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Performative Allyship Is Deadly (Here's What to Do Instead)

Activism can't begin and end with a hashtag



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Credit Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

On May 25, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer who kneeled on his neck for more than eight minutes as Floyd gasped, “I can’t breathe.” On March 13, Breonna Taylor was shot dead by police who stormed her home as she slept. On February 25, Ahmaud Arbery was killed in the middle of the day by two white men, a retired policeman and his son. They got in their car, tailed him, and shot him twice.

I could go on.

These tragedies, just the most recent examples in a long history of violence against black people, have led to an explosion of attention on social media. In the days after Arbery’s death, I scrolled through Instagram, reading post after post from white friends and influencers professing their outrage and disbelief. Urging us to #sayhisname. The posts were flooded with comments from more (mostly) white people, thanking them for their “bravery” and praising them for “speaking truth to power.” Three months after the shooting, Gregory McMichael and Travis McMichael were arrested and charged with murder in what has been heralded as a victory for the powers of social media, a place where normal citizens can “use their voice” to demand justice.

Still, as a black woman, instead of feeling inspired by this act of solidarity, I found myself feeling angry and afraid. Looking through my feed, I wanted to say to my white friends, “You’re here now, but where are you the other 364 days a year when anti-racism isn’t trending? When racism isn’t tucked safely behind the screen in your hand, but right there in front of your face?”

I am not overlooking the fact that public allyship can help spur positive change. Voices can be heard, and some small version of justice may even be served as a result. But we must also not be lulled into believing that this kind of allyship is enough to dismantle the conditions that made it possible for an innocent black man to be lynched in broad daylight. And we must not let the kind of performative allyship that begins and ends with hashtags take center stage in the quest for equality.

What is performative allyship?

To understand performative allyship, let's first look at what real allyship is. An ally is someone from a nonmarginalized group who uses their privilege to advocate for a marginalized group. They transfer the benefits of their privilege to those who lack it. Performative allyship, on the other hand, is when someone from that same nonmarginalized group professes support and solidarity with a marginalized group in a way that either isn't helpful or that actively harms that group. Performative allyship usually involves the "ally" receiving some kind of reward — on social media, it's that virtual pat on the back for being a "good person" or "on the right side."

I want to make clear that I do not exempt myself from this kind of behavior. I myself have spoken online with fervent vigor about the evils of factory farming, only to later that day sneak a piece of cheese from my partner's plate. (If I didn't order it, I'm still vegan, right?) I understand the urge to say *something*, especially when people are reminding you that to be silent is to be complicit. But the problem with performative allyship is not that it in itself damages, but that it excuses. It excuses privileged people from making the personal sacrifices necessary to touch the depth of the systemic issues it claims to address. If you hashtagged #sayhisname, you've done your bit, right? You've publicly declared you stand against racism and therefore can check that off your to-do list. Wrong.

'Mom, Why Don't You Have Any Black Friends?'

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Looking through the Instagram stories of apparent white allies shouting for justice, my heart broke to see their posts immediately followed by photos of what they had for lunch or something similarly unrelated. This kind of allyship is transient. A passing story. A repost. For the 'gram. It's cheap and inauthentic.

How do you spot performative allyship?

On social media, there are four clues.

1. **The post is usually simple**—a few words, an image or whatever the going hashtag is (in the aesthetic of their personal brand, of course). Performative allyship refuses to engage with the complexity below the surface or say anything new.
2. **It almost always expresses itself as outrage, disbelief, or anger “at the injustice.”** But your outrage isn’t useful — if anything, it’s a marker of your privilege, that to you racism is still surprising. Trust me when I say this is not so for black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) for whom racism is an everyday reality.
3. **It refuses to acknowledge any personal responsibility for the systemic issues that provided the context for the relevant tragedy.** Instead, it looks at a villain “out there” — a crooked police officer or a heartless conservative. It separates you (good) from them (bad).
4. **Perhaps most noticeable, it’s usually met with praise, approval, or admiration for the person expressing it.** That is its lifeblood.

If you recognize yourself in some of these descriptions, know that this doesn’t mean I’m saying you don’t care, or that you’re a bad person, or a racist. Just that you’ve fallen into the trap of thinking that your activism can begin and end with a hashtag. But systemic racism doesn’t care about your hashtags and your outrage. People have been hashtagging #blacklivesmatter for eight years, and young black men are being killed in the street for jogging. It’s critical to realize that if your allyship is performative, you are excusing yourself from engaging with the tough and messy conversations necessary to address the root causes. The conversations that will actually bring about change. And you’re easing your guilt with the empty advocacy of keyboard warring when what you really need to be doing is advocating with your actions.

So what can you do instead? Here are some suggestions.

Act with your wallet

This, I believe, is the greatest thing you as a white person can do to support BIPOC. If you are disgusted by the centuries of state-sponsored theft from black, Asian, and indigenous people's lands, then support BIPOC-owned businesses. Initiate your own program of reparations by actively looking for products and services you use regularly and finding alternatives created by BIPOC. And if you're heartbroken by the exploitation of people of color in some of the poorest countries in the world, refuse to buy from the fashion and technology companies that continue to shamelessly exploit adults and children in their labor practices.

Call out people in real life

It's easy to call people out when you're hidden behind a keyboard. You know what's hard? Calling out your boss when he routinely mixes up your two Indian colleagues, or facing off with your racist relative when they start talking about "immigrants taking our jobs." If you can't yet speak up, that's okay, but recognize that fact and commit to doing your work so that, one day soon, you can.

Inform yourself

It's all too easy to focus on the people "out there" — the evil ones, the KKK, the neo-Nazis. Almost every sensible person believes these people and their views are deplorable. But because they are marginal and few in number, they have little power and influence over the mechanics of society. You know what does have mass influence? Systemic white apathy and privilege. And I'm sorry to say, if you're white, no matter how nice you are, unless you're doing serious and sustained personal anti-racism work, you are a part of the machine. Ask your BIPOC friends about their experiences of racism and listen. Engage in ways to confront your own biases. Read books on the history of racism in your country. (This reading list is a great place to start.)

Do something that no one will ever know

As Lil Wayne said, "Real Gs move in silence like lasagne." This is never more true than in activism. Sometimes real activism requires us to step up and shout. But far more often, it requires us to carry out simple daily acts that no one will ever see. If, on

reflection, everything you do is public, it's likely you're a performative ally. Challenge yourself to do things quietly, like changing the things you buy, giving your platform to a BIPOC, or educating yourself on the history of racism without telling everyone about how educated you now are. That way, you know you're really down for the cause — and not the cause of looking like a woke person.

Simply “saying stuff” is easy. You know what's hard? Not buying stuff you want because the supply chain is violent. Turning down a job because the company employs child labor in Africa. Calling out other white people when they say something clearly racist. That shit is hard. But if you want to be a true ally to BIPOC, you have to be willing to do it. Anyone can post hashtags on social media. And the fact that this is seen as an act of activism is deadly.

So this is a call. For all of us. To get honest and real. To look at how much we really care. To understand that when our allyship does more for ourselves than for the people it professes to help, we have a problem. Be an activist who actually acts. It's too late in the day to be anything but.

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