

"HIDING OUR FACES TO BE SEEN": STRATEGIES OF VISIBILITY OF ACTIVISM | E18-1408

DR ISABEL RUIZ-MORA AND DR JOAN RAMON RODRIGUEZ-AMAT

University of Malaga (Spain) isabelruiz@uma.es

Sheffield Hallam University (UK) mon.rodriguez@shu.ac.uk



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INTRODUCTION

The strategy of hiding behind a mask is a political statement against individualism and eventually against capitalism, too. It is a form of stating a selfless identity of collective being that links the secret and hidden identities of comic superheroes with Goya's "The third of May 1808" painting. In digital times of compulsive selfies and of biometric facial recognition software, and of facial-unlock personal communicative devices, the mask has emerged as a tool for protest as has been the "facial weaponisation suite" responding to regressive phrenological insinuations of linking homosexuality and facial structure. The colourful hats of Pussy Riot have also become a form of protests in themselves for freedom of expression and against repressive policies in Russia; or Guy Fawkes' mask, or the black suit headless man, have become symbols of technologically enabled protest associated to the global hacking organisation Anonymous.

This paper explores how this gesture of masking, hiding, and facial-covering is not only a liberation response to a form of oppression or a political statement against some unlawful action; but that it also works as a strategy of visibility.

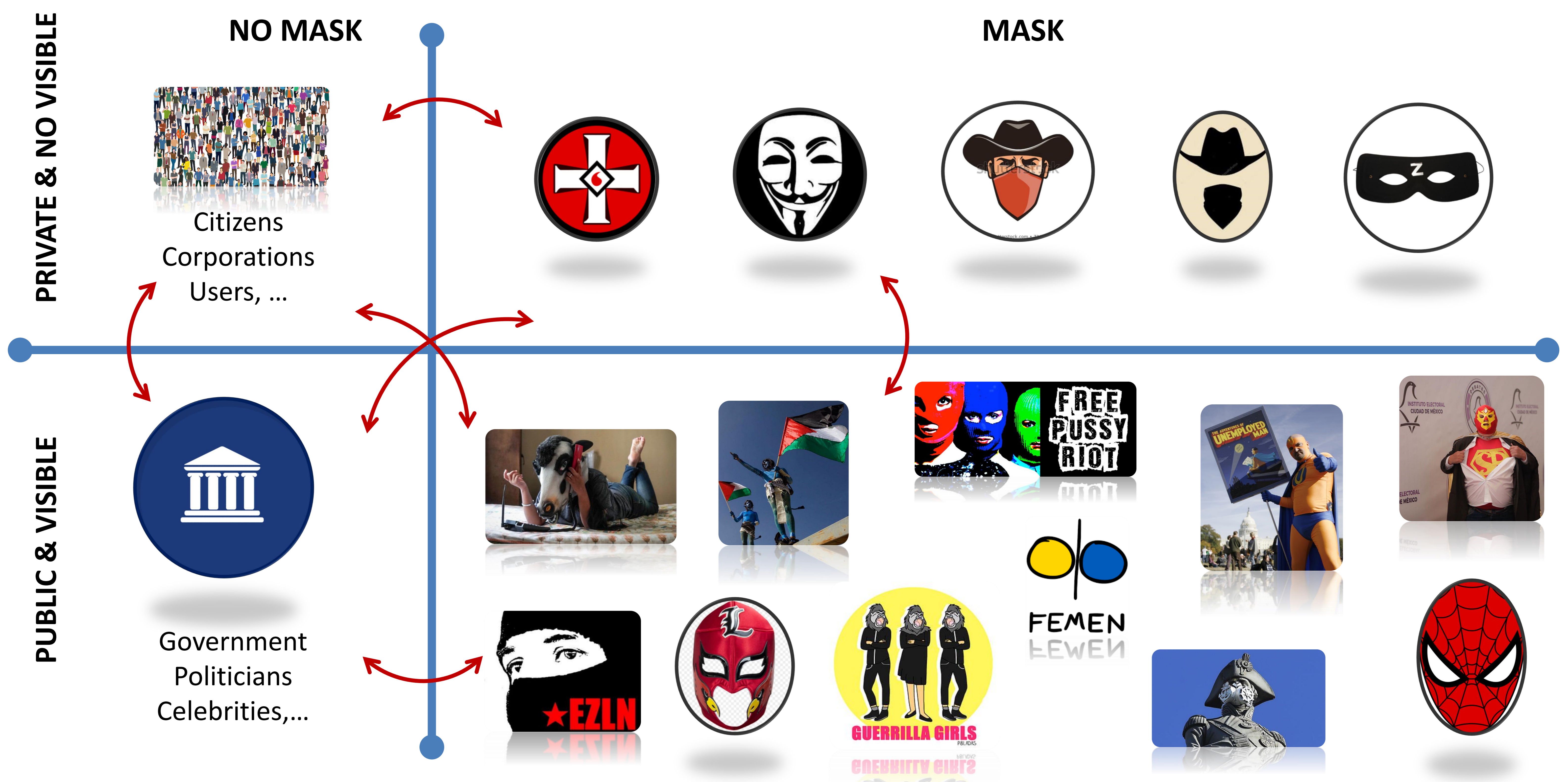
"ACTIVISM IS A FORM OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION" (CISZEK, 2017, p.702).

METHODS

Combining a series of quantitative and qualitative techniques for its analysis, this paper brings together recent forms of "masked activism" around the world.

We elaborate a typology that helps for the understanding of the strategies and actions happening in activism and social movements with the use of masks.

The question deriving from this principle would be then, to what extent those actions and strategies are ideologically grounded: can these strategies and actions differ from movements to movements? And in particular, what does the mask do, in each case? Is a mask more than a mask?



CONCLUSIONS

Protest Masks work strategically and simultaneously in three directions: Masks as everyone; Masks as anyone; Masks as theatrical.

MASKS AS EVERYONE: the mask is an anonymised expression for the people. The diversity and richness of the members of the community is brought together by the mask that calls for everyone as a single entity with a shared identity, with a message and with a will. **MASKS AS ANYONE:** the mask hides the individual within the collective, as a threatening monster amongst the group, the mask protects the activist from being isolated from the group it represents. Anyone could be, and the collective cannot be forbidden, arrested, or imprisoned for what one single masked unidentified individual does. **MASK AS THEATRICAL:** masks generate visibility. They help activists to be seen and recognised, increasing the outreach of their actions beyond the conflict borders, bringing third parties in as witnesses or mediators: ie. internationalising national issues.

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