

Rethinking digital activism The deconstruction, inclusion, and expansion of the activist body

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Abstract

This article explores the following research question: How is political activism expressed in connective, affective, and embodied ways, and how do these modes result in a rearticulation of the body and central activist signifiers? While connective and affective dimensions of digital activism offer invaluable insights into the new forms of activist organisation, it remains underexplored how the activist body and the concepts of “human” and “rights” are discursively produced through digital expressions of activism. Therefore, drawing on a purposive selection of digital content, we produce a discursive analysis of three illustrative cases of digital activism relating to three major political contemporary issues: Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Extinction Rebellion. We argue that they each present different modes of embodied and discursively constructed signifiers of “human” and “rights”, which allows for a range of political aims and outcomes to be expressed through different degrees of antagonism calling, respectively, for deconstruction, inclusion, and expansion of the signifiers.

Keywords

Digital activism, connectivity, affectivity, embodiedness, discourse

Introduction

While digital activism has been theorised in organisational terms drawing on thinkers of networks, affectivity, and connectivity (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Fenton, 2012b; Papacharissi, 2016), there remains a need to rethink the role of the activist, physical human body and its sensibilities. We argue that embodiedness is central to the practices, the claims involved, and the potential political-juridical outcomes of activism. The activist claims and outcomes involve questions of what it means to be human and hold rights. It follows that the two signifiers “human” and “rights” present analytical insights into how digital activism supports a variety of reformulations of the body. In this article, we examine these reformulations as deconstruction, inclusion, and expansion. We explore the following research question: How does political digital activism take different forms when expressed in connective, affective, and embodied ways, and how do these modes result in a rearticulation of the body and central activist signifiers?

We contribute to the field of activism and digital media studies with a theoretical and political discussion and argument. To this end, we draw on readings of digital texts and images from three illustrative cases: Black Lives Matter (BLM), #MeToo, and Extinction Rebellion (XR). The three cases are well-known front runners in digital activism because of their innovative digital presence and organisation. In this article, they are used to unfold the connective, affective, and embodied modes of activism as well as the political antagonistic struggles they present. Our employment of these cases is therefore by no means exhaustive. Through a discursive analysis, we show how each case represents a different mode of digital activism, resulting in different expressions of political struggles leading to three specific rearticulations of the signifiers “human” and “rights”, calling for either deconstruction, inclusion, or expansion of the body and thereby what it means to be human and have rights.

In the following, we build the theoretical framework by presenting and discussing digital activism through the concepts of connectivity, affectivity, and embodiedness. The organisational structures of connectivity and collectivity run through the discussion of both affectivity and embodiedness, allowing us to further the theoretical understanding of digital activism. A short methodology section is followed by the analyses of how the signifiers “human” and “rights” enable a rethinking of the body in digital activism.

Theoretical framework: Connectivity, affectivity, embodiedness

Connectivity

W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg describe and define the organisation of digital activism as falling into two logics: The logics of collective and connective action (2012, p. 748).

Collective action promotes contestation through common identification and cause. Within this logic, digital media is used to coordinate, manage, and mobilise participation,

rather than “inviting personalized interpretations of problems and self-organization of action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755). Similarly, Stefania Milan (2015, p. 59) argues that social movement organisations “offer [] straightforward membership on the basis of gender, religion or life cycle” and are controlled by leaders who present the ideology of the movement to the press and other stakeholders. Collective action may be seen as following the traditional social movement organisation principle, which scholars today often find unsound and outdated in its pure form (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2015).

Connective action falls into two categories, of which the first is at the extreme opposite end from collective action logic. While some “‘lead’ organizational actors” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 755) may exist, in these self-organised networks, they are kept at the periphery, because social media have transformed organisations (Milan, 2015, p. 59). Connective action is based on individuals’ experience continually recognised and confirmed through social media affordances such as “likes” and “favourites” (Milan, 2015, p. 62-63) and uses digital media to organise multi-headed action, which is highly personalised. Such polycentrality, of course, is a double-edged sword. While power may be spread out among the users and activists, elites have shown themselves resourceful and quick to engage in the new modes of communication, having “greater cultural and economic capital at their disposal to harness the power of social media to their advantage” (Fenton, 2012a, p. 132). While the culture of connectivity promises to liberate sharing practices of knowledge and experiences, it simultaneously and continuously teeters on the edge of capitalist exploitation, long pointed out by scholars of social media (e.g., van Dijk, 2013).

The second connective action category – organisationally enabled networks – presents a hybrid between collective and connective logics. While there are no formal organisational actors in this category to promote their agenda, informal organisational actors may play a role in developing some capacities in terms of conventional organisation. In this way, individual brands and organisations may collaborate – stepping back from their individual agendas – in order to push for a common goal (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 757).

While both Milan and Bennett and Segerberg understand collective action to be challenged by the sheer particularity, presence, and power of social media in our lives, versions of its specific identity frames survive in social movements off- as well as online. Recent social movements, such as Black Lives Matters (BLM), exactly base their struggle on the identity and particular experiences of African Americans, while expanding their solidarity to encompass all oppressed minorities. As evidenced by the work of BLM, discussed below, collective action unequivocally produces an antagonistic counter-public (Fraser, 1991). Anastasia Kavada and Thomas Poell privilege connective, rather than collective, actions when emphasising the flows and changeability of public contestation. As opposed to collective action, connective action lends itself to the analytical framework of contentious publicness in which the multiplicity of material, spatial, and temporal relations help conceive of the ever-flowing publicness of social media action (Kavada & Poell, 2021). While the concept of publicness offers great flexibility, it runs the risk of depoliticising

social movements' causes and the bodies they impact. So, while digital social media have radically challenged the organisation and expression of social movements and activist actions, we want to focus on the fact that digital activism never presents on its own but is imbued with affectivity and embodiedness.

Affectivity

Zizi Papacharissi (2016) shows us how networked publics create feelings of connectedness through affectivity. From this perspective, collective as well as connective action as modes of activist organisation through and with digital media draw on affectivity in different ways when they contribute to creating networked counter-publics (Fraser, 1991; Roslyng & Blaagaard, 2018). Digital activists' calls for change are supported by connective flows of storytelling that are collaboratively networked and support "soft structures of feeling that may potentially sustain and mediate the feeling of democracy" and that "connect people in ways that make them *feel* like their views matter" by providing a "feeling of being there" for publics that are physically removed from events (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 32, italics in original). Affect is defined as a continued production of intensities and direction produced through circulation (Ahmed, 2004, p. 45; Reestorff, 2014, p. 489).

First, while the collective mode of activism carries a stronger level of organisation of collective activity, these nevertheless also draw on an affective engagement in an antagonistic struggle that produces collective political subjectivities through the articulation and documentation of demands for justice and equal rights. Digital and social media work to support an already existing offline organisation in relation to which collective action frames are performed through affectivity and turned into networked publics. Expressions of vulnerability and solidarity are illustrative of how activists may articulate structures of collective affectivities and networked publics (Papacharissi, 2014) as "vulnerability directly invokes and mobilises affect in that it actualises in feelings of fear, shame, compassion, anger, and many others" (Koivunen et al., 2018, p. 7). These articulations create political frontiers that are based on antagonisms articulated with strong, direct links of continuation developed through struggles of identity that are accumulated over time producing a memory-based affectivity.

Second, activism as connective action based on self-organising networks with little or no coordination (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 756) are in even greater need of an emotional and affective engagement to sustain connective and networked publics across a set of demands. For Jodi Dean, social networks "produce and circulate affect as a binding technique" (Dean, 2010, p. 21) so that "affective networks produce feelings of community or what we might call 'community without community'" (Dean, 2010, p. 22). These public communities are often based on a personal vulnerability and are performed through individual testimonies expressed and disseminated on social media platforms, but in a way that creates a feeling of community and solidarity that goes beyond singular expressions of demands for justice. Papacharissi identifies hashtags as connective signifiers that

are open to redefinition and re-appropriation as they support “networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms [and which] come together and/or disband around bonds of sentiment” (2016, p. 308). Platforms, despite their commercial structure, proliferate and sustain these affective expressions, but in ways that are not only polycentric (Fenton, 2012b) but perhaps also based on what Dean calls a “politics of montage [...] released from the burdens of coherence and consistency” (Dean, 2010, p. 29). Instead, politics of montage creates ever-flowing feelings of community in co-created expressions online that are both personal and affective.

Third, hybrid connective action produces affective publics organised both off- and online that are central to tying autonomous political expressions together in demands for global solidarity and collective vulnerability. Off- and online activist organisations combine personal expressions of collective vulnerability and global solidarity, for instance, on behalf of nature. These affective networks are characterised by somewhat loose forms of organisation, non-hierarchical structures, and high levels of individual autonomy amongst loosely organised members (Fenton, 2012b). In her study of the feminist activist group Femen, Camilla M. Reestorff calls this kind of organisation an affective environment or assemblage in which the activists’ mediated protests create “vulnerable yet brave bodies” (Reestorff, 2014, p. 487). Expanding global justice to both intra- and inter-generational solidarity, moreover, requires a particular level of emotional and affective commitment to global solidarity (WCED, 1987).

All three modes of action support an activist engagement that belongs firmly in the realm of the political defined as the “dimension of antagonism which [...] is] constitutive of human societies” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 11). The political stands in contrast to politics, which constitute an institutional order. The political is therefore a precondition for the possibility of the articulation of hegemonic discourse that seeks to fix meaning according to a particular political or ideological project (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Digital activism, in contrast, supports counter-hegemonic discourse that in turn challenges and disrupts the order of liberal democratic politics. We argue that collective and connective action lead to different degrees of antagonism: Collective action is political as it invokes and sustains longer-running and more firmly established antagonisms, while within connective action there is a need to constantly confirm and reinforce the antagonistic struggles in a more dynamic and changeable political dimension.

Embodiedness

While the connective and affective dimensions of digital activism offer invaluable insights into new forms of organisation, distribution, and mobilisation, it remains underexplored how the activist body is discursively produced through digital expressions. We wish to further an understanding of the participatory subject as embodied in personal experiences and embedded in social and political structures. For Rosi Braidotti (2011), “embodied subjectivity is [...] a paradox that rests simultaneously on the historical decline of

mind/body distinctions and the proliferation of discourses about the body” (p. 69). We recognise that a similar paradox is present in the way that digital activism may offer the possibility of rejection of universality through the representation of multiple voices and positions standing in solidarity, while at the same time exposing the vulnerable activist body to processes of co-optation, commodification, and commercialisation. Bodily vulnerability may be used to mobilise awareness online in different discursive struggles in which a bodily event becomes a dislocation of existing hegemonic discourse (Knudsen & Stage, 2015, p. 1) through the affective production of possible alternative futures (p. 8).

The identity and memory-based affectivity of collective action embeds the activists in a particular embodied counter-public fighting against historical, social, and political structures as well as trying to recast or deconstruct those structures. The body of the collective action is a body defined as representing the experience of common oppression or injustice. In this way, affectivity of vulnerability and solidarity is constructed through the reiterative power of a “cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (Butler, 1993, p. 3), i.e., a public structure. The body, in this sense, is performed within a “reiterative power of discourse” that produces “the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). The collective action is organised according to identity and therefore “membership” because it is produced through and seeks to redefine the discursive constructions of their bodily and affective existence. Consequently, the body is not the material result of the performativity of the individual’s experience, but a structural experience which invites activist participation by means of a sense of belonging (Milan, 2015, p. 62). It follows that the vulnerability of the collective body is under pressure from the cultural norm of grievability (Butler, 2006). “Lives are supported and maintained differently”, argues Judith Butler (2006, p. 32). Indeed, while some lives and some bodies are deemed worthy of protection, others “will not even qualify as ‘grievable’” (Butler, 2006, p. 32). In this way, the collective vulnerability is baked into the materialisation of bodies.

In contrast, self-organising connective action draws heavily on the affective affordances of digital media in which qualities of visibility and individuality support the representation of multiple voices producing a “community without community” (Dean, 2010, p. 22). The understanding of what is collective is redefined and creates a “transposed identity building”, which Milan terms “visibility”. “Visibility is taken to mean the virtual embodiment of individuals and groups and their respective meanings, as they are relentlessly negotiated, reinvigorated and updated in online platforms” (Milan, 2015, p. 62). The virtual body exists by virtue of its online and public presence and recognition of the personal vulnerability as an individual part of a new kind of collective. The implications of this move of embodiment – or embodiedness – from political and structural to personal and visible, argues Milan (2015, pp. 63-64), is twofold: While “the evaporation of the group as the necessary precondition for collective action alters crucial interpersonal dynamics typical of social movements, like internal solidarity [...] the pursuit of visibility at all cost may override action itself”. The emphasis on the visible body, then, may turn the defini-

tion of social movements' impact and effectiveness into a measure of media coverage at the expense of social change. This effect of mediatisation produces the body as a sign embedded in affective politics (Reestorff, 2014, p. 489).

In hybrid connective action, the activist body is constructed digitally in a way that is at the same time autonomous while also embedded in non-hierarchical, polycentric, and digitally supported organisational and political structures. There is therefore simultaneously a sense of personal visibility in online bodily presence and a feeling of membership with various degrees of commitment from fleeting expressions of sympathy and support to close identification and commitment of "being present" in a bodily manner in both online and offline activist events (Gitlin, 2013). Putting one's body at stake in a political struggle for justice, in the space between the embeddedness in political and social structures and the virtual embodied online presence, can lead to a radicalisation of activist expression of demands for solidarity and vulnerability. The body is here not just constrained by political, social, and technological structures, it is a body placed in a complex relation to nature itself. For Braidotti (2013), a post-human subjectivity calls for a post-anthropocentric decentring of the subject as occupying the humanist centre (p. 49), lead-

	Affective	Embodied
Collective action Membership based on identity, creating bridges between differences	Structures of collective affectivities expressed through vulnerability and solidarity Memory- and identity-based affectivity	A public performed through antagonism Genealogical and structural construction of the collective, vulnerable body Attempted deconstruction of memory- and identity-based political and judicial structures
Connective action: self-organising networks Participation based on recognition of individual experiences	Affect as a binding technique among participants in virtual communities Expressions of personal vulnerabilities aggregate and crescendo to political solidarity through recognition	A public performed through polycentrality Virtual and visible embodiedness of individuals and groups The visible body is included in a solidary collective when recognised
Connective action: organisationally enabled networks Participation in clusters of networked individuals	Local affective expressions of solidarity and vulnerability coordinated in global connective outreach	A public performed through the posthuman Constrained neither by physical presence nor by digital visibility alone, the body is post-anthropocentrically decentred The body may expand to encompass nature and others

Table 1: Collective/connective, affective, and embodied action.

ing to the emergence of “environmental, evolutionary, cognitive, bio-genetic and digital trans-disciplinary fronts” (p. 146) and “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (p. 190). Thus, activist post-human subjectivity is constructed as connective, affective, and embodied based on a radicalisation of antagonisms that can go beyond strictly human-centred power-relations.

We understand affectivity to be directed intensity between and within bodies and non-human entities. Affectivity may construct particular kinds of bodies depending on the structures produced by either collectivity or connectivity, such as the case of virtual bodies and visibility. Embodiedness refers to physicality – human or posthuman – that grounds the subject in experience and memory. Although the two concepts are intertwined, we set them apart theoretically in order to explore the notions of deconstruction, inclusion, and expansion of the activist body.

Methodological reflections

To explore and discuss the question of how political digital activism is expressed in connective, affective, and embodied ways, and how these modes result in a rearticulation of the body and central activist signifiers, we produce a discursive analysis of three illustrative cases of digital activism relating to three major political contemporary issues: Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Extinction Rebellion. We have chosen these cases due to their status as innovative global movements that are pivotal in changing the way activism is organised and practised. While they are each in no way archetypes of the three modes, they do present important traits that are indicative of the issues at stake. Thus, they represent multiplicity and polycentrality in the current activist environment. The dataset is drawn from a purposive selection of digital images and texts from digital media platforms. The data have been selected to give us insights into the three causes and how they assemble their narratives of origin focusing on the pivotal hashtags, tweets, posts, and images for each case that were the onset of the movements and followed by selected examples of acts of resistance. The data referenced include 4 websites, 4 tweets, and 3 Facebook posts including comments and likes, and 2 journalistic articles. Each case allows for different combinations of connective, affective, and embodied elements, giving us the opportunity to investigate their range of on- and offline expressions. While this relatively small dataset does not allow us to create a comprehensive analysis of the three cases, it enables us to unfold our theoretical argument regarding the connective, affective, and embodied modes of digital activism. The analyses, then, are primarily illustrative of the theoretical rethinking and helping the conceptual development of embodied activism.

To understand the implications of these connective, affective, and embodied expressions, we conduct a discourse analysis of how the signifiers “human” and “rights” are articulated as part of a political struggle (Laclau, 1990) vested in personal, embodied feelings of vulnerability and solidarity. We look at “human” and “rights” as floating signifiers

which open the field of meaning that the signifiers can take on and challenge hegemonic discourse on democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 113). The aim is to develop a model that illustrates the interconnectedness of the modes of expression with the articulation of signifiers in each case. All three cases are connected in their ambition to expand a notion of rights in a more inclusionary manner, albeit in different ways: deconstructive, inclusive, and expansive. These notions allow us to argue that there are different levels of antagonism in the activist debate. With this analysis, we therefore aim to identify how human and post-human rights are discursively produced and understood.

Analysis of digital activists' political struggles of vulnerability and solidarity

Connective, affective, and embodied expressions of Black Lives Matter

The first part of the analysis gives us insights into how BLM narrate their origin through political and personal expressions and communications shared by organisers as well as participants in relation to their embodied and embedded life circumstances, thus expressing a collective action. By way of discursive analysis, we continue by focusing on the Black visual public sphere (Richardson, 2020) and particularly on its corporeal expressions of vulnerability and solidarity in order to understand how the images produce the signifiers "human" and "rights".

BLM may be understood as a civil rights movement, fighting for reforms of the justice and prison systems to grant greater equality to the African American population in the United States (US). The movement took off as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2013. The acquittal referenced Florida's "Stand your ground" law, which allows citizens to defend themselves anywhere and with deadly force if they feel threatened. The verdict shocked Black communities, because Martin was a young, unarmed boy, whereas his killer was a grown, armed man. Yet the jury perceived Martin as a threat (Richardson, 2020, p. x). Shortly after the acquittal, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the founders of BLM, circulated the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter (Richardson, 2018, p. 388). Garza posted on Facebook: "I continue to be surprised at how little black lives matter ... Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter" (Garza as cited in Richardson, 2020, p. x). The following year, another Black teen was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, this time by a police officer, prompting large-scale demonstrations and online protests using the hashtag. BLM has since been associated with the gruesomely running list of killings of unarmed African Americans by police in the US. Each killing has incited demonstrations and calls for political changes to take place. Hashtags have also proliferated, such as #Ferguson, #ICantBreathe, #HandsUpDontShoot, and #IRun-WithMaud. Today, BLM presents themselves on the website blacklivesmatter.com, on which they call for support and action, inform about events and political campaigns, and encourage the celebration of Black lives through joyous art. The movement defines itself as expansive and affirming of all Black lives globally and working against targeted and

deadly oppression. It goes by the name Black Lives Matter Global Network Inc. (Black Lives Matter, n.d.), but has since scaled internationally (Richardson, 2018, p. 388).

BLM started as a “double hashtag” (Blaagaard, forthcoming): both embodied in the particular African American experience and love for the community and in a digital hashtag, which quickly travelled globally. The movement can initially be defined as connective and affective action, but quickly merged with a strong collective action aspect founded in the embodied African American experience and with a focused website stating mission and breadth of the actions desired by its members. BLM has no leader apart from the three founders, although DeRay Mckesson is often presented as such in mainstream media (Richardson, 2020, pp. 106, 108). However, the movement has a common goal under which local chapters may run their own campaigns and collaborate with other local organisations and develop new hashtags. In the case of BLM, the hashtag and the movement’s related online practices articulate an affective demand to make visible Black vulnerability when moving in public and to address and document this demand with political acts of protest such as demonstrations. The collective action underscores the memory-based affectivity of solidarity and a continued struggle for justice.

Many of the killings of African Americans have been filmed and shared on visual social media platforms. The collective movement’s strategy of demonstrations and digital hashtag activism produced “double hashtags” (Blaagaard, forthcoming) or “corporeal iconography” (Richardson, 2020, p. 143) that rooted the visual tags in embodied gestures. Examples include raised hands in a reproduction of Michael Brown’s alleged last words and gestures before he was shot by a police officer: “Hands up, Don’t shoot”.¹ The embodied reproduction of the gesture of raising one’s hands was enacted by protesters, politicians, football players, and journalists alike in support of BLM’s cause and was often accompanied by placards or a hashtag with the text or title “Hands up, Don’t shoot”. The embodied, physical gesture travels as if it were a hashtag repeatedly connecting disparate bodies in a common expression. The gesture reminds the viewers as well as its performers of the particular and structural vulnerability of African American existence, thus deconstructing the modern understanding of “human”. “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency”, writes Butler (2006, p. 26). The body is exposed, showing the neck and chest unprotected, and the option of self-defence is limited. In this way, argues Blaagaard (forthcoming), the embodied gesture of “Hands up, don’t shoot” creates the constant memory of Brown’s vulnerable, dying body. The performance transforms the slogan “from a space for standing *with* [Brown] to a state of standing *within* the body in peril” (Hoyt, 2016, p. 31), making visible the continued social struggle and the societal structures that necessitate the antagonism entailed. The gesture insists that Brown’s life is grievable, and grief becomes a catalyst for political action (Butler, 2006, p. 22; Fabian, 2010, p. 66). In terms of deconstruction, the gesture brings to the fore the structures of inhumanity that persist and construct some bodies as more human than others.

Another example is the gesture of linking chains, i.e., using bodies to form a human chain across tarmacs or freeways to disrupt traffic and claim attention and space (see, e.g., Bowean, 2016). It presents a rich metaphorical signifier of inhumanity “insofar as African American subjugation has been held together literally by chains: shackled Africans at the auction block [and] black convicts leased to work on railroads in chain gangs” (Richardson, 2020, p. 144). However, the participants in the display of linking chains reclaim the gesture as a signifier of humanity and allow it to show, instead of captivity, a strength in numbers and a solidarity in fighting for a common cause. Due to the historical association embedded in the expression, linking chains moreover demonstrates resilience and endurance – an antagonistic promise of overcoming the structural racism against which BLM fights.

In light of these gestures, BLM’s understanding of what counts as human is arguably rooted in a genealogy of resistance and is produced in spite of the modern concept of “Man”, which in large parts have excluded people of colour as well as (white) women. The signifier “human” is deconstructed and reclaimed through vulnerability and solidarity. Similarly, the concept of “rights” is defined in contrast to the reality of the African American experience, in which justice for Martin, Brown, and all the others is rarely served. In turn, the call for “rights” employed by BLM becomes a radical and antagonistic demand for rethinking the modern justice and political systems on which it is based. Topics such as defunding the police, which has been rallying cries in the movement and beyond, reflect this radical deconstruction necessary to recognise and acknowledge the movement’s participants’ rights as human.

Connective, affective, and embodied expressions of #MeToo

#MeToo enabled a particular form of embodiedness through practices of visibility (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Milan, 2015). After exploring how #MeToo builds primarily on connective action in affective publics, the discourse analysis shows how the movement articulates the signifiers “human” and “rights” through awareness of vulnerability and processes of solidarity.

More than ten years after African American activist Tarana Burke coined the hashtag #MeToo in 2006, it went viral in 2017 when actor Alyssa Milano shared an update on the social media platform Twitter in response to allegations of sexual abuse by media mogul Harvey Weinstein. In her tweet, Milano encouraged all “women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted” to write “Me too” as a social media status, adding “[then] we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Milano, 2017). The idea was initially taken up by other actors and celebrities, prompting a debate about the culture of sexual abuse in the film industry, and it quickly spread, starting a global discussion about the extent of the problem of sexual disparities and oppression (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019; Clark-Parsons, 2019). The hashtag proceeded to ebb and flow when more people were charged with harassment or assault or when additional work sectors began to address their particular issues. #MeToo in this sense is a connective action organisa-

tion, which grew organically in multifarious directions as well as in stretches and intervals of time. Affectively, #MeToo binds the movement's or campaign's participants together through a strong sense of the classic feminist idiom: The personal is the political. "#MeToo aggregated personal stories into a networked visibility campaign, illustrating the systemic nature of sexual violence", according to Clark-Parsons (2019, p. 363). However, the double-edged sword of hashtag activism's polycentrality is evident in #MeToo: Each personal tweet using the hashtag adds to a sense of solidary outrage on a political level, while simultaneously the tweets potentially open up the participants to trauma and vulnerability, forcing them to "negotiate between the affordances and limitations of hashtag activism" (Clark-Parsons, 2019, p. 364).

#MeToo has inspired scholarly analyses on the practices and the *doing* of feminist hashtag activism (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018) as well as on how the campaign was received and the political, legal, and cultural effects it rendered (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019). Both foci reveal an understanding of #MeToo as a connective action produced and sustained by affective structures, building to a crescendo of collective story-telling able to change societies and bring wrong-doers to justice. However, the initial founder of the hashtag, Tarana Burke, has continued her community work and presents her trademarked "me too" movement on the website metoomvmnt.org (me too, n.d.) from where she offers guidance and counselling programmes to help victims and survivors find their healing journey at no cost to participants. She also keeps her focus on communities of colour and members of the LGBTQI+ community. In this way, the "me too" movement shows strong collective and affective qualities as well as a pronounced interest in counteracting the pitfall of co-optation and superficiality of digital space and politics (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018).

In connective action, the affective and embodied actions are closely related, as are the solidarity and vulnerability aspects. Personal vulnerability is imbued with affectivity and becomes visible producing the virtual, digital body. In Milano's tweet, she calls for "women" to show the extent of this solidary vulnerability to "people" for "them" to "sense the magnitude of the problem". Milano is not making a demand for social change at this early stage of the movement, nor is she able to speak on behalf of all women affected by harassment and abuse. Rather, she shares her personal and individual pain so that it may be part of and help produce a larger community of solidarity. While the tweet clearly constructs an "us" and "them", it does not demand the deconstruction or rejection of "them" or their conceptualisation of "human". Instead, it is a demand for inclusion into the construction of "human" to make it comprise more than "them", "people", or "Man". Implicitly, the tweet asks that women be recognised and included in the concept of "human" with the "rights" that entails.

Likewise, the wording of the hashtag in and of itself calls for inclusion both in the category of woman with the attached vulnerabilities and in the category of human with that category's inherent "rights". Me too means add me: Add me to the list of vulnerables,

to the community of visible, virtual bodies, and I am “human”. Despite the focus on the transgressions against the integrity of the female, physical body, the connective action allows its participants to become embodied only through the visible recognition of their rights and the representation of their vulnerability online. Although female vulnerability has never been considered non-political by feminist scholars and practitioners, the tweet and the following hashtag demand that the feminist insight is carried into the general public, i.e., be recognised by “people”. The demand requires affective labour and a continuous re-affirmation with every reply of “me too”, circulating widely to be sustained as a political claim.

While local instances of #MeToo resistance in physical spaces and political events followed the connective action on the ground and insisted on the physical significance of the embodied experience of women, the connective action alone demonstrates the virtual and visible body of digital activism.

The reliance on recognition and visibility is supported by connective action’s polycentrality, which also adds to the movement’s aim – if such exists uniformly – a balancing act between political visibility and co-optation of visual representation. As Braidotti (2011) notes, the collapse of the mind/body divide is paradoxically simultaneous with the excessive focus on (female) body parts and digital and modifiable visuality.

The connective, affective, and embodied expressions of Extinction Rebellion

The first part of the analysis shows XR’s activist practices on- and offline in terms of their hybrid organisation and affective engagement, while the discursive analysis explores how the signifiers “human” and “rights” push for an expansion of the notion of the human body.

On 31 October 2018, 1,500 people assembled on Parliament Square in London to announce a Declaration of Rebellion against the UK Government (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.-a). Extinction Rebellion UK was initiated six months prior by a group of activist academics, most notably Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam, who worked with strategies of civil disobedience and had a background in environmental activism. In the time that followed, XR organised a number of events in the UK, often in the form of occupation, demonstrations, and other expressions of dissent and direct action against the government, culminating in mass demonstrations with extensive roadblocks in London. Despite its avowed purpose to call out national politics and governments for its inadequate attention to climate change and the ecological crisis, the movement soon spread to other destinations and became global (Gunningham, 2019; see also Taylor, 2020).

XR is characterised by having strong elements of both collective and connective action. It relies on the collective logic and civil disobedience as it follows in the slipstream of earlier environmentalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalisation activist movements. But XR is also defined by its connective logics that are enabled by the movement’s structure and organisation. Containing hybrid traits, XR events are always announced on Twitter and Facebook and open for all participants regardless of degree of engagement: “We need

you – whoever you are, however much time you have to offer” (rebellion.global, n.d.). The media content produced and shared by XR is connected through hashtags that organise the movement, in particular different versions of #ExtinctionRebellion, often with a geographical indication attached, e.g., #XRLondon (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-b), thus indicating a geographical situatedness alongside the global connectivity involved in the movement’s name and its many subgroups. A great variety of hashtags are used across the different Facebook pages and Twitter walls: #ClimateCrisis, #ActNow, #TellTheTruth, #StopTheHarm, #DemandTheImpossible, and #CitizenAssembly, for instance (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.; Extinction Rebellion Global, n.d.). Some of these hashtags replicate a defined set of demands that run across all geographical XR subgroups and form their coordinated, collective strategy: “tell the truth”, “act now”, and “go beyond politics” (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.-b). Like BLM and #MeToo, XR has been characterised as a leaderless and decentralised movement which, for Fotaki and Foroughi, can become problematic to the movement’s “capacity to fulfil the objectives” (2021, Conclusion). Westwell and Bunting (2020) view the movement in more positive terms as a form of regenerative culture that works towards a duty of care for the planet and for people.

Hashtags, reports from XR events on Twitter and Facebook, and the movement’s different web pages show both the affective and embodied dimensions in XR’s activist expressions: #ActNow and #ClimateEmergency voice the sense of emergency as does: “THE WORLD IS ON FIRE”. While anger is seen across all social media posts, as in “Orla is joining the rebellion to demand that politicians stop with their empty promises”, supportive comments are also noticeable: “Well said, well done you rebels!! Working from your hearts for love of our fragile planet” (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-a). The XR expressions are embodied in several ways: The protesters put their bodies on the line in acts of civil disobedience: They are arrested and forcibly removed from occupied spaces. Moreover, pollution and climate change are seen to not only harm the planet but all bodies and beings who inhabit it.

The social media expressions produced and circulated by XR show the intersection between physical, civil disobedience events of activism and the way that the movement uses social media to interact with, organise, document, and represent these events. Social media announcements not only work to recruit participants and petition for public support, they also spread and augment these events which contribute to articulating the signifiers “human” and “rights” according to their demands for climate change and environmental justice.

The hashtags, words, and images used on both Twitter and Facebook contribute to expressing and giving meaning to XR’s three central demands – “tell the truth”, “act now”, and “go beyond politics” (Extinction Rebellion n.d.-b) – and happens in a general way through some of the hashtags already mentioned (Extinction Rebellion UK, n.d.-b; Extinction Rebellion Global, n.d.). This call to act urgently is also expressed as specific local demands with a global outlook. An example is XR retweets concerning the occu-

	Affective	Embodied		Human	Rights
Collective action Membership based on identity, creating bridges between differences	Structures of collective affectivities expressed through vulnerability and solidarity Memory- and identity-based affectivity	A public performed through antagonism Genealogical and structural construction of the collective, vulnerable body Attempted deconstruction of memory- and identity-based political and judicial structures	Deconstruction	The concept deconstructed in light of historical wrong-doings and abuse	Defund the police and destroy the prison complex
Connective action: self-organising networks Participation based on recognition of individual experiences	Affect as a binding technique among participants in virtual communities Expressions of personal vulnerabilities aggregate and crescendo to political solidarity through recognition	A public performed through polycentrality Virtual and visible embodiedness of individuals and groups The visible body is included in a solidary collective when recognised	Inclusion	The concept critiqued and made to include its "others"	Call for recognition and inclusion
Connective action: organisationally enabled networks Participation in clusters of networked individuals	Local affective expressions of solidarity and vulnerability coordinated in global connective outreach	A public performed through the posthuman Constrained neither by physical presence nor by digital visibility alone, the body is post-anthropocentrically decentred The body may expand to encompass nature and others	Expansion	Post-anthropocentric Nature-human divide expanded: post-human	Expanding the judicial system to include the rights of nature Include non-humans: nature, animals, etc.

Table 2: The impact of collective/connective, affective, and embodied action on the signifiers of "human" and "rights".

pation of trees in *Amager Fælled*, a large, mostly wild-growing recreational area close to central Copenhagen. Environmental activists occupied the trees in an area that had been designated for new property development to meet the demand for more housing in the Danish capital. XR Denmark’s Twitter feed reports and documents action under

the headline “Tornsangerland stays!”,² supported also by #Tornsangerland and #Amagerfælled. When pieced together, the posts therefore tell the full story of the occupation of the trees, the building of a fence, the presence of guards to scare off activists, and finally the police action to clear the trees and arrest the occupiers. The narrative is supported by video clips and images showing the dramatic highlights and texts that petition for support (“we call for everyone to come and help protect our precious nature, from the ground and in the trees!”) or display the injustice of the authorities’ actions (“The police are here in numbers and want us down”) (Extinction Rebellion Danmark, n.d.).

The demands for justice and solidarity with nature illustrate how the signifier “rights” becomes not only the rights for citizens to protest and express their demands, but also the rights of nature, and specifically of the trees and animals in this area. It follows that trees’ rights are expanded and incorporated into the activists’ bodies of rights, and activists become embodied beyond themselves as humans as a result of this expansion. The activists represent the rights of nature when they put their bodies at risk and use them to protect the trees. Moreover, and in line with other XR events, they engage in illegal action, entering fenced-off spaces, and letting themselves get arrested and constrained.

Thereby, climate justice protests expand what it means to hold rights: Firstly, activists define the signifier “human” to include a global and intergenerational solidarity in relation to humans’ consumption of and access to resources and bearable living conditions. Secondly, and most prominently, the activists’ bodies occupying the trees expand to protect the vulnerability of nature and claim solidarity with the rights of nature, and thus non-humans, whereby they occupy a space of post-human subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013). The articulation of the signifier “human” regards both human survival but also a humane treatment of nature, endangered species, etc. The activist occupancy of trees therefore rests on a post-human subjectivity that expands the “sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 190).

Conclusion: Deconstruction, inclusion, expansion

This article asked the question: How does political digital activism take different forms when expressed in connective, affective, and embodied ways and how do these modes result in a rearticulation of the body and central activist signifiers? As summarised in table 2, we found that while connective/collective and affective qualities are present to greater or lesser extent in all the three cases analysed, it is the formulations and conceptualisations of the body – as expressed through vulnerability and solidarity, which in turn gives salience to particular understandings of “human” and “rights” – that set the movements apart.

Collective action, illustrated in the analysis of BLM, remains important in digital activism. Our analysis shows that the embodied dimension of collective action allows for the emergence of a counter-public that elucidates the antagonism at play in racist politics.

The collective action therefore calls for a deconstruction of the concept of “human” that in fact continues to dehumanise African Americans. The movement challenges the liberal hegemony by calling for “rights” that in turn requires a radical rethinking of political rights, the judicial system, and the prison complex.

Connective action like #MeToo relies on self-organised and networked individuals and lacks the political potential that lies in embodied collective action due to the polycentrality and personalised expressions and aims. #MeToo’s demand to be included in the concept and rights of “Man” produces a call to be recognised as vulnerable bodies and provides a tempered antagonistic counter-discourse. Rather than collective countering the hegemonic discourse of “Man”, they seek to make visible the suffering and injustice that has been unrecognised and excluded as an issue in public debate.

In the analysis, we illustrate hybrid connective action through XR. This movement shows an antagonism that becomes obscured, as the problem it presents is all-encompassing and difficult to solve. Simultaneously, XR articulates a radical antagonism that requires the subject to engage in solidarity with the non-human other. The task calls for an expansion of the concept of the human to incorporate nature leading to a radical questioning of the Anthropocene. As a mix between connective and collective action, XR shows that it is the collective action that allows for nature to become embodied through the claim of activists.

In summary, the three cases have shown us different degrees of antagonism expressed as calls for deconstruction, inclusion, and expansion of the body through the rearticulation of the signifiers “human” and “rights” as embodied vulnerability and solidarity. The cases have shown that deconstruction consists of a genealogical awareness of and opposition to how some the human bodies are constructed as more human than others. Inclusion is the call for recognition and addition to the category of “Man”. Finally, expansion involves pushing the boundaries of the human body towards the post-human. Thus, the activists in all three cases engage in political struggles that contest the signifiers “human” and “rights” as the cornerstone of a particular hegemonic liberal discourse that has defined the role of citizens in democratic politics.

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Notes

- 1 A quick online search for images of “Hands up, Don’t shoot” renders multiple images of demonstrations, celebrities, and merchandise sporting the expression (search conducted 18 August 2021).
- 2 Tornsangerland is the name of the area in question that is named after a bird.

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