What kind of activist are you?
Positioning, power and identity in political online activism in Europe


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Abstract: In this article we examine the different forms of activism using information and communication technologies as a means to represent different political positions. Within the framework of radical democracy we develop a typology of contemporary activism as a form of political participation. The results are based on three qualitative case studies of political activism: [1] middle-class activists in Sweden fighting to save their bathhouse; [2] student protests in Austria; and [3] anti-fascist protests in East Germany.

Keywords: activism, Internet, radical democracy, contestation

Today activism is marked by extensive use of digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (see Ellison & Boyd 2007; Mattoni 2008; McCurdy 2009; Uldam 2010). As far back as 2002 Rheingold drew attention to new possibilities of organization and coordination with mobile and digital media in his concept of SmartMobs. Developments in media and communication technologies do not only have an impact on protest coordination and mobilization but also on the way activists present themselves and negotiate their political identity. In this paper we will address the issue of activist-identifications as a form of political participation from a contemporary European perspective based on three cases of political activism where digital communication played an important role: [1] middle-class activists in Sweden fighting to save their bathhouse; [2] student protests in Austria; and [3] anti-fascist protests in East Germany.

By examining the three cases we develop a typology of online activism within the framework of radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2005). The main question is: how do activists negotiate their political identity online in comparison to their opponents and which types of activism are reflected in these representations? Thus, the focus of this paper is on meanings and identifications in contemporary European activism reflected in digitally mediated discourse.
1. Activism as Citizenship in a Political Community

To understand the representation of different forms of contemporary European activism we discuss political activism in the social and discursive field of the political where hegemonic power struggles take place (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2005). These power struggles are closely related to the concepts of political participation and citizenship. The concept of citizenship consists of three components: participation, membership in a political community and rights & duties (Bellamy 2008). Participation within this framework is tightly entangled with the other components. Citizenship ideally entails a particular form of identification with the political community in which citizens participate and are conceived as members (Dahlgren 2009). Consequently, identity can be understood as a motivator behind participation, i.e. participation in order to form and reform individual identity and to develop feelings of belonging (Svensson 2011).

Computers in general and the Internet in particular redefine the way human beings negotiate their identities (Turkle 1995). Social media sites seemingly enhance processes of identification and self-representation since users are able to explore their multifaceted identity and form new relationships online (Svensson 2011). These processes are closely related to political participation online aimed at finding and exploring common causes, as well as challenging power elites, societal norms and values (Bennett & Amoshaun 2009). In this way, the individual level of identification with political opinions is interlinked with the socio-cultural level of mass mobilization and collective action. In other words, for people to act politically they need to identify with a community and a cause that provides individuals with an idea of themselves that they can value. Bakardjieva (2011) talks about mundane citizenship in this context as firmly rooted in individual experiences but expanding beyond these through collective identification. Such processes are strongly related to ideological beliefs, core values within political communities and to the expressive side of political activism (van de Donk et al. 2004). Rather than territoriality, it is around shared values, beliefs and norms that political communities are formed today (Bruns, 2009; Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2009), even though physical space/location still plays an important role for value creation and maintenance of norms.

Power in communities is at play in different ways: through hegemonic power struggles between communities claiming supremacy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), and within communities through socialization, shared norms and values. Even though these mechanisms of power are related we will focus on the first one here. Establishing a communal We implies a distinction in relation to Them. Hegemonic power struggles are centered around such processes of identification (Mouffe 2005). Power and conflict are thus linked to the political on different levels. Since the political refers to the organization of human co-existence (see Arendt 1998/1958; Dewey 1927; Foucault 1994/1988), political power struggles have to do with conflicts over interests and resources in the organization of society (Dahlgren, 2009). Hence, the political has a normative dimension since the organization of a democratic society is based on principles such as equality and equal division of society’s common goods (Rancière, discussed by Arsenjuk 2005). However, following Mouffe (2005) we should not be misled to believe that consensus on this division ever could be fully achieved. Essential in her understanding of political participation are conflict and hegemonic power struggles between different groups and communities. Through construction of “frontiers which separate” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), different communities in political struggle are based on identification with a certain political identity which then entails the identification of the Other.
Through outlining a normative concept of “agonism” Mouffe (2005) seeks to establish the Other, not as an enemy to be destroyed but as an adversary to be acknowledged. The task of democratic politics, according to her, is to bring different poles to the center, accept different positions but not with the idea that consensus will ever imply equal power distribution or that it can be fully achieved. We, therefore, define political activism as based in challenging power relations within the political formed around we/they distinctions, i.e. different political positions. Political activism consequently works through the circulation of struggle, which permits people to struggle with their adversaries, both against the constraints of the system and for the alternatives they envision – separately and together (Cleaver 1993). By analysing the construction of such frontiers in three different contemporary European cases, this paper concludes with a typology of online activism based on notions of identity, power, and positioning in discourse.

2. A Short Note on Methodology

Discourses are social constructions of possible worlds manifested in text and have to be studied in their relationship to each other, i.e. dominating, competing, cooperating, etc. (Fairclough 2003). Communities can have power over other communities by controlling them (van Dijk 2001), and activists try to challenge existing power relations by constructing a common enemy against which struggles are directed. In Harré and Moghaddam's (2003) work on positioning theory, processes of identification are viewed as temporary and dependent on both context and individual agency. To think of we/they identifications as acts of positioning underlines power relations between communities, as well as the role of discourses for understanding agency, power and identity. Harré and Moghaddam (2003) delineate a positioning triangle consisting of speech acts, positions (or identities) and story-lines (or discourses). In our case studies, digitally mediated speech acts of activists provided information about the we/they identifications (positions) as well as the discourses in which they were performed.

The following three cases show a high level of variation in their form and size, especially in terms of the actors involved in the events. This variation provides us with a diversity of political positions and, by extension, with a variety of processes through which the boundaries between Us and Them are built. In all these cases information and communication tools were extensively used. All the studies have an ethnographic component in the sense that we have been involved in each case of political activism to some degree. However, this article is not action research since we aim at understanding the struggles of these groups from the theoretical point of view presented in the previous section. To gather data a range of methods have been used, from participant observations to interviews and content/document analyses (for a more detailed discussion of the methods used in the three cases see Svensson, 2012, Edelmann et al., 2011, Neumayer, 2012).

3. Activism in Southern Stockholm to Save a Local Bathhouse

In 2009 a group was formed to save the community-run (but city-owned) bathhouse from demolition in the middle-class suburb of Aspudden. Online petitions were circulated, a Facebook-group, Twitter-feed, SMS-list and blog were used by the group together with more traditional offline activities. The focus here will be on the battle for the bathhouse and the online forms of communication among the activists in the group. The data for this research was collected through interviews and participant observations online as well as offline.

The most obvious constellation of Us and Them in Aspudden was made along a discourse of we,
the ordinary folks, against them, the politicians, detached from the people who they are supposed to represent. One typical example comes from one activist saying that it was not normal that politicians wanted to destroy a local meeting place that many people wanted and needed and thus ignoring the wishes of ordinary people. Some activists were very passionate when they positioned themselves in this discourse, describing for example personal and family hatred towards responsible politicians. On the blog, activists published YouTube videos mocking a Liberal politician chairing the city district to which Aspudden belongs. On the whole, politicians were described as enjoying themselves rather than representing the people. This discourse with its positioning of ordinary people against corrupt politicians is summoned on this blog post, after the bathhouse eventually was destroyed:

"We have decided not to continue with our struggle. We have children to take care of, we have employment to return to and household duties to fulfill. Those politicians whose job it is to represent us refuse to listen and instead of dialogue they chose to command the police"

In this quote the distinction between activists and politicians becomes very clear. However, this we/they positioning was often more nuanced than the bipolar division between ordinary people against corrupt politicians. Most notably the activists made use of a participatory democratic discourse in order to position themselves as engaged citizens exercising their democratic rights. Many of the activists explicitly referred to themselves as participants wanting to change society by protecting it from politicians who no longer understood what “real” democracy is. On Facebook, this process was presented as the activists fighting against “the democratic deficit” of Stockholm.

The activists’ political identities seemed to be especially connected to bad political decisions. The political process leading to the destruction of the old and picturesque Klarabergenighbourhood in the 1970s was one political decision highlighted by some activists as spurring their political awakening. However, not all politicians were constructed as corrupt or enemies. In accordance withs the participatory democratic discourse the activists commonly referred to the Green Party as being more bottom-up and, consequently, playing the role of a watch-dog vis-à-vis the ruling majority. Frequently it was right-wing politicians who were described as the Other. In Twitter and Facebook this positioning was expressed as “the right-wing majority” or “the conservatives in power”. The Liberal Party, one of the members of the conservative coalition ruling Sweden, was specially targeted as the main adversary, not the least since both the chair of the city district and the politician in charge of sport and leisure were liberals. “Liberals hate leftist people” as one activist proclaimed, clearly positioning activists as left-wing and the Liberal party as right-wing.

There were activists who were part of, or in the process of, joining the Green Party. However, in line with the participatory democratic discourse of engagement they made clear that it was out of the question “to just sit in a committee and discuss”. They wanted to do something, to act, to engage in “real projects”. These statements further underline the importance of the participatory democratic discourse among the activists in Aspudden. One of the activists was also a politician, representing the Green Party. He performed an interesting balancing act between representing a politician position regarding the activists as short sighted and representing a kind of not-in-my-backyard participation — and fulfilling an activist position in which demands for “real” participatory democracy in the neighbourhood were ignored by the ruling conservative coalition.

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1 Original quotes translated by the authors. —
The activists were aware of how they were positioned by the Other, i.e. the right-wing politicians, as militant left-wing extremists. Strategies to contest this position could be observed, often by using the discourse of participatory democracy to position themselves as active citizens. However, the activists also used the adversary’s discourse in their favour, to position themselves as peaceful demonstrators and the politicians as undemocratic and authoritarian (due to the use of police forces and their excessive violence towards activists). The Sport and Leisure Committee was also described as “incredibly militant” for destroying the bathhouse, as opposed to activists who “took care of” it. It was also a conscious strategy to term the activists staying in the bathhouse 24/7 not as occupants, but as lifeguards (authors translation: badvakt, literally bath-guard).

The bipolar friend-enemy positioning also reflected different levels of engagement. Not all who participated in the protest considered themselves as activists but rather as citizens being politically engaged. Some of the activists clearly expressed their distrust towards politics in general, while other activists were actually involved in party politics. The police, described as the forceful right arm of the politicians in power, was a group that frequently appeared in the activists’ discourse. The involvement of the police discouraged some activists to show their physical support in the bathhouse. Instead, they supported the protest online and showed their solidarity with the activists engaged in physical action. Other activists did not think that talking and deliberating was enough. These activists felt compelled to act, occupying and guarding the bathhouse, in spite of the likely consequences of police eviction and prosecution.

4. Student Protest in Austria for a Better Higher Education System

Our second case analyses the Austrian student protest movement known as unibrennt. In October 2009 hundreds of activists occupied the largest lecture hall of the University of Vienna in order to demonstrate for better study conditions and against the commodification of education. Social media tools and mobile phones played an important role for mobilisation and coordination. The occupations ended after two months when lecture halls were evicted by police forces. The data used here is part of a bigger data-set including communication on social media channels, websites, video channels and news coverage as well as results from an online survey conducted by one of the authors during the protests. The following analysis focuses on the construction of identity, friend-enemy constellations and processes of identification enhanced by new media usage.

The protest movement represented a heterogeneous target group (Edelmann et al., 2011), which on the one hand enabled a lot of people to identify with the movement, but also led to various sub-goals within the movement. A common collective identity within the movement was mainly constructed through processes of disapproval. Students were frustrated by the current study conditions and the higher education system. By posing the current status as something to act against, several adversaries were created. The Bologna-process, as a structural, symbolic instance of the Other was representative of the commercialization of education in Europe:

“The university does not belong to either managers, bureaucrats, or operatives. It should be everyone’s!” (Activist, Interview)

A very obvious friend-enemy constellation during the student protests was the Federal Minister of Science and Research (Johannes Hahn) opposed by student groups who identified the politician as a common enemy. Especially in social media channels it became clear that politicians with a certain agenda for the educational sector were the main adversaries, which was observable in
different cases of hate speech (e.g.: “Pluck the rooster/Der Hahn gehört gerupft!” as the minister’s name translates as rooster) and parodies or ironical statements (“LOL!!! Hahn states: It is not my fault!”).

In the student protests not only very explicit statements but also expressions of political identification on a more symbolic level were observable. Assuming a relation between a clamorous struggle and its counter-images and the conferred identity, this obviously led to various identification opportunities that contributed to speed up mobilization despite a diversity of political positions among the participants. Although the absence of a clear common enemy can be a problem in political activism, in this case the selection of adversaries displayed by the protests turned out to be attractive to frustrated students, who mobilised against conservative politicians and neoliberal politics in general. The intensity of the protest was, therefore, not only a reaction to the political atmosphere but also to the climate of conflict already existing within the university system.Moments of conflict can be fruitful for identity building as, in particular, students had the feeling that they had been deprived of their voice within that system for a long time. This silent growth of dissatisfaction with existing power structures seems to have provided a fertile ground for the protests in the Austrian case.

Looking at how activists were positioned vis-à-vis the Other, both mass media and a counter-protest movement played a crucial role. The group of protest adversaries consisted mainly of students who strongly criticised the forms of activism, like occupying lecture halls which would prevent other students from studying. Actions by these counter-groups could only be observed online, in spite of the fact that these channels reached high numbers of supporters. Debates in this group were largely characterized by generalizations, insults and a tense atmosphere between supporters and opponents of the occupations:

“Just look at these blockers, greenies, rastas, punks, anarchists, work deniers, German and foreign students who seek to study for free at our uni!!! Clean the Audimax!!!” (Facebook)

Opponents furthermore preferred labels that identified protesters as belonging to the extreme left-wing of the political spectrum. This position was also being taken up by the mass media. The most influential tabloid newspaper, Kronen Zeitung, referred to protesters as “extreme left-wing-Green-Communist student slobs” and considered their claims completely utopian (Heissenberger 2010), whereas the first national newspaper, Die Presse, described the activists as partysans and quixotic students. Media and counter-protesters have been supported by leaders of Austria’s right-wing parties who used terms like “leftist anarchists” (BZÖ) or “wannabe-revolutionists” (FPÖ). Amongst the strategies to contest these positions, the live video stream from the occupied Audimax was used to invalidate mass media articles by providing first-hand information. However, mass media organizations cannot be seen as direct adversaries of the protests despite a mainly negative coverage during the first stage of the protests. In order to communicate with the public, activists were still dependent on the dominant discourse shaped by the mass media in Austria, while social media channels provided an additional and more personal perspective.

The increased usage of online media even enhanced the spectrum of engagement: results of an online survey that has been conducted during the student protests show that 84% of the respondents followed the students protests online whereas 60% took part in demonstration. A remarkable 43% of the respondents said that they participated in occupations. Online activism on one hand promoted reciprocal exchange and created bonds with those who couldn’t participate. On the other hand, technical alternatives might have dissuaded people from taking part in civil
disobedience actions such as the occupation of the lecture hall, for instance. Group norms were not only collectively shaped, but could also, due to a transparent information policy enabled by new media, be influenced by outsiders. Consequently, rules and regulations for upcoming actions were open to feedback. This transparent process enhanced identification with the movement, together with slogans such as “One out of many”\(^2\). As with the other cases examined in this paper, not everyone who participated in the movement seems to have identified as an activist.

5. Anti-fascist Protests in Germany

This case focuses on anti-fascist protests in East Germany and consists of three sites: [1] several marches planned by neo-Nazis in Leipzig, Germany, on October 16 2010, and mobilization for blockades; [2] neo-Nazi marches in Dresden on February 13, 2011 and February 19, 2011; [3] blockades in and around Dresden by NGOs, civil society groups and anti-fascist groups from all over Europe. The data-set includes communication on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, websites, blogs and news media coverage. Additionally, informal interviews and participant observation methods were used to better understand the discourse around the events. The analysis here focuses on the different political positions articulated in the protest events, the power relations between the groups and the mobilization of people across the political spectrum for a common cause within democratic pluralism.

The obvious friend-enemy constellation in the anti-fascist protests is the neo-Nazi groups. However, within the discourse about the events it becomes clear that the blockades against the marches are formed by people with very different political positions, such as anti-fascists, anarchists, citizens, politicians (usually rather left-leaning), NGOs, representatives of Universities and also the church, which engages in counter-activities such as organizing commemorations. During the blockades the bipolar division between the groups is clearly expressed as, for example, by the Twitter stream organized by a hashtag that clearly separates the two positions. However, a more nuanced discussion takes place after the events. One criterion that is frequently discussed to differentiate core activists from “civil society” is the readiness to act in civil disobedience and to expose oneself to a high level of risk. Criticism is raised by both sides: by core-activists since they consider the blockades and acting in civil disobedience as the only way to stop the neo-Nazis; and by the civil society groups due to the readiness of some activists to engage in violent action. There is also a difference in terms of self-definition. “Citizens” are necessary to get a significant number of people in the streets, as well as to increase the number of members of a Facebook-group or to contribute with donations, tweets online and posts and comments on YouTube. This kind of citizens do not necessarily refer to themselves as activists, although they consider that they are as politically active in supporting the cause as anyone else. This becomes especially clear in the Leipzig case where the anti-fascist group *Roter Oktober* and the civil society network *Leipzig nimmt Platz* co-existed to resist the neo-Nazis. *Leipzig nimmt Platz* described itself as a cross-section of the whole political spectrum in comparison to the anti-fascists who clearly position themselves as left-wing. Although criticism was raised after the events due to the lack of clear political statements during the mobilization, the anti-fascist group concluded that it was necessary to overcome these differences and unite for the common political cause (*Roter Oktober* 2010).

Another group that is often depicted as an enemy in textual representations produced by the activists involved in the blockades are the police as the authority that has to protect the marches: "Not an unusual unity: neo-Nazis and police unite to fight democracy #19februar #polizeigewalt" (Twitter, Dresden). Activists involved in the blockades act in civil disobedience and, thus, struggle against authority. The police, as a representative of authority in relationship to the activists, are part of the traditional power relations when acting against civil disobedience. In this case, the struggle over domination can only be successful if the counter-protest outnumbers the neo-Nazis and the police and, thus, is able to block the march. The need to mobilise this critical mass unites different political positions into a clear friend-enemy constellation.

The event also gained the attention of the mass media and started to be part of the societal discourse in general. The political positions in the different media are reflected in the discourse on social web platforms about the events: “Dear Aljazeera, please send us reporters, our media are either censored by the state or pimp their ratings #19februar #polizeigewalt” (Twitter, Dresden). Media are usually addressed as being different from the activists. However, these boundaries are less clear when alternative media are included. Publishing on alternative media platforms that reported about the events can also be a form of political activism and is certainly a form of political engagement. Some of the journalists expose themselves to a high level of risk or act in civil disobedience by reporting about the events from a critical perspective. The different positions are related to power relations that exist between the dominant discourse in mass media that construct the public knowledge about the events and alternative media that give a different perspective on the events, usually with a certain political position.

A central question in the discussion is the legal justification of demonstrations by groups with an anti-democratic agenda based on the democratic right of freedom of expression, as compared to the blockades that were officially banned. Right-wing groups use the right for freedom of expression to justify their march. On their mobilization website for the event in Dresden on February 19, 2011, they say: “[…] we will fight for our own freedom. This includes freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.” The political position of these groups becomes clear in digitally mediated discourse. Videos related to the events with titles such as “Good Work! National Socialism now!” or “Heil Hitler! You are still among us” were published in YouTube and became part of the discussion. This case shows that the political also includes voices that cannot be considered constructive in democratic pluralism since their aims are undemocratic and their supporters demand a system that increases domination and silences other voices, i.e. fights democratic pluralism.

6. Activism and Identity in the political

In the three cases discussed above, activists developed a counter-discourse that aimed at challenging power. By an analysis of digitally mediated discourse in each of the three cases we identified a set of criteria within the framework of radical democracy:

Activism and participation: In the three cases political participation took place outside of the established power centers of representative democracy. Activism within the framework of radical democracy and participation can be understood as part of the struggle to renew/develop recognized forms of citizen participation. Through the participatory democratic discourse in Aspudden, activists could demand to be taken seriously, exercising citizenship but from an extra-

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3 All quotes originally in German are translated by the authors.
Parliamentary position. Mouffe (2005) argues that contemporary democracies cannot include all political positions since deliberation and decision-making always implies to favor one position over another. Activism may thus be understood as a coalition of excluded opinions, views and expressions that no longer fit in the parliamentary political arena. In doing so, activism re-establishes that Other. Following Mouffe, the established institutions of democracy should be able to cater to a multiplicity of voices.

Political positions: Activism is happening through identity performances positioning one group in comparison to another. The role of the Other can be attributed to another activist community, as in the case of anti-fascists protests, to politicians, such as in southern Stockholm or to the counter-protest group in Vienna. In the course of a protest different political positions can be temporarily united to fight for a common cause as in the Dresden case where civil society groups, NGOs, politicians, citizens of Dresden and anti-fascists fight against neo-Nazis. In the Austrian case, university faculty members fight together with the students to improve study conditions. They all might have different agendas that determine why they engage in the events but fight for a common cause. Sharing political positions through digital communication platforms can support cooperation and community identifications, as well as mobilization and coordination of collective action. This process, however, requires that activists share beliefs and values and are aware of these (Shirky, 2009). In democratic pluralism we also find voices that are more difficult to accept, since they promote undemocratic values. As Cammaerts (2009) argues, it is difficult to include these extreme perspectives in the concept of pluralism particularly since they use the right of freedom of speech to incite hatred and they are characterized by “an agonistic agenda towards democracy and its core values” (p.558).

Adversaries and enemies: Whether the current flourishing of digital activism could be regarded as agonism or antagonism in Mouffe’s understanding would depend on the context, the process of contestation and the political positions proposed (i.e. as friend-adversary or friend-enemy relations). The we/they constellations do not always turn out in “conflictual contention” in Mouffe’s terms but can support fragmentation and, thus, make political positions more extreme as in the anti-fascist protests. The Dresden case shows that both antagonism and agonism are at stake and that these constellations are liquid rather than stable. The bathhouse activists in Stockholm wanted to be heard and listened to, and when this failed, the conservative municipal majority was increasingly portrayed as the enemy, something that resulted in clashes with police forces during the eviction of the bathhouse.

Readiness to act in civil disobedience: Although the clear identification of an adversary, often in a simplified bipolar friend-enemy constellation, is suitable to mobilize a critical mass of people, we see in our cases that there are more nuanced differences between the groups involved. One aspect that differentiates them from each other is the strategies they use to challenge power. The readiness to act in civil disobedience in all the cases is an important criterion that differentiates the groups from each other and determines their self-definition as political activists. Although citizens who support a cause by signing an online petition, joining a Facebook-group or even physically taking part in a demonstration feel that they engage politically, they would not necessarily identify themselves as activists, as compared to core-activists who deliberately use civil disobedience to contest domination.
7. Towards a Typology of Contemporary Political Activism

Based on the criteria developed above there is a difference between expressing political opinion as part of identity and self-representation and to be ready to act in civil disobedience to the extent of exposing oneself to surveillance and eventually punishment. Hence, we need to consider if activists are ready to engage in civil disobedience. This forms the first axis in our typology of activism in the political. Mouffe’s understanding of adversary versus enemy in her discussion of agonism vs. antagonism forms the second axis of the typology. Along these axes we identified the following types of activists: the Salon Activist, the Contentious Activist, the Law-Abiding Activist and the Gandhian Activist.

![Figure 7: Typology of contemporary activism.](image)

The Salon Activist clearly identifies the Other as an enemy, who should be fought against and be eliminated. This type of activist is ready to engage politically within the legal framework but is not ready to engage in civil disobedience. They would identify themselves as being politically active but not necessarily as activists. Although they might support activists and their causes they would not expose themselves to a high level of risk. The label Salon Activist indicates the engagement within the secure walls of legality. The Salon Activist, even though he or she openly articulates enemy exclusion as part of his/ her political identity, stays at home and hence mostly within what is legal (hate speech not included).

The Contentious Activist, in comparison, is ready to engage in civil disobedience and violent action to achieve social change and to fight domination. This type of activist is aware of the risk that is involved in civil disobedience and is ready to face legal prosecution. They do not consider the Other as an adversary, i.e. someone that has to be listened to, but as the enemy who has to be eliminated. The readiness to act in civil disobedience is not only carried out offline, by engaging in some violent action for example, but also online, by illegal hacking for example. The Contentious Activist identifies with the role of an activist and with the aim of fighting the enemy. The readiness to act in civil disobedience can be used strategically to radicalize a political position, i.e. to develop frontiers to the enemy.

The Law-Abiding Activist is located on the opposite side of the matrix, i.e. he/ she respects the Other as an adversary that should be listened to and whose opinion has to be valued in discussion, even though it is contrary to his/ her own political position. This type of activist stays within the legal boundaries and does not act in civil disobedience. The Law-Abiding Activist has a strong
political opinion, is politically active, has a clear political position and engages in political action and discussion. He/she, however, is not ready to engage in civil disobedience and most likely does not identify him-/herself as an activist, despite having and voicing a clear political opinion.

The Gandhian Activist is situated in the fourth quadrant of the matrix. Inspired by the example of Mahatma Gandhi’s, this kind of activist is characterized by a readiness to act in civil disobedience in order to fight injustice, while at the same time accepting the Other as an adversary, that is, someone having the right to exist and expressing a valuable political opinion that is worth to take incorporate in a serious political discussion. This indicates a high level of readiness to act in civil disobedience and to struggle for social change but at the same time accepting the pluralism of opinions. This type of activist risks punishment but within a normative framework that accepts the Other. Important to keep in mind here that the civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi was always non-violent as it tends to be if regarding the Other as an adversary rather than an enemy.

These four types are not static and can differ depending on the political cause activists are fighting for. There is an array of different subtypes of activists to be delineated and defined in each field. In the field of Contentious Activists, for example, we find Ritual Activists, in which actions themselves, rather than outcomes, are the most important part of their engagement. We also find activists who do want to change society for what they consider to be better, but their improved vision of society does not accept the Other as part of it. It can be problematic to wholly dismiss this kind of activists when the Other they want to exclude from society is a group that embraces undemocratic opinions such as the neo-Nazis in Dresden. The political position of an online community and the societal context in which it is operating are important elements that have to be considered. One’s own political position also influences, for example, the readiness to engage in civil disobedience and, thus, the same individual can adopt different forms of activism in different protest events depending on the political cause. Consequently, political positions represent the contexts in which the different types of activism develop. There are certainly other dimensions and categories to consider for a typology of contemporary political activism. The aim of this typology, however, is to initiate a discussion that ceases to label as activism every form of identification with a political cause online and that moves towards a more nuanced perspective on political action in contemporary democracies.

References


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