

# From Theory to Action: Exploring the Interplay Between Academia and Activism

Clara Rosa Cardoso<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *University of Siegen, Kohlbettstr. 15, 57072 Siegen, Germany*

## Abstract

This position paper explores the growing intersection of academia and activism within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW). Researchers in these fields are increasingly engaging with activist causes, translating academic insights into actionable practices while incorporating grassroots perspectives into their work. This shift challenges traditional academic boundaries, raising questions about objectivity, ethics, and methodology. The paper discusses collaborative methodologies, ethical challenges, and the need for frameworks that balance scholarly rigor with activism. By examining the role of researchers as activists, the paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue on how academia can support social and political change.

## Keywords

activism, research methods, meta-research, reflexivity, ethics

## 1. Introduction

The intersection of researchers and activists in the domains of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) has garnered increasing attention. This evolving relationship reveals a shift in how knowledge is produced and used, with researchers taking on activist roles and activists incorporating research into their movements. As change agents, these scholars use their expertise to support activist causes, while activists use research methodologies to amplify their initiatives. This dynamic fosters a vital conversation on the role of technology in driving social change and community empowerment. In HCI and CSCW, the interplay between researchers as activists and activists as researchers represents a multifaceted approach to addressing societal issues. Collaborative methodologies, such as participatory action research and reflexive inquiry, emphasize inclusive, community-driven technology design that prioritizes equity and representation. These frameworks not only enrich academic discourse but also empower marginalized communities to use research for social justice and transformative change. However, integrating activism into academic practice also raises important ethical and methodological questions, including how to navigate the tension between objectivity and advocacy.

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 clara.rosacardoso@uni-siegen.de (C. Rosa Cardoso)

 0009-0001-8497-6400 (C. Rosa Cardoso)



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## **2. Activism and Academia: Bridging Boundaries**

Researchers in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) are increasingly adopting activist roles, engaging with communities to translate academic insights into actionable practices and vice versa. This shift challenges traditional academic boundaries, positioning scholars as "active citizens" who mediate between institutions and grassroots movements. Critics caution that activism risks compromising scholarly neutrality. Wells [1] warns that such engagement may undermine objectivity, while Fish [2] argues that academia's sole purpose is to promote and multiply knowledge. Conversely, proponents argue that knowledge production is inherently political, particularly in crises demanding urgent action [3] and that activism is intrinsic to researchers aiming to influence policy or societal norms, leveraging research for societal advancement [4]. Leal et al. [5] emphasize the importance of researchers questioning their assumptions and methods to avoid perpetuating dominant perspectives that marginalize alternative ways of knowing.

### **2.1. Collaborative Methodologies in HCI and CSCW**

The collaborative nature of research in HCI and CSCW has given rise to methodologies prioritizing inclusivity and participatory design. Participatory action research, activist research practices, and reflexive inquiry emphasize collaboration between researchers and communities [4, 6]. Grönvall et al. [7], for instance, discuss "concordance" in healthcare as an egalitarian approach aligning with activist goals of equal representation in health dialogues.

These methodologies promote democratized technological development by emphasizing user experiences in shaping technology designs. This transformation underscores the potential for new research trajectories that meaningfully involve the voices of communities affected by technological interventions.

### **2.2. Ethical Challenges in Activist Research**

The integration of activism into academic research raises ethical considerations. Reflexivity plays a relevant role in ensuring ethical practices by encouraging researchers to reflect on their roles within the research process and its societal implications [8, 9]. Ethical concerns include potential biases emerging from researchers' vested interests in social change, which may color data interpretation or compromise objectivity [10].

Traditional ethical standards often fall short in community-based research contexts. Scholars argue for rethinking these standards to ensure ethical conduct while respecting community rights [10, 11]. Salma et al. [12] stress the importance of informed consent, ensuring participants understand the dual role of researcher-activists and how this may influence their contributions.

Leal et al. [5] caution against unintended harm despite good intentions, urging researchers to critically evaluate their assumptions and methods. Similarly, scholars like Bandsma et al. [13] emphasize investigating power dynamics within both activism and research to uncover barriers in social movements and their impact on research outcomes.

### **2.3. Activism-Informed Research Frameworks**

The interplay between activism and academia calls for robust ethical frameworks that address complexities arising from researcher-activist dual identities. These frameworks must prioritize reflexivity, informed consent, accountability to both academic institutions and activist communities, and equitable interactions with participants [14, 15]. Prost et al. [16] highlight how incorporating activist perspectives into methodologies can enhance the sustainability of socially impactful initiatives. By integrating lived experiences into research agendas, scholars can better address shared goals with activists – creating technologies that foster collaboration while respecting community agency.

## **3. Exploratory Questions**

This position paper is a preliminary exploration of the complex interplay between academia and activism, particularly in cases where researchers assume roles that extend beyond traditional scholarly inquiry and engage in advocacy or political action. This intersection raises critical epistemological, ethical, and methodological challenges, calling for a closer examination of power dynamics, institutional constraints, and the implications of researcher positionality. Several key questions derive from this exploration:

- How can the ethical boundaries between scholarly neutrality and activist engagement be navigated?
- What power dynamics emerge when researchers collaborate with activist communities, particularly in terms of knowledge production and representation?
- In what ways do funding structures influence the extent to which academic research can support activist causes?
- How can commitments to objectivity be balanced with advocacy for social or political change?
- What methodological considerations arise when conducting research that directly informs activist practices?
- What risks — academic, professional, or personal — are associated with research that is perceived as political?
- How does the expectation of impact or societal relevance influence the legitimacy of activist-oriented scholarship?

- What alternative models of knowledge production and dissemination can bridge the divide between academic research and activist practice while maintaining scholarly rigor?

Exploring these questions in the First Workshop on Meta-Research in HCI aims to spark meaningful discussions and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the role of academia in addressing social and political issues. The goal is to integrate the topic into the broader agenda of meta-research in HCI and encourage further reflection on the intersection of research and activism.

## Declaration on Generative AI

The author has not employed any Generative AI tools during the preparation of this work.

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