



Staying in our lane. Academia, professionalism, and activism

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“I am truly grateful to today’s organizers for inviting me to participate in this discussion on the important and timely topic of activism and academia, and for putting this on today’s agenda. I was told the aim was to explore how academics engage with society - to talk about history, theory, and practice, and to position activism from an academic angle. That all sounded reasonable - and very academic. It also puzzled me. What if we reversed it? What happens when we look at academia from an activist perspective? Consider this: the [Dutch Network of Women Professors](#) (LNVH) promotes social justice and has roots in activism. We would not be academics if not for activism. Yet somehow over time, this knowledge - our heritage - has faded from our memorial culture, from our academic archive, remembered out of sight, excluded from the narrative of what is academic and what is not. So let’s first honor the strong activist shoulders we stand on today. Remember those women.

Activism is not easy to define, but a major tenet is commitment to impact and social change, mostly towards various forms of justice, democratic values, and sustainability ([Bashiri, 2024](#)). And of course there is no single type of activism. First, academic activism may refer to scholars using their specific expertise and their academic platform to address social issues – like pulmonologists fighting the tobacco industry ([Rahbari et al., 2025](#)). Second, scholar-activists embed activism in research and teaching, for instance in participatory action research and critical pedagogies ([Muntinga et al., 2016](#); [Van Beek, 2024](#); [Servant-Miklos, 2024](#)). Teaching, research, and societal engagement blur together. Interdisciplinary collaborations and long-term relationships with communities and grassroots movements help dismantle power hierarchies and democratize knowledge creation ([Abma et al., 2018](#); [Verdonk et al., 2019](#); [Duijs et al., 2022](#)). This kind of work inherently critiques the dichotomy between activism and academia, but the ‘action’ aspect can be enacted in various ways ([Bashiri, 2024](#)). Common features are criticality and engaging in reflexivity by navigating positions as scholars and activists simultaneously. Third, stakeholders in academia - students and staff - may challenge structures and hierarchies within the university and within disciplines to pursue social change. Universities are, after all, complicit in [human rights violations](#) or the climate crisis or the reproduction of for instance gender discrimination and racism in their institutions including in their knowledge-base, in maintaining ties with notorious human rights violators from [the fossil fuel industry](#) to the military-industrial complex, and for repression against critical students and staff. And fourth, academics are being mobilized by their institution – but only when convenient. Academics are called to defend science itself against external threats: [budget cuts](#) in the Netherlands, or attacks on academic credibility. No wonder we’re confused about our professional roles.

Universities including our public universities have become corporatized, governed by market logics ([Engelen et al., 2014](#)). Corporate values - output, accountability, rankings, deadlines - undermine societal impact ([Berg & Seeber, 2016](#); [Slow Science Manifesto, 2010](#)). But social change requires reform, agency, and collective academic work ([Spolander et al., 2022](#)). Most forms of activism do not count within the academic system. Rather, they get a bad press. Critics



claim activists promote ideas that lack supporting evidence, ideas that do not stand up to academic scrutiny, and threaten academic freedom. In a book review, [Martha McCaughey](#) (2022) from the American Association of University Professors states that what anyone sees as 'proper expressions of academic freedom' depends on our vision on the purpose of the university and what we think professionalism entails.

Right now, that definition of professionalism has become quite narrow. Boundaries of professionalism are easily violated: in the use of specific words, in teacher responses in the classroom, by inviting speakers, in 'liking' posts, or pasting a sticker on your laptop. Activism, by nature, involves making complaints, and as professor [Sara Ahmed](#) (2021) has shown: complaints hit academic and institutional walls. Currently, in every 'professional environment', activism is seen as detracting from professionalism. But professionalism is just another slippery term. In our project on diversity in health care teams in our university hospital, we saw how the concept of professionalism is far from being objective and neutral, and loaded with whiteness and everyday racisms ([Leyerzapf, 2019](#))— themes long ago identified by, among others, professor Philomena Essed ([Essed, 1984](#); [Essed, 2012](#)). A few weeks ago she received the [KNAW Akademiepenning](#), so well deserved, so long overdue. Her career shows us that what is considered professional or not is not only open for interpretation, but also that some have more interpretation power than others.

[This symposium](#), as I understood, should also stay within the academic realm. The organizers worried a bit about this day being 'hijacked' by activists fighting for a particular cause, such as Gaza, or the climate crisis. That sounded loud. Gaza, a particular cause, not an academic cause, not everyone's concern. The climate crisis. Something... particular. Relegating these very existential crises to being 'a particular cause' says something about packaging causes, one by one, it says something about thinking in domains, in fields, in niches, in something that is academic and something for after working hours. It draws the line between 'professional' and 'unprofessional'. It tells us to stay in our lane. After a mass shooting in the US, American doctors were admonished by the National Rifle Association to stay in their lane; they should not express their outrage on social media. In response, physicians shared graphic images of operating rooms flooded with trauma — captioned [#ThisIsOurLane](#) ([Ranney et al., 2019](#)).

I do get it - I have worked in academia for 25 years. Maybe thinking in 'particular causes' is so common and maybe these worries sound so reasonable, because we have become depoliticized, as professor [Ingrid Robeyns](#) could have said. We have gotten so used to staying in our lane, to sticking to our own particular field, where we can withdraw and immerse in our own particular knowledge. For me, a clean cut between my academic knowledge and the rest of my life was always difficult, like for many others involved in gender studies and social justice research. It is maybe even more so the case for those who are denied access to professionalism because of the color of their skin, their headscarf, their accent, or for other unprofessional reasons. The others, those who can manage this expectation of the distanced academic may however also have to pay a price. In professor [Christien Brinkgreve's](#) (2025) recent book *Beladen Huis*, her reflections show how deep the cut is between knowing and experiencing, between understanding and describing painful patterns while living them. This is what academia teaches us: to not act upon your knowledge. To professionally stay in your lane.



Imagine, being one of those tragic academics who are supposed to neutrally, objectively, academically free stick to documenting the extinction of life (e.g. [Finnerty et al., 2024](#)), the collapse of biodiversity, the melting of glaciers, analyzing the rise of fascism, registering the body counts, and in writing down your knowledge professionally having to come to a halt in the recommendations part of your discussion section. Imagine the loneliness. By having to disconnect from the very emotions that are required for taking action, professionalism has become a wall with barbed wire.

In 2018, a few personal experiences sucked all the distancing out of me. First during a heatwave in Australia, and shortly after that in a very thirsty Italian olive orchard, I was deeply hit by the insight of the fragility of life, of all life. Of how 'they' don't have a plan. They, the system, those in power, our politicians, our department heads, our boards, our thought leaders, our CEOs, our governments, they have no plan. Ever since, I can no longer disconnect. In that experience, I lost my capacity for professionalism. Earth systems and societies are collapsing. Gaza does not only echo the Western world's brutal history, it is also called a rehearsal of the future. We are all losing ground.

For those of you who do not believe in collapse: I stick to the science and I am prepared to clog up your email with resources. I can and will professionally defend my perspective. You are also invited to look at the signs yourselves. Collapse of worlds has already happened to so many for so long: black and brown bodies, female and transgender bodies, children, non-human life. More collapse is here and now. Even for the TechBros, with their billions and their safe bunkers and democracy-free islands and their fancy technologies - no one can live disconnected from the world and ignore vulnerability forever. They already worry about the loyalty of their security staff.

Academics could be part of democracies' security staff. Academics have a responsibility to halt the weaponization of professionalism against them, and start criticizing the lane they're supposed to stay in. We have the knowledge to see where this is going. The violence. The surveillance, the oppression, the thought control, the suffering, the dismissal of knowledge. Interpreting professionalism as staying in your lane keeps US in THEIR lane. While attempts to dismantle democracies happen across the globe, we are discussing the boundaries between academia and activism. Instead, we should be discussing actions to protect democracy and social justice as the very prerequisite of knowledge creation. No democracy, no science. Ethically, those at lesser risk of substantial harm from activism have a larger responsibility to participate. Theoretically, that would be you. Practically, we need you on the streets.

When the interpretation of professionalism is out of sync with protecting human rights, democratic values, and fighting for social justice, something must have gone wrong with 'professionalism'. Being an academic, means intentionally and legitimately breaking with the false and biased expectations of professionalism. We have to shift lanes, because this one has become a dead end street."

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