



## Lights, camera, activism

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In 2019, hardly anyone personifies activism more conspicuously than Greta Thunberg. Since August 2018, the teenager's solitary calls for climate action have inspired millions of people to follow her example and take to the streets. The resulting wave of climate strikes is every activist's dream come true: inspiring a mass movement to support a cause, passing on the flame of resistance, stirring the power of a democratic collective. What can we learn from this phenomenon?

After being involved in voluntary work for years, I have come to a conclusion that activism, at its most basic, is about *being seen doing something*. Both elements — 'being seen' and 'doing something' — are equally important.

In order to inspire action in others, we must first *demonstrate it ourselves and be visible*. Thus, irrespective of the urgency of the cause, activities lacking in media coverage are doomed not to reach a broader audience, and, consequently, their organisers would not be seen as activists.

On the other hand, even if showered with media coverage, the action might not inspire a movement if it does not offer a space for practical involvement. The latter is decisive because one of the most attractive sides of participating in activism is moral satisfaction from *doing something about the problem*.

Alongside daily dispatches of ecological calamities from the Amazon to Siberia, we are regularly encouraged

to do our little bit by refusing plastic and switching to veganism. The anxiety of inaction, reinforced by policy makers' and public servants' inertia, breeds a feeling of personal guilt. Many thus turn to activism for a comforting escape from this guilt trap.

The emotional pressure to act can shape two kinds of strategies: one that shifts responsibility to and demands actions from individuals, and the other that exerts political pressure on decision-makers. To alleviate the internalised guilt for the disturbing state of the planet, it could be tempting to demand individual action, from advertising 'conscious' consumer choices on social media to picking up rubbish. Individualised



activism brings moral satisfaction and boosts egos with public admiration, but fails to challenge the status quo and absolves governing bodies.

Cleanups are perhaps the starkest example of the escapist kind of activism; politically impotent, yet widespread. Moving rubbish away from visible spaces to landfills – out of sight, out of mind – ticks all the boxes: it attracts media coverage, creates space for practical involvement, and offers moral satisfaction from ‘doing something about the problem’. Although it brings visible (yet temporary) improvement – cleaner beaches and pavements – this kind of activism rarely addresses the causes of pollution, the intrinsic

flaws of plastic manufacturing, and the market mechanisms that enable it.

Pressure group *Moviment Graffiti* leads a different, political, kind of activism in Malta. The movement’s direct actions have succeeded in drawing public support and are creating a space for a broader democratic participation. Regardless of shared elements with the individualised kind of cleanup activism – visibility and action – it differs from the latter in one aspect: it offers no immediate moral gratification from witnessing the results of the action.

Authorities don’t accept demands for policy change and challenges to the developers’ power right away. Instead of the personal glorification

behind consumer activism or cleanups, system-level actions require persistence and trust in the power of a democratic collective.

The true social value of activism is not in the instant gratification it may offer to private individuals. It rests in its power to inspire a movement for a common goal that puts pressure on decision-makers to act in the common interest. Eventually, this movement may even lead to more radical demands, such as ‘system change not climate change’. The most praiseworthy effect of activism is to help us experience our collective power – just as Greta Thunberg’s inspiring example has successfully proven. **T**