

# Science vs. Activism? Exploring the Boundary: Perspectives of Young Researchers in Switzerland

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In the spring of 2023, as part of the Swiss Young Academy project "Science vs Activism? Exploring the Boundary," we conducted qualitative interviews with 33 young researchers from Switzerland representing various disciplines (28 disciplines: Natural Sciences (45%), Social Sciences (27%), Humanities (27%); mean age = 35; 67% female). The aim was to understand how early-career scholars understand activism in the context of science and how the relationship between science and activism is negotiated in different disciplines. The semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions, which were thematically divided into four categories: (1) the definition of activism and the relationship between activism and science, (2) objectivity in science, (3) forms of activism in science, and (4) the responsibility and impact of activism. The interviews were transcribed and coded using the software MAXQDA.

The key findings of the project highlight a range of perspectives and opinions from young researchers in Switzerland regarding the relationship between science and activism. The findings illustrate that activism is a contested term with different value judgments attached to it. Moreover, the data illustrates that debates around science versus activism mask other debates such as the objectivity of science, scientific integrity, and questions of credibility. The following outlines the most significant results.

## **Definition of Activism and its Relationship to Science**

At the beginning of the interviews, researchers were asked for their opinions on the following definition of activism: "a range of methods used by groups with relatively little institutional power attempting to influence opinion, policy, or practice toward [...] normative ends [...]" (Woodhouse et al., 2002: 298). The positions of the researchers varied, with many indicating that they did not fully agree with the definition. Some participants considered the definition to be too narrow, particularly regarding the criterion that activist groups must have relatively little institutional power. It was emphasized that activism can also originate from individuals or groups with institutional power, and that this form of activism is often not labeled as such, despite the underlying goals being similar.

There were differing opinions on whether science and activism can or should be separated. Respondents who opposed the idea of a separation highlighted that, in their view, there is no complete "objectivity" or "neutrality". They emphasized that science always has a political aspect. Some researchers therefore argued that there is a close connection between science and activism. Some interviewees viewed activism as a continuum, suggesting that one cannot avoid being activist, but rather is more or less activist at different levels and in various forms. However, others argued that science and activism pursue different goals and should therefore be distinct because activism is intended to influence, which is not the role of science. One researcher also noted that the discursive construction of science as something objective also serves to label certain forms or disciplines of science as "activist."

## **Objectivity in Science**

Some of the interviewed researchers called for a clear separation between science and activism to preserve the objectivity of science. However, many of the participants rejected the notion of a completely objective science. Instead, they emphasized that science must be transparent and intersubjectively verifiable by clearly communicating assumptions and starting points, yet they acknowledged the subjective aspects of science. While one participant viewed "this completely objective science" as an "illusion," another described it as essential for science to strive for objectivity. Notably, differences in perspectives were observed here across various scientific disciplines. Many humanities scholars and social scientists rejected the idea that science is or can be fully objective, while most natural scientists accepted the idea of science as objective.

## **Forms of Activism in Science**

When asked to list activities that are considered activist, the participants named a wide range of practices. As direct forms of activism they listed activities such as participating in demonstrations and political campaigns, drafting statements for parliamentary committee meetings, and writing petitions. They also named "indirect forms of activism" which they identified as selecting research topics based on personal values, engaging in science communication, or writing opinion pieces. Additionally, the use of social media for specific causes and participation in public discussions were also mentioned as indirect forms of activism. This broad list shows that activism is used as a broad and imprecise term.

## **Responsibility and Impact of Activism**

Some of the interviewed researchers saw it as their responsibility to effect social change through deliberate and purposeful actions, including through proactive science communication. Activism was sometimes seen as a way to enhance the societal relevance of scientific work and to stimulate public discourse. At the same time, potential disadvantages and concerns were thoroughly discussed.

The survey results illustrate that activism is seen as diffuse and ambivalent practice by the interviewed early career scholars. Positive associations with "activism" included increased societal impact of their work, engaging with stakeholders beyond academia, and a sense of empowerment that comes from providing solutions for societal problems. Additionally, activism is credited with enabling new projects and transdisciplinary collaborations and increasing the visibility of one's work. Finally, some respondents also stated that activism can promote scientific progress and uphold scientific integrity because political investments are made transparent rather than hidden.

On the other hand, the participants also mentioned various disadvantages and concerns regarding activism. A significant concern is the potential risk to scientific credibility and the possibility of discrediting science if science and activism are not kept separate. Additionally, negative career impacts were cited, such as the fear of being labeled as an "activist," which could lead to a lack of institutional protection and difficulties in appointment processes. This labeling of certain researchers as "activists" is also seen as a way to categorize some scientific work as "scientific" and others as "activist," often with the intent of delegitimizing the latter and defending a positivist approach. Furthermore, the interviewed researchers mentioned personal challenges, including concerns about mental health, time management issues, and negative public reactions.

## Conclusion

The interviews reveal a broad and complex spectrum of understandings of activism among young researchers in Switzerland. Some researchers view activism as an integral part of their scientific work and see a close connection between science and activism. They feel responsible for providing solutions for societal problems through deliberate and purposeful actions, though they also reflect on the potential negative consequences of activism. For others, maintaining a strict separation between science and activism is crucial, with objectivity in science being of paramount importance. The findings underscore the diversity of perspectives and practices within the scientific community, as well as the issues that are masked by the politicized debate.

It is crucial to understand the terms of the debate and the implications this has on young Swiss scientists who are under pressure to navigate an increasingly politicized environment. The interviews reveal a broad spectrum of attitudes towards activism among scientists, from full engagement to none, with varying views on what activism is in their discipline. The study highlights the contested understanding of activism in scientific communities and the need for a nuanced debate and understanding of the underlying issues that are often masked when activism is used as a “catch-all” term.

The study highlighted the need to engage in an inter- and transdisciplinary debate about the underlying questions of the science versus activism debate. They include an exploration of the politics that undermine the integrity of scientific knowledge and the relationship between truth, power and justice. With that being said, the project findings do not offer any suggestions on whether or not, and how much or how little Swiss scientists should get involved in activism. If anything, the project asks scientists to reconsider how activism is framed in the context of science.

## Reference

Woodhouse, E., Hess, D., Breyman, S., et al. (2002). Science Studies and Activism: Possibilities and Problems for Reconstructivist Agendas. *Social Studies of Science*, 32(2), 297-319.