^{11}\) This account fits with contemporary work on implicature, see e.g. Davis (2019).

\(^{12}\) See e.g. Olusoga (2020).

\(^{13}\) See ibid.

\(^{14}\) There is a natural, more specific way to understand (ii):

\textit{Activism as Political Communication.} A’s \(\varphi\)-ing is an instance of activism only if (i) A’s \(\varphi\)-ing communicates a political conviction of A’s or a political message to another B and (ii) \textit{in the closest possible world in which A knows that her \(\varphi\)-ing communicates this conviction or message (which may be the actual world) A doesn’t prefer that this conviction or message were not so communicated.}
On the one hand, it seems plausible to think that activism is an inherently communicative activity. This is a reason why secret do-gooding (e.g., secretly returning a mislaid wallet to someone’s backpack before they even notice it’s gone) does not seem to be a form of activism: secret do-gooding is necessarily non-communicative. On the other hand, as we’ve emphasized, many forms of activism, such as open rescue and ecotage, do not always aim at communication, and sometimes aim only at directly righting a wrong. These two points seem to be in some tension. The possibility of communication without communicative intent allows us to resolve this tension, by allowing us to maintain that activism is essentially political communication, but only sometimes involves intentional communication.

3. Activism as Intrusive and/or State-Independent Political Communication

If we hold that activism is (political) communication in the way outlined in the previous section, we avoid the problem that the campaign account faces. For, as we showed, our account—unlike the campaign account—does not imply that open rescue and ecotage are not instances of activism. (Campaigning essentially involves some sort of intentional communication with the aim of persuading others; by contrast, on our account, activism may or may not involve intentional communication.)

However, in voting one can communicate one’s views in a similar way: voting is a form of political communication. Yet, as we discussed in §1, voting is not a form of activism. In the present section we will discuss two ways to supplement the account in order to explain why voting doesn’t get to count as a form of activism.

The first idea we want to discuss holds that activism is intrusive political communication. If activism is intrusive political communication, then this would explain why voting is not a form of activism. After all, voting is not an intrusive act: when a citizen goes into a voting booth and casts a vote, the citizen does precisely what the citizen as citizen has been invited and encouraged to do. On this view:

Activism as Intrusive Political Communication. A’s φ-ing is an instance of activism iff (i) A’s φ-ing communicates a political conviction of A’s or a political message to another B and (ii) A does not prefer that this message or conviction were not communicated to B and (iii) A’s φ-ing is experienced as intrusive or is actually intrusive.

To provide some support for this account, it can be observed that many activist actions are distinctively intrusive. Consider a paradigm example of activism: the Greensboro sit-in of 1965. In this event, four Black students entered a whites-only restaurant, sat down, and refused to leave. This event attracted international attention, inspiring many other activists and influencing the evolution of the entire American civil rights movement. The Greensboro sit-in was intrusive in the most literal of ways: it was an intrusion into the restaurant owner’s property. This same sort of intrusion occurs in many other cases. A common tactic in the animal rights movement is to enter places where animals are used (e.g., restaurants, slaughterhouses, or laboratories) to chant slogans, occupy space, and in general create disruption of normal activities. This kind of boundary-crossing intrusiveness is a common thread that unites otherwise disparate activists such as modern-day animal rights activists and civil rights activists of the 1960s.

The Greensboro sit-in and animal-rights disruptions both involve illegal intrusions—violations of anti-trespassing laws. But not all activist intrusions are illegal. A very common form of activism is street protesting, which is often officially permitted by the city. In these cases, there is no illegal intrusion, but there is an intrusive element nonetheless. For example, when a major environmentalist activist group such as Extinction Rebellion engages in a permitted street protest involving hundreds or thousands of protesters in a crowded city, this is experienced by business owners and ordinary citizens as an intrusion into their routines and daily lives, and the fact that it is legally permitted does not significantly diminish this intrusiveness. Similarly, door-to-door campaigning is legal but it is at least mildly intrusive (when someone opens the door, the campaigner might appropriately begin her spiel by saying, ‘Pardon my
intrusion, but...). So, many activist actions are intrusions in the sense that they are at least experienced by others—who do not normally share activists’ concerns—as intrusive or unwelcome intrusions into their lives or experiences. Voting is not intrusive in this way.

There are two main issues with Activism as Intrusive Political Communication. First, some activism may be un-intrusive. Activists frequently appear on morning TV shows or other chat shows and plausibly engage in activism in their interviews. But they do not seem to be doing anything intrusive. Setting up a twitter account, using consistently over a prolonged period of time only to further a political cause or campaign can plausibly constitute activism but need not be intrusive. 

A second problem for Activism as Intrusive Political Communication is that some intrusive political communication may not be activism. A government’s propaganda machine can engage in intrusive political communication but it would be odd to say that a government propagandist is an activist even if their moral and political convictions match the propaganda they circulate. Similarly, a police chief might send 200 riot police into an area to break up an illegal rave of 100 people. In doing so, they might thereby (intentionally) communicate a moral or political message and do this intrusively. Finally, one country’s army often invades part of another country because a part of the latter country is held by the former to really be part of their country, to be land that is morally theirs or theirs people’s. Such an invasion is intrusive and involves moral and political communication, but it does not seem to be activism.

An alternative way of satisfying the second desideratum for an account of activism (i.e., the desideratum that voting not ordinarily count as activism) holds that activism is state-independent political communication, where political communication is state-independent when it does not operate via the state’s channels and does not involve communication in one’s capacity as a state official or employee of the state. On this view:

Activism as State-Independent Political Communication. A’s φ-ing is an instance of activism iff (i) A’s φ-ing communicates a political conviction of A’s or a political message to another B and (ii) A does not prefer that this message or conviction were not communicated to B and (iii) A’s φ-ing is state-independent.

Where, to reiterate, A’s φ-ing is state-independent in the present sense iff (a) A φs not in their capacity as an employee, member, or leader of an organ of the state, and (b) A’s φ-ing does not proceed via one of the state’s own channels of communication with citizens and others, nor via one of the state’s (preferred) channels of such communication.

Door-to-door campaigning, the Greensboro sit-in and animal rights disruptions will all be instances of activism on this account because such activism is not communication that proceeds via a government’s channel of communication. But voting will not constitute activism on this view, for voting proceeds via a government’s preferred channel of communication with voters. Similarly, attending a government listening exercise and giving one’s views to government officials will not constitute activism, nor will telling state officials one’s views at a meet and greet. 

Activism as State-Independent Political Communication seems equipped to sidestep the two problems that Activism as Intrusive Political Communication faces. Regarding the first, Twitter activism as well as appearances on chat shows can be activism on this view. Regarding the second, this account straightforwardly implies that government officials’ production or circulation of government

* These are examples of Martini’s activism from Martin (2019).
* Unless one subverts the listening exercise or meet and greet in such a way that overturns its status as a preferred channel of communication.
propaganda is not activism. This account also implies that a police chief does not engage in activism by sending a large number of riot police to break up a small(er) rave. And this account implies that when one country’s army invades another country, it does not thereby engage in activism.

A problem for Activism as State-Independent Political Communication, one might argue, is that it may seem to imply that street protests that have been approved by the relevant police force or other state apparatus are not instances of activism. But the defender of this account might reply that the mere fact that the state has approved a protest does not make that protest a state-based action, or an action that proceeds via one of the governments’ channels, or preferred channels, of communication. It might seem that voting the state allows citizens to vote without knowing what the result of the vote will be and so voting does not proceed via a state’s (preferred) channel of communication. But there may be argued to be a clear different between a state allowing a protest and setting up a process for citizens to vote that has nothing to do with a difference in the content of street protests or votes: states set up the channel of communication in the case of voting, so it is one of the state’s channel of communication—a state-based channel of communication; whereas parts of the state only allow, rather than setting up, street protests, they only allow the communication rather than setting up the channel of communication (or preferring communication via that channel).

However, we might still be unsure that Activism as State-Independent Political Communication can really distinguish between voting and street protests in the way that we have been discussing. In that case, we might instead combine the two accounts that we have been discussing as follows:

Activism as Intrusive, State-Independent Political Communication. A’s φ-ing is an instance of activism iff (i) A’s φ-ing communicates a political conviction of A’s or a political message to another B and (ii) A does not prefer that this message or conviction were not communicated to B and (iii) A’s φ-ing is experienced as intrusive or is actually intrusive and (iv) A’s φ-ing is state-independent.

Given that voting is not intrusive and political protests are, this account should allow us to distinguish these two actions. It will also solve the second problem for Activism as Intrusive Political Communication because the state propagandist, police, and army actions are not state-independent. However, it will still face the first problem that Activism as Intrusive Political Communication faces: it will imply that activists who appear on morning TV shows or setup an activist twitter account are not activists because such appearances and tweeting does not seem intrusive. So, in order to be justified in holding this hybrid account we would need to argue that such actions are, despite the appearances, in fact intrusive or should not be held to constitute activism for independent reasons.

We’ve developed three accounts of activism. There are some wrinkles to iron out with these accounts. But it seems that one of the latter two accounts will provide plausible accounts of activism. There is one additional problem case for all three accounts that we’ve proposed.

a But it allows that non-governmental agents could still engage in activism by using such propaganda – such use of propaganda is plausibly activism.

b Suppose that a non-governmental organization engages in similar armed combat perhaps to support a secessionist movement. Is that activism? If such activity is not activism, it is not for the reason that such an army’s invasion is not activism. Secessionist movements and their supporters often engage in activism. When the majority of a secessionist organization’s activity no longer consists in vocal campaigning and instead consists in armed warfare or terrorism it seems odd to say that they’re engaged in activism rather than warfare or terrorism, but this may just be because calling such an organization activists is uninformative or misleading, for their warfare or terrorism is more salient than their activism. But nonetheless they seem to be activists who also engage in warfare.

c It might seem that instead of holding that activism is state-independent political communication we should hold that activism is communication that punches up, that is, which comes from those with a relative deficit of power. However, billionaires can engage in activism. And some famous ‘gender-critical’ feminists are often held to be both activists and punching-down—at trans people who have relatively less power than such famous feminists—at the same time.

d One additional potential problem for this third account is that it may appear gerrymandered.
Suppose that a teenager who has been forbidden to wear jewelry by her parents comes home wearing an earring. In this case, the teenager’s action clearly has the social role of communicating a message in either an unwelcome and to that extent, perhaps, intrusive way and it does this via state-independent means. The message may not have the kind of political content that activist messages must or typically have, for the message communicated may be something like Your control over me is slipping. But if the message is instead something like, I am entitled to wear jewelry—a message that is, in a certain relatively broad but not altogether implausible sense, a political message—then all three of the accounts we’ve discussed will seem to imply that the teenager is engaging in activism by wearing the earring.

There are ways in which we could revise these accounts to avoid this problem. Whatever the message communicated by the teenager, it is not about the laws of society. We could restrict both accounts so that they required the message communicated to be one that is political in some restricted sense, for instance, to be one that concerns the Rawlsian basic structure of society. Or we could require that activists’ targets be the state or members of some group qua members of that group. But any of these moves threaten to make an account of activism objectionably narrow by implausibly implying that activists cannot aim to change individuals’ behaviour rather than more narrowly political behavior such as the behavior of political institutions. On consideration, we do not think it is a very high cost of our account to consider some versions of this teenager’s action in this case to be instances of activism, albeit of a sort that is less public, more individualized, and of less (narrowly) political relevance than other forms of activism. But if this is seen as a high cost, then it may be necessary to develop an account that includes some sort of content restriction beyond restrictions implied by the accounts we’ve considered here.

4. The Value of Activism

Instead of offering a single account of activism, we’ve discussed three different accounts. We hope to eventually find a single account that is fully satisfactory. However, even though we have not settled on a single account (yet), our discussion suggests that the best account of the nature of activism will feature several themes. First, all of the accounts we’ve discussed imply that activism is a form of political communication and that the communicative aspect of activism need not be intentional. Second, we’ve introduced some considerations that seem to support the idea that activism is distinctively intrusive. Third, we’ve offered considerations that seem to suggest that activism is distinctively state-independent.

All of these themes are featured in many paradigm examples of activism. Reflection on these themes can reveal some of the ways that activism can be distinctively valuable. To illustrate this, we want to briefly discuss one specific type of activism: the restaurant disruption, of the sort practiced by many animal activist groups including Direct Action Everywhere (DxE).

Restaurant disruptions typically involve various sorts of overt communication: activists chant and distribute pamphlets, for instance. But these overt communications are not the sole or even the primary aim of these actions. Wayne Hsiung, the leader of DxE, has this to say:

Speaking out while others are eating, while not illegal, is a violation of one of our most important social traditions: breaking bread. When we sit down to eat, we seek nourishment, and comfort, and peace. ... It is precisely because [of this] that [restaurant disruption] is such an important and powerful tool for social change. Passersby, customers, and even multinational corporations can easily dismiss and write us

24 Hsiung’s observation that restaurant disruptions are not (inherently) illegal deserves consideration. (These actions do sometimes violate trespassing laws, but they do not always do so.) This is important for the present discussion because it disqualifies restaurant disruptions from being acts of civil disobedience. Hsiung and many other activists often use the term ‘civil disobedience’ to describe what they do, perhaps because civil disobedience is (as we noted in the Introduction above) a particularly heavily discussed and valorized form of activism. But the fact that restaurant disruptions (along with many other forms of activism) do not qualify as civil disobedience means that there is a need for theoretical attention to activism, not just to civil disobedience.
off, if we do not push our message in the places where it is most unwelcome. But when we transform a space where violence has been normalized into a space of dissent, we can jolt, not just individual people, but our entire society into change. And because we have now expressed that our cause is important enough to violate a powerful social norm, we leave a mark in people.\(^7\)

Here Hsiung suggests that what is communicated by a restaurant disruption goes beyond the content of what is explicitly chanted by activists and written on pamphlets distributed by activists. Indeed, activists’ chants and pamphlets are often not particularly informative. In many cases, diners already know (at least at some level of generality) most of what animal activists have to say about the harms to animals that occur in modern animal agriculture. But the important point is that in a restaurant disruption, activists are not only speaking and distributing pamphlets. They are also doing something: they are invading a restaurant, thereby ruining customers’ dinner. And in doing this, they may communicate certain pieces of information, such as information about the depth and intensity of their commitment to abolition of animal agriculture, that they could not communicate through other channels available to them.

Importantly, restaurant disruptions can play this communicative role even if activists do not intend for them to serve this role. Even if activists’ sole intention is to prevent diners from being able to enjoy their dinners in peace—or to reclaim the space of restaurant for animals—this form of activism would still communicate more than would be communicated were they to avoid such disruptive tactics.\(^8\)

We suggest, then, that an important feature of restaurant disruption is that it enhances activists’ communicative abilities—it allows them to say more than they could say otherwise. The intrusiveness and the state-independence of restaurant disruption are both important in enabling restaurant disruption to play this communicative role. If restaurant disruption were somehow a state-sponsored activity, or if it were somehow not intrusive, then it would be less effective in revealing activists’ level of commitment to their cause.

These points suggest a general hypothesis about the value of activism according to which activism often (perhaps not always) allows activists to communicate more than they could communicate via non-activist channels. If this hypothesis could be defended, it would provide a basis for a case that activism has a particular or distinctive value in democratic societies.

References

Bardowell, Derek (2020). ‘Marcus Rashford and other black athletes have run out of patience and are forcing change’. The Guardian 18 June 2020.


\(^7\) Hsiung (2014).

\(^8\) Some activists state that the aim of restaurant disruptions is to reclaim the space of restaurant for animals; this is what Joanne Lee, who led such a disruption of a steakhouse in Melbourne, said to us when we interviewed her for Killoren and Rowland (2019).
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