

# 'Virtue signalling,' a slur meant to imply moral grandstanding that might not be all bad

September 29 2020, by Karen Stollznow

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Last month, on the centennial of the 19th amendment granting American women the vote, US President Donald Trump announced he would issue

a posthumous pardon for Susan B. Anthony. A suffragette, Anthony was convicted of voting illegally as a woman in 1872. The response was [mixed](#). Some applauded the president, others [accused him of virtue signaling](#).

The term has been leveled in recent times at celebrities, politicians, and brands. But what does "[virtue signaling](#)" mean?

The [Cambridge Dictionary](#) defines it as "an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media."

So, virtue signaling is an expression used to call out an individual, company, or organization—suggesting they are only backing an idea to look good in the eyes of others. The term implies that they don't truly believe in the cause they publicly support. They are acting out of bad faith, because they have an ulterior motive.

The abundance and popularity of similar terms in the social lexicon, like "[radical chic](#)," "bleeding hearts," "politically correct," "poseurs," or just plain "posers," suggests many value honesty and integrity. We're wary of fakes and possible bullshit.

However, like these labels, "virtue signaling" is highly pejorative: often wielded as a sneering insult by those on the right against progressives to dismiss their statements [as grandstanding](#). Some people accused of it may actually believe deeply in the cause they speak of, and back their words with actions.

## Looking good

A virtue is a trait or quality that is deemed to be moral or good. The word has earlier Christian connotations of [theological virtues](#), including

humility, kindness, and charity, in opposition to the "seven deadly sins."

In the case of Trump, infamous for his misogyny, the symbolic pardon of Anthony was construed by many as disingenuous. In a perceived attempt to garner female voters, he was displaying a virtue he didn't have.

Before an AFL game in June this year, meanwhile, Richmond Tigers and Collingwood Magpies players and umpires [knelt down on one knee](#) to show solidarity with Indigenous Australians. It was part of the worldwide [Black Lives Matter](#) movement against racism.

Many fans interpreted the gesture as an act of support, unity, and respect. Yet some online critics [rejected the display](#) as virtue signaling, telling the teams to "stick to football instead of politics."

Virtue signaling is often an accusation of "jumping on the bandwagon" of a popular cause. At the height of the #BLM protests, companies including McDonalds, Starbucks, and Nike were accused of "corporate virtue signaling"—or "[woke washing](#)"—for issuing empty statements of support.

In the US, even mask wearing has been [branded by some as virtue signaling](#)—signifying [to progressives a serious approach to public health but to the right an over-reaction](#) amid political culture wars. Indeed the term can sometimes say more about the person who wields it than its ostensible target.

## Radical chic

The origins of the term "virtue signaling" are disputed. British journalist James Bartholomew is often credited with coining the phrase in a [2015 article](#) in the conservative publication The Spectator. It is more likely he

popularized an existing term, as there are [older academic references](#).

The earlier expression "radical chic"—coined by [Tom Wolfe](#) in 1970 and celebrating its 50th anniversary—describes association with a fashionable crusade, but without genuine commitment to it. Where radical chic described the adoption of causes by celebrities and socialites, virtue signaling is different because anyone can do it.

The slur of virtue signaling relates to older well-regarded idioms: "do as I say, not as I do"; "all talk, no action"; "talk the talk"; and "walk the walk."

## Claiming the higher ground

"Virtue signaling" joins other right-wing slurs like [libtards](#), [bleeding hearts](#), [snowflakes](#), and [social justice warriors](#).

It is a cousin of accusations of [political correctness](#). In their apparent sermonizing and moral outrage against racism, sexual harassment, climate change and more, progressives are viewed as emotional and weak, or [accused of being sanctimonious](#).

Ironically, wielding the term sometimes serves as virtue signaling in itself. By calling out virtue signaling, the speaker publicly claims the moral high ground.

The term is often used as an [ad hominem attack](#)—a charge that dismisses an argument based on the character of the presenter, not the argument itself.

Does it matter if an individual or company signals virtue if it's in the name of a good cause? Indeed, it can be argued that signaling a commitment to specific values [helps moral discourse](#).

As the Trump pardon of Susan B. Anthony shows, the same action characterized as virtue signaling by one person can also effect positive change.

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