

How activists can challenge double standards

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Abstract

Activists often encounter double standards: powerful groups make a huge outcry about a problem, meanwhile ignoring their own greater role in exactly the same problem. For example, governments with major nuclear arsenals raise the alarm about the possibility that others might acquire nuclear weapons. Powerful groups use a variety of tactics to reduce awareness and concern about their own actions while raising the alarm about others; activists can try to counter these tactics. As a general rule, it is better for campaigners to choose methods that highlight and accentuate double standards and make it more difficult for opponents to adopt the high ground.

Introduction

Many campaigners encounter a perplexing and frustrating phenomenon. Your opponents accuse you of doing something terrible — but actually your opponents do the same thing just as much or even a great deal more. For example, your opponents are engaged in massive censorship, but accuse you of censorship, or your opponents are engaged in serious terrorism but accuse you of being a terrorist. It seems like gross hypocrisy, yet it can be hard to address.

A classic example involves nuclear weapons. Over the past two decades, the US government has raised the alarm that Iraq, and more recently Iran, might be obtaining nuclear weapons, with the danger presented as so acute that invasion is a potential remedy. During this whole time, the US government has been sitting on thousands of nuclear weapons, and it is just one of several nuclear-armed states about which there is barely a peep of official concern. How can the US government get away with its indignation about alleged Iraqi and Iranian nuclear weapons when it is the world's leading nuclear-armed state? And what can anti-nuclear campaigners do about it?

On a smaller scale, in confrontations between protesters and police, there can be plenty of police violence and brutality, but somehow the media frame the story as a “violent protest” rather than “violent police.” It's as if the actions of one side are invisible.

These are examples of double standards in campaigning. A standard is applied to one side, for example concerning nuclear weapons or use of violence, but is not applied to the other side. One way this is done is by an implicit attribution of guilt or danger to one side and virtue to the other: *their* nuclear weapons are dangerous; *ours* are to preserve peace. Achieving such a mindset involves two

processes operating in conjunction: reducing concern about what one side is doing while increasing it about the other side's actions.

To examine campaigning double standards, I first look at methods for determining whether a double standard is involved. Then I catalogue techniques used by the more powerful group to reduce awareness and concern about their own actions while stigmatising the opponent's, using a series of examples to illustrate the techniques. Finally, I outline possible responses to these techniques.

Is there a double standard?

Just listening to claims and counter-claims, sometimes it can be difficult to decide who is right. Neither side may be giving a balanced perspective. Ultimately, there is no substitute for investigating claims and making an assessment. What should you look for?

To begin, it might seem worth looking at the stated goals of each side. However, these might be hidden, misleading or self-serving. For example, if the Iranian government is developing nuclear weapons, it might not want to admit this. Most experts say the Israeli military has hundreds of nuclear weapons, but the Israeli government has never admitted having any. The US government says its weapons are for defence or deterrence. So, at least in the case of nuclear weapons, stated goals are not very revealing.

More useful is looking at who has power, whether this is military power, economic power, support from established authorities or some other source of power. Compare, for example, al Qaeda with the US government. Al Qaeda has support from hundreds or thousands of fighters around the world and is able to participate in combat in some places (for example, Syria and Yemen) and initiate terrorist attacks, most famously 9/11. However, the US government has vastly more power, including to launch wars, assassinate opponents through drone attacks, fund massive surveillance operations, and imprison and interrogate its perceived enemies. So the US government has a much greater capacity to terrorise opponents, and wider populations, than al Qaeda. Indeed, the US government has the capacity to destroy much of the al Qaeda organisation, whereas al Qaeda has no prospect of overturning the US government.

Another criterion for double standards is the consequences for each side of actions taken. If actions affect one side much more than the other without corresponding levels of concern, this is an indication of likely double standards. Consider, for example, Israeli government condemnation of the violence of Palestinian youths who threw stones during the first intifada, 1987–1993. Although a few Israeli soldiers were hurt, a much larger number of Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops.

Some caution is needed in assessing impacts in cases where responsibility is unclear. In some struggles, members of one side will pretend to be on the opponent's side and take actions that discredit it. Police sometimes disguise themselves as protesters, infiltrate protest groups and urge the use of violence, or even initiate it themselves. These *agents provocateurs* encourage protester violence so that police seem justified in using much greater violence. With such "black operations," in which appearances are deceptive, the consequences of actions may be attributed to the wrong group (Lubbers 2012; Soley and Nichols 1987).

In summary, the key criterion for assessing double standards in campaigning struggles is differences in power. If one side has much more power than the other, yet complains vociferously about actions by the other side, it is wise to be sceptical. However, power alone does not prove double standards, because sometimes power is not exercised or is used with restraint. So it is necessary to assess the consequences of actions by each side. If the side with much more power is also causing much more harm, then this side's complaints about being a victim may reflect a double standard.

My friend Jørgen Johansen often uses five criteria to compare words and actions. As applied to the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, he provides this assessment of NATO governments' rhetoric and actions.

- *What did they say?* British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton said the bombing was to prevent ethnic cleansing and to promote democracy and human rights.
- *What were they doing?* Massive bombing from high altitudes.
- *What were the immediate results?* Massive violations of human rights, without increased democracy.
- *What were the long-term results?* Ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Kosova.
- *Who benefited in the long run?* The US military built its largest foreign military base since the Vietnam war on occupied Serbian territory.

Jørgen's conclusion: there is no correlation between words and deeds.

For any issue, there is no substitute for a careful analysis, looking at evidence and arguments. Special care is needed when there is the possibility of black operations in which actions may be attributed to the wrong side.

Examples

Here are a few cases of conflicts in which each side potentially could accuse the other of the same sort of misconduct.

Violence in the first intifada

In the first Palestinian intifada (1987–1993), most of the resistance methods used by Palestinians were nonviolent, for example rallies, boycotts and setting up systems of home-based schooling (Dajani 1994; Kaufman-Lacusta 2010; King 2007; Rigby 2015). Many Israelis declaimed against Palestinian violence, in particular youths throwing stones against Israeli troops.

Analysis The Israeli military had vastly more weaponry and capacity for violence than the Palestinians. Few if any Israeli troops were killed by stone-throwing, whereas thousands of Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops during the first intifada.

Terrorism

Terrorist attacks kill civilians and are widely condemned by governments and citizens. The 9/11 attacks are the most prominent example, but there have been thousands of other attacks. However, it is also possible to talk about “state terrorism,” in which governments terrorise citizens, including through mass killing (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Herman 1982; Stohl and Lopez 1984). Two prominent examples are genocide in Indonesia 1965–1966 (500,000 or more killed) and in Guatemala in the 1980s (200,000 killed), in each case with little or no apparent concern expressed by the US or most other western governments.

Analysis States have vastly more power than non-state groups; state terrorism has killed far more civilians than non-state terrorism.

Leaking

When low-level government employees leak documents to journalists or others, politicians make a great play about how terrible this is, often carrying out witch-hunts for leakers. The leakers Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden have been denounced as traitors (Greenwald 2014; Gurnow 2014; Harding 2014; Madar 2012). Meanwhile, politicians and high-level officials routinely leak confidential information — including classified information — to journalists, often for personal or political advantage. However, this seldom receives any comment, much less criticism (Horton 2015, pp. 129–151; Pozen 2012).

Analysis Politicians who leak have far more power than the low-level employees they castigate for leaking.

Nuclear weapons

Countries with substantial nuclear arsenals include the US, Russia, China, France, Britain and Israel. However, the governments of several of these

countries spend much effort raising the alarm about the possibility of nuclear weapons being acquired by other governments, such as Iraq and Iran.

Analysis The long-standing nuclear weapons states have far more power than other states that are alleged to be seeking nuclear weapons.

These are just some of the many instances of double standards found in a range of issues. The typical configuration is that there is a powerful group doing something that some might see as wrong, such as censorship, violence or nuclear threats. However, the powerful group accuses others of exactly the same action and loudly condemns it. Sometimes the powerful group is so successful at shaping perceptions that few even realise a double standard is involved. For example, few people think of major governments as terrorists.

Selling a double standard

To get away with double standards, the more powerful group usually relies on two sets of processes: one is to reduce awareness and concern about its own actions; the other is to raise the alarm about the opponent's actions.

Powerful perpetrators commonly use five types of methods to reduce public outrage over actions potentially seen as unjust (Martin 2007, 2012):

- covering up the action;
- devaluing the target;
- reinterpreting the events by lying, minimising consequences, blaming others, and favourable framing;
- using official channels to give an appearance of justice;
- intimidating and rewarding people involved.

Raising the alarm about someone's actions involves a parallel set of methods:

- exposing the action
- validating the target
- interpreting the events as an injustice
- avoiding or discrediting official channels; instead, mobilising support
- resisting intimidation and rewards

Powerful perpetrators may use both sets of methods selectively, reducing outrage about their own actions while drumming up concern about their opponents' actions.

Cover-up and exposure

The powerful group typically does everything possible to draw people's attention to the allegedly terrible actions of its opponent. These terrible actions, by repeatedly being brought to awareness, become all-consuming, and alternative concerns become afterthoughts.

Meanwhile, the powerful group, if possible, hides its own activities. This is possible in some cases. Torture, for example, is almost always carried out in secrecy. However, in many cases, the actions of the powerful group are almost impossible to hide, for example the possession of nuclear weapons arsenals. In these cases, there are two main options. One is to say nothing about it, so people don't pay attention to it, even though the evidence is overwhelming. The other option is to reinterpret the actions, as discussed below.

Devaluation and validation

The powerful group nearly always tries to discredit and defame its opponent. If the opponent is devalued, then what is done to it does not seem so bad. Leaks by low-level employees are painted as security threats and the leakers castigated as traitors, malcontents, or even terrorists.

At the same time, the powerful group paints itself as virtuous, with the implication that its actions are praiseworthy. Nuclear weapons states portray themselves as responsible members of the international community, defending freedom and preserving the peace. They present themselves as qualitatively different from "rogue states" that are alleged to be a serious danger to international security.

When one group can portray itself as good in a struggle against evil, this allows double standards to persist without critical examination. When terrorists are seen as evil and those who oppose them are thought of as the "good guys," the actions of these "good guys" escape scrutiny, even if they cause far more death and destruction.

Interpretation struggles

The powerful group can use various techniques to convince people that its opponents are in the wrong while it is in the right. One technique is lying. For example, while governments decry torture elsewhere, they deny doing it themselves. A second technique is minimising consequences. When justifying torture in Guantánamo Bay prison, some apologists said the harm to prisoners

was not so great. A third technique is to blame others. At Abu Ghraib prison, torture was blamed on prison guards, with higher-level officials exempted from responsibility. A fourth technique, often the most powerful one, is framing. What opponents do is said to be torture, but the US government labelled actions at Abu Ghraib as “abuse,” never using the word torture, and US media went along with this framing.

Similarly, the term “leaking” is applied to anonymous disclosures by low-level employees, whereas when politicians and top officials leak information, it is framed by the media in different ways, for example “a source revealed” or “according to a knowledgeable official.” For leaks by low-level workers, the language used focuses attention on the leaker, whereas for high-level leakers, the language focuses attention on the information leaked, without invoking the concept of leaking.

Official channels versus mobilisation

Official channels include regulatory agencies, courts, treaties and a host of other processes and agencies that are supposed to resolve problems and provide justice. Powerful groups, rather than allowing official channels to operate independently and fairly, often use them to defend themselves and to attack opponents.

As a response to public concerns about nuclear weapons, governments negotiated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. According to the treaty, non-weapons states are supposed to avoid moves towards nuclear weapons; in return, weapons states are supposed to eliminate their arsenals. In practice, the treaty has been used against potential newcomers to the nuclear club, with the nuclear disarmament aspect of the treaty largely ignored.

In the conflict between Israel and Palestine, there have been numerous formal processes invoked, for example the 1993 Oslo accords and various “peace processes.” These have given the appearance of moving towards a resolution of grievances. However, the Israeli government has not changed its actions on the ground in relation to several vital matters, for example the return of Palestinians expelled decades earlier. Meanwhile, attention to the various supposed peace processes soothes audiences expecting something to be done.

Intimidation and resistance

Powerful groups commonly attempt to intimidate opponents and anyone who might help them, for example journalists. Meanwhile, these same powerful groups make a great issue of alleged threats from their opponents.

The US government maintains troops in over a hundred other countries, has invaded various countries, uses drone attacks for extra-judicial assassinations and maintains comprehensive surveillance programs. These activities serve to

intimidate opponents. At the same time, it devotes enormous resources to resisting intimidation by non-state terrorists, al Qaeda in particular, and attempts to mobilise public concern about threats from terrorists.

When workers speak out about corruption or abuses, their employers often label them as snitches or troublemakers, and subject them to harassment, ostracism, reprimands or dismissal. These are methods of intimidation that serve to deter others from becoming whistleblowers. The US government treated Chelsea Manning, who leaked war logs and diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks, savagely, with months of solitary confinement. Meanwhile, employers make a great play about the damage caused by whistleblowers, presenting themselves as the victims of a sort of attack.

In summary, powerful groups use five sets of processes to reduce concern about their own actions while drumming up concern about less significant actions by their challengers. What can activists do to counter these double standards?

The immediately obvious response is to raise the alarm about abuses and to put their own actions into perspective. The tables give examples for the cases of terrorism and leaking.

Table 1. Challenging government alarm about terrorism

Types of methods	Government techniques	Possible activist responses
Cover-up and exposure	Hide complicity in state terrorism; publicise evidence of non-state terrorism	Collect information about state terrorism and publicise it
Devaluation and validation	Devalue enemy terrorists; praise own troops	Use the label “state terrorism”
Interpretation	Explain the need for security measures and foreign interventions; lie or exaggerate the dangers and consequences of non-state terrorism	Expose justifications for state terrorism; propose alternative ways of responding to non-state terrorism
Official channels versus mobilisation	Refer critics to courts and appeal processes	Mobilise support to challenge state terrorism
Intimidation and resistance	Threaten and harass critics	Resist intimidation

Table 2. Challenging official alarm about leaking

Types of methods	Government techniques	Possible activist responses
Cover-up and exposure	Do not discuss leaking by high-level figures; publicise leaking by lower-level employees	Publicise high-level leaks, especially damaging ones
Devaluation and validation	Call low-level leakers traitors, snitches or malcontents; call high-level leakers “sources” or “officials”	Call low-level leakers “whistleblowers” or “public interest leakers”
Interpretation	Explain the need for official secrecy; lie about the damage caused by low-level leaks	Explain the damage caused by excessive official secrecy and the benefits of access to information
Official channels versus mobilisation	Claim that whistleblower laws protect those who speak out	Encourage whistleblowers to work with journalists and action groups rather than trusting in whistleblower protection
Intimidation and resistance	Search for low-level leakers and subject them to reprisals	Help employees develop skills in leaking anonymously

Accentuating the double standard

Double standards can be challenged in several ways. As illustrated in the tables, there are various tactics to reduce concern about minor matters and increase concern about the behaviour of more serious offenders. There is also another step that can be highly effective: reduce or eliminate the pretext for criticism.

In a rally, protesters might do some things like pushing police or yelling abuse that are minor in comparison to police brutality against them. Yet the government, police and media may make a great play about protester violence while drawing attention away from police violence. In this context, one reaction is for protesters to say, “we were justified in what we did.” That may be true, but it is not the point: even minor actions that can be portrayed as aggressive will be

used against protesters. A different strategy is to undermine suggestions of protester aggression, for example by using humour, formal dress, silence or other techniques to establish an image of non-aggressiveness. In this context, police violence will seem much greater, and is more likely to backfire on the police (Martin 2007, pp. 43–64).

In the first intifada, the Palestinians primarily used methods of resistance causing no physical harm to Israelis, such as boycotts, strikes and setting up their own education systems. Israeli troops used far more violence, but the limited Palestinian violence was enough for many Israelis to see the intifada as a violent uprising, thereby forming the wrong impression of Palestinian goals (Abrahms 2006). Some commentators therefore have recommended that it would be more effective for the Palestinian resistance to avoid stone-throwing (Dajani 1994). This would accentuate the double standard.

This same consideration applies to many other situations involving double standards. The weaker side may be *justified* in its actions, because the other side is doing terrible things, but be more *effective* by avoiding any behaviour that can be negatively portrayed.

Terrorism is another example. Many of those labelled “terrorists” are, in the eyes of others, freedom fighters. They feel justified in striking back against vicious repression or overwhelming oppression. Yet in doing so, the double standard is eroded.

It is useful to remember that many challengers to repressive systems have been called terrorists. For example, the US government in the 1950s and 1960s referred to the National Liberation Front (or “Vietcong”) in Vietnam as terrorists, while its own military operations led to millions of casualties. In South Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s, the South African government called the African National Congress terrorists. In the Philippines, there has been a long-running armed insurgency, and the government calls the insurgents terrorists. However, the Philippines military has been involved in numerous human rights abuses that might better warrant the label “terrorism.” Today, in the US, environmental activists are sometimes called “eco-terrorists” even when their actions cause no loss of life. What is striking in these and other examples is that the label “terrorist” is applied only to challengers to dominant groups, whose own actions might better warrant the label.

One option is to avoid any actions that can easily be labelled “terrorism.” Hijackings, bombings and suicide attacks, however justified, can readily be stigmatised. Even seemingly minor actions like throwing bricks through shop windows can be counterproductive via selective labelling. Choosing methods that are less easily stigmatised can be more effective.

In Serbia, during the resistance to ruler Slobodan Milošević, members of the group Otpor made fun of the regime’s attempts to label activists as terrorists, by presenting to a crowd a mild-mannered student activist and doing a parody of the regime’s description.

When to ignore double standards

In some cases, it may be better for activists to ignore double standards. When the US government acts against nuclear weapons development in India, that may be a good thing, even if there are thousands of US nuclear weapons. When the Australian government signed the Kyoto climate change protocol, this sent a valuable signal, even though Australian greenhouse gas emissions per capita were among the highest in the world.

Activists themselves are often accused of double standards, and sometimes are guilty. For example, a climate activist might fly to numerous international conferences or a public transport activist might sometimes drive a car. Very few individuals are able to live a blemish-free life. It is worth avoiding clashes between principles and practice when possible, but unrealistic expectations and rigid requirements should be questioned.

Implications

Activists need to be alert to the possibility of double standards and how to expose and challenge them. The first step is to be sceptical whenever a powerful group raises the alarm about someone or something else. The claims might be correct, and something unsavoury might be going on, but it is important to ask whether something more important is happening elsewhere but not receiving sufficient attention. For example, when a government raises the alarm about terrorism, it is worth examining the government's own role in terrorising populations.

The next step is to look at the methods used by the powerful group to increase concern about the problem. These include publicity, stigmatising others as dangerous or evil and using experts and formal investigations to give credibility to claims. In the case of nuclear weapons, there is much attention to governments of North Korea, Iraq and Iran that are assumed to be dangerous ("mad mullahs"; "axis of evil"), with international relations experts quoted in support.

While concern is ramped up about dangers from the "other," powerful groups seek to reduce outrage about their own actions. Standard methods are covering up their actions, labelling them as good, giving reasonable-sounding explanations and rewarding those who assist in this process.

Seeing through double standards, and recognising the methods used to maintain them, is hard enough. Even more difficult is trying to expose them, as a means of opposing abuses of power. Five sorts of methods are useful: exposing the actions; blaming those responsible; explaining why actions are wrong; mobilising support and not relying on official channels for support; and standing up to intimidation.

Finally, there is an important step: behaving in ways that accentuate double standards. If governments make accusations of terrorism, for example, then avoiding actions that can be labelled as dangerous can strengthen the movement. This often means using low-risk actions, such as boycotts and symbolic protests, that allow wide participation. The more people who join, especially when a cross section of the population participates, the harder it is to discredit them as terrorists.

Many people believe in fairness as a fundamental value (Haidt 2012; Moore 1978). Double standards represent a violation of the principle of fairness and therefore are a potential tool for activists. However, double standards may not be obvious, so there is work to be done to become aware of them, make them visible to others and to behave in ways that highlight them.

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