

## Activism and Advocacy as a Researcher

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*During the Annual Assembly 2023 of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, transdisciplinary Tyndall Centre researchers gathered to discuss activism and advocacy as a researcher. This briefing note serves as a summary of the discussions.*

### Opening Commentary

As scientists and researchers, we conduct our work against a backdrop of increasing climate and ecological disasters, humanitarian crises, and social injustice. Despite decades of research into transformative alternatives to the extractive carbon economy – as well as international climate agreements, Net Zero laws and biodiversity targets – global emissions continue to rise, and the Climate and Ecological Emergency continues to worsen. In the UK and elsewhere, governments are acting in direct opposition to scientific advice and their own legal commitments on climate change mitigation and are making increasingly authoritarian moves to repress protest and expressions of dissent. As a result, many of us working in this field experience significant psychological distress, and struggle to feel like our work is making a difference. We believe that engaging with civic activism and advocacy outside of academia must now be considered a valid and morally important role for researchers.

In this panel, we address the question of how we, as scientists, researchers, and teachers, can move beyond our traditional roles in the Academy and contribute directly to local and global struggles for climate justice. We reflect on our personal experiences of activism and advocacy, and the many diverse forms these can take. In addition, we discuss the challenges which can make engaging in activism as a researcher difficult – from punishing work schedules and job precarity in a competitive and individualizing sector, to concerns around how our actions will be perceived by colleagues and collaborators, to striking a balance between academic critique and constructive support for climate and social justice movements.

We invite the audience to share their own experiences of balancing activism / advocacy with an academic career, and to join us in reflecting on how we, as the Tyndall Centre, can collectively create a space where we empower, challenge, and support each other in taking on the work of fighting for climate justice.

### Questions and Panel Reflections

*Question: Why should we [as researchers] do this [activism and advocacy]?*

*Panel Response:*

As researchers, we often engage in this work because we can't afford to do anything but this. There is a pressing need for transformative change, and yet this change may not be brought about in a traditional way. As researchers, we are often thrust into the role of activists, as the dissemination of 'objective data' is a highly politicized act. When we reflect upon our own process of knowledge accumulation, it can inspire acts of communication to contribute this knowledge back into society. Moreover, as researchers engaged in activism, we must often reconcile the 'hard' line between research and activism, while reflecting upon the ways in which participating in everyday life and research often means participating in power structures that are contributing to the climate crisis.

- "Activism is my rent for living on the planet" (–Alice Walker)

*Question: What challenges have you faced [as a researcher engaged in activism and advocacy?]*

*Panel Response:*

Time, energy, and social pressure were resounding themes throughout the panel response. Organizing requires effort and is often emotionally intensive. For some, the research environment in which they work fosters and supports activism-focused research. For others, their respective research institutions do not legitimize the forms or outputs of activism-research. Moreover, the labor of organizing is not often valued within institutions, and researchers are made to understand that research and activism must be separate.

As researchers, it can often be challenging to fit activism around one's work schedule when situated in an institution that does not support activism as research, as academics very rarely work '9-to-5' jobs. There is, therefore, a burden to find 'after hours' time to engage in this form of activism. Lastly, there was reflection on the critical nature of a researcher's mind: while there will always be aspects to critique within social movements, it is important to find a strategy to commit to, in order to avoid the paralysis that the imperfections of any social movement can bring.

*Question: What changes could be made to make this [activism and advocacy as a researcher] easier?*

*Panel Response:*

There needs to be more space within research practice to disseminate the results of activism-based research. Moreover, there needs to be an institutional shift wherein the emphasis on research having a real-world impact is larger than the emphasis on commercialized 'research impact.' For each researcher, it can be helpful to discover one's own personal philosophy of 'what is my job?' For some, redefining this 'job' can offer freedom to re-interpret their role as researchers and activists, resulting in greater possibilities for movement. Concurrently, the support of senior academics is important -- particularly for early career researchers who are engaged in activism and advocacy as a researcher. Support can take a variety of forms, including senior academics showing up at protests. Furthermore, there are often challenges regarding who provides research funding, and what types of boundaries can or cannot be crossed because of this. As researchers, it is important to have greater flexibility to work outside of specific grant agreements, which in itself requires institutional change. Lastly, it is helpful to think of activism as better than doing nothing at all, rather than trying to find the perfect movement or activist group.

*Question: Is research activism? In what ways can or should research be more "active" or agitative? Where is the boundary?*

As researchers engaged in activism, we must be mindful when we step outside of our privileged academic spaces and be very clear about our positionalities in the work that we do. There are power structures that we are up against, but there are also power structures that we are within, including the constant risk of extraction of radical thought into the University. Being a scientist means that we are often activists, within any given realm. The pressure of climate change demands that we implement better science communication, while, simultaneously, research is under pressure to appear "objective."

This duality between objectivity and politicized communication constrains what researchers feel they are able to do. Concomitantly, researchers are often forced into a political box as the world politicizes climate research. In an ideal world, policy would be research driven; in reality, this is far from the case. Panelists described that as researchers, they received feedback that their voices were not important, despite being the ones who could provide evidence-based opinions on the matter: "*when our research findings have direct implications on how we approach biodiversity, climate and our way of life, there is a duty to communicate these findings and policy-makers, in turn, have a duty to listen. Yet, we are being denied our voice. This is why we're forced to turn to activism.*" Lastly, panelists spoke about the need to engage in the politics of citations, and to be critically aware of who we, as climate researchers, work with and speak with, and who is being foregrounded.

- "If we ask more radical questions, we may get more radical solutions."
- "We might as well be what we're already accused of being." (Regarding scientists being activists).

Following the panel discussion, the session was opened to provide space for generative dialogue amongst the panelists and the audience.

*Audience question regarding: the politics of arrest, unequal positioning within British society, and the reality that non-British, non-White activists do not experience the same degree of privilege as their White, British counterparts, which could enable them to engage in direct protest action. Further question regarding: what motivates the panelists' research and activism?*

Panel Response (Politics of Arrest): Activism in the UK vs. in the Global South is highly unequal. A panelist shared an illustrative experience of organizing two simultaneous protests in Sweden and in India, and the dramatic variation in police response and presence at each. Correspondingly, it is important to remember the protest privilege that exists within many spaces within the UK. An audience member shared an analogous story regarding their experience with student organizing in India, vs. their experience of police presence at COP26 in Glasgow. Due to these differences in individual and global positionalities, it is important for researchers from the Global North to remember that UK slogans cannot simply be 'copy and pasted' to contexts within the Global South. Instead, researchers should take the time to understand regional contexts, and learn from successful 'rainbow coalition' movements such as the 2020-2021 Farmer's Protests.

Panel Response (Inspiration/Motivation): Motivation and inspiration is found from the environment, and anger and grief are channeled into activism.

*Audience Question: How can Tyndall support researchers who drop out of the profession because they have become disillusioned or maybe burned-out and need a rest?*

Panel Response:

- It is important to validate climate researchers in their feelings. It is understandable that people feel that their jobs are misaligned with the scale of change that is needed. While this misalignment may not be solved by one individual manager, a work environment in which researchers feel heard and are empowered to be open about their emotional struggles will help. Moreover, when people do choose to step away from academia, it is important to keep the door open for them to continue being part of the conversation.
- We need to create more spaces such as this panel where we can discuss these issues more often and develop solidarity with one another.
- We need to examine how resources are distributed within institutions and examine the responsibility of resource sharing. Moreover, we need hardline support for activism research.

As the session closed, audience members were invited to add their reflections to a collaborative mind map.

*The prompt:*

*What do activism and advocacy look like to you?*

