

Academic Labor**IJoC**

Getting to “Not Especially Strange”: Embracing Participatory-Advocacy Communication Research for Social Justice

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Growing wealth gaps between rich and poor, whites and people of color, and men and women during the latest recession underscore the need for more social justice research and activism (Dougherty, 2011; Jordan, 2011). Cuts to public education and attacks on academic labor also demand that we “reconstruct relationships between the universities and the multiple stakeholders in society” (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p. 98) to make them useful to non-elite students and community members. Conducting research while participating in struggles for social justice would enable this reconstruction.

Specifically, working for social justice through research involves what Carragee and Frey (in press) call “first-person-perspective studies,” where “researchers get in the stream [of human events] and affect it in significant ways” (p. 7; also see Frey & Carragee, 2007). This blend of research and activism connects three spheres of activity: participation, advocacy, and work for social justice. Embracing participatory-advocacy communication research for social justice as mainstream communication scholarship would improve the quality of communication research and may encourage more activism. By “embracing as mainstream,” I mean accepting such research as common and not requiring special justification—or “not especially strange,” as Seth Kahn, an advocate for such research, put it (personal communication, June 17, 2011; see also Kahn & Lee, 2011). Research integrating first-person advocacy for social justice will enter the mainstream of communication studies when graduate students learn about the family of methods that enable such work, when communication methods textbooks include such approaches, and when faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion committees reward such research. This essay synthesizes positions advanced by communication scholars working for social justice and makes a special appeal to critical communication scholars whose research becomes hypocritical, fruitless, and perhaps moribund when not informed by their participation in social justice movements. I conclude by suggesting ways to encourage more participatory-advocacy communication research for social justice.

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Why We Need Participatory-Advocacy Communication Research for Social Justice

This essay starts from the premise that although communication scholars are involved in both research and activism for social justice, more of each is needed. Research with a “social justice sensibility” seeks “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically and/or culturally underresourced” (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996, p. 110). A “social justice sensibility,” furthermore, “foregrounds ethical concerns,” “commits to structural analysis of ethical problems,” “adopts an activist orientation,” and seeks “solidarity” with others (Frey et al., p. 111).

Appeals for more research with a social justice sensibility come from scholars across the field, in specialties including applied communication, critical theory, cultural studies, organizational communication, and rhetoric (Frey & Carragee, 2007). Critical rhetorician Dana Cloud (2010) calls for collective action from communication scholars, though not necessarily through research: “If you are a critic of our system, the ideologies that sustain its horrors, putting ideas into action is the only conceivable thing to do” (p. 22). Communication scholars thus need to intervene as active agents who work to solve the significant social problems that we study. In this way, we can integrate participation (i.e., first-person involvement), advocacy, and social justice through our research and activism.

My call for mainstream communication research connecting participation and advocacy for social justice also springs from my work as an activist in the Seattle-based labor union the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech) and from my experience as a graduate student in communication in the early 2000s. As a budding critical communication scholar informed by Marxism but lacking awareness of established methods to connect activism and research, I deemphasized my activism in my post hoc writings about the significance of WashTech’s struggle for secure, fairly compensated jobs (Rodino-Colocino, 2006, 2007, 2008). By placing my advocacy in the background, I missed opportunities to engage with literature on communication and activism. As I discuss below, mainstreaming methodologies that enable participation in the struggles we study may improve the quality of research generated collaboratively by scholars and activists, and encourage more scholars to work for social justice. Scholars have recently begun to position themselves as participants in movements for social justice when designing their research (Lawrence R. Frey, personal communication, June 7, 2011). The time seems ripe, then, for embracing communication research involving participation in and advocacy for social justice as “not especially strange.”

The disconnect between ideas and action produces dissonance that is particularly egregious for critical communication scholars. That divide renders Marxist critical communication research useless, given, for example, that the telos of Marxism is to overturn capitalism because of the injustice it begets. In the concluding chapter of an anthology on Marxism’s relevance to communication, scholar and media reform activist Steve Macek (2006) argues that despite the abundance of Marxist “critical” communication research, “much of that discursive output has willfully ignored one of Marxism’s cardinal insights: namely, the need for intellectuals to actively participate in and learn from real political struggles” (p. 218). Macek contends that Marx’s aphorism “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx, 1983, p. 158) was meant to underscore the relationship between

understanding material reality and taking action to radically change it. Knowledge of capitalism's history, logic, and signal contradictions should inform radical action.

The converse, however, also is true: "It is impossible to develop such an understanding without becoming actively involved in movements for radical change" (Macek, p. 218). For Macek and others (e.g., Hartnett, 2010), participation in activism for social justice illuminates inequities and atrocities produced by capitalism, racism, sexism, and other forms of domination. Consequently, critical communication studies that draw on critical race, feminist, political-economic, and queer theories but are not informed by scholars' participation in struggles against oppression are in vain, in the double sense of the word: they are fruitless and excessively concerned with appearance (i.e., appearing significant rather than effecting significant change). It is imperative, then, that critical communication scholars participate in "concrete struggles for social justice" in ways that "entail immersion in the life of a movement" (Macek, pp. 219, 238).

Such immersion, as Macek (2006) argues, would not only improve the quality of communication research but also enable more activism by scholars. As Tony Palmeri (2006), a rhetoric professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh who has produced progressive alternative media, explains, "Substantial amounts of social justice work do not get accomplished because many people cannot reasonably be expected to pursue such work if it does not conform with the rewards available on their respective campuses" (p. 149). I hope readers will consider rewarding such work by taking steps such as the ones discussed in this essay. Those who are unconvinced of the value of this work should consider the potency of scholarship that integrates first-person advocacy for social justice.

The Family of Participatory-Advocacy Methods for Social Justice

A growing body of scholarly work points to the intellectual and political fruitfulness of immersion in activism for social justice. Robert McChesney, founder of the Free Press, is among the best-known scholars producing critical communication studies of political economy. Working with other activists and scholars, McChesney has organized protests against rules that would have expanded large corporations' command of the airwaves by enabling further consolidation of ownership (Macek, 2006; McChesney, 2007). The two volumes of *Communication Activism* (Frey & Carragee, 2007) provide additional examples of scholar-activist collaborations from a range of perspectives.¹ The lead chapter of the first volume (Jovanovic, Steger, Symonds, & Nelson, 2007), for example, details a project that community members and University of North Carolina-Greensboro communication scholars undertook to facilitate public dialogue about a November 3, 1979 domestic racist terrorist attack in Greensboro that the city never came to terms with, which underlies racial relations there. Another chapter discusses the documentary that John McHale made as a doctoral student and circulated with the help of anti-death penalty movement members, which led to the exoneration of an innocent man (McHale, 2007). By involving social movements and community programs to address issues of media ownership, public dialogue, and the death penalty, these projects demonstrate the unity of communication scholars' labor across the three spheres or "streams" of researcher participation, advocacy, and social justice (Carragee & Frey, in press).

¹ See also the third volume of *Communication and Activism* (Frey & Carragee, in press).

Other scholars also have conducted first-person advocacy for social justice research (see, e.g., Kahn & Lee, 2011; Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Swartz, 2006). An exemplar is Dorothy Kidd and Eloise Lee's (2011) work with Media Alliance, an advocacy organization that seeks "a more just, accountable, and diverse media system" by enabling "historically marginalized communities" (p. 14), including low-income areas and communities of color, to develop communications capacities (i.e., access to and skill in the latest communication technologies).² Kidd, associate professor of communication studies at the University of San Francisco, and Lee, program director at the Oakland-based Media Alliance, describe their partnership as "the latest in a series of academic-activist research collaborations" (p. 11). One key difference between that type of research and third-person-perspective, "objective" research, Lee argues, is the role of the researcher: in their work "the researcher is less of an observer, and more of a participant—a kind of participant who is invested in the project" (p. 18).

This distinction between participant and observer points to important epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches that enable fruitful collaborations between scholars and activists. Kidd and Lee (2011) draw on the "family of approaches" that eschews "supposedly 'objective'" approaches and takes up a "liberationist practice aiming at redressing imbalances of power" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 7). Some scholars who collaborate with activists to conduct research for social justice have described their work as "action research (AR)," a polyglot "family" of methods that includes participatory research and participatory action research, or P(A)R (Swantz, 2008). P(A)R methodology springs from Paulo Freire's (1970) work, which offered a "critical pedagogy" based on a "problem-posing" model that foregrounded dialogue with poor, illiterate Latin American adult students as an alternative to the prevailing top-down, hypodermic "banking model," wherein powerful teachers "deposit" knowledge into the minds of ignorant students. Freire's goal was to fully engage students in a transformative, liberating, and humanizing process of learning by working "with" (and "in solidarity with") students. His teaching methods thus promoted social justice through democratic means. Following Freire, scholars have sought to achieve social justice through similar means in adult education, health sciences, medical anthropology, and community and agricultural development (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Hall, 1991, 2005; Hall & Lucio-Villegas, 2011; Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992).

Others view P(A)R and AR as springing from distinct veins: P(A)R from Freire's critical pedagogy, and AR from Kurt Lewin's social-scientific work of the 1940s and 1950s (Brown & Tandon, 1983). From such a perspective, P(A)R seeks collaboration to promote social justice, whereas AR allegedly is value-neutral but encourages collaboration between scholars and research participants. However, since all the chapters in Reason and Bradbury's *Handbook of Action Research* (2008) reflect social justice aims, flexible vocabulary for these methods seems appropriate. A recent issue of the *International Journal of Communication* underscores the value of "eclectic pluralism" (Chambers, 2008, pp. 311–312) in applying participatory methods and their labels, describing work in this methodological vein as "engaged research," "research that matters," and "Freirian-influenced collaborative research" (Milan, 2010, p. 856; Ryan, Salas-Wright, Anastario, & Cámara Cervera, 2010, p. 846). In addition, some argue for the suitability of

² See <http://www.media-alliance.org>

"advocacy" rather than "participatory" methods (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1993). Therefore, to balance flexibility and specificity, it is preferable to discuss the *family* of participatory-advocacy methods for social justice.

Rewarding Participatory-Advocacy Communication Research for Social Justice

One barrier to conducting this type of research is the distance between scholar and activist. For many scholars, detachment from one's "object of study" is the hallmark of academic research. Frey and others attribute the persistence of scholarly detachment in part to the privileging of theory as the telos of academic research, "theory" being derived from the Greek word *theoria*, meaning "spectatorship," "contemplation," and "a looking at" (Carragee & Frey, in press, pp. 2–3; Frey, 2009, p. 210; Frey et al., 1996). Jeff Schmidt (2000) suggests that by its nature, academic training purposefully discourages scholars from engaging in activism, especially around questions related to their discipline. For these reasons, academics are "comfortable 'talking about thinking about theorizing about maybe doing something,'" as Ted Coopman, whose research and activism has supported the micro radio movement, has put it (personal communication, June 8, 2011; see also Coopman, 2007, 2011).

From such a perspective, critical communication scholars may reconstruct the disconnect between scholarship and activism even as they conduct research for activist organizations. William Hoynes (2005), who with David Croteau has conducted important media-monitoring work for FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), argues for, rather than against, distance between activists and scholars:

Scholars face a different set of challenges when we lend the cultural authority of the academy to our activist partners. We risk being labeled "advocacy academics." Because the legitimacy of scholarly knowledge remains at least partially rooted in a definition of objectivity that emphasizes detachment from the object of study, scholars who work with social movements run the risk of being dismissed as politically motivated partisans. (p. 108)

Although Hoynes suggests that collaborating with activists may improve scholarship, he also cautions against blurring the boundary between scholar and activist to avoid the delegitimizing label of "advocacy academic."

The problem with Hoynes's position is that rejecting the role of participatory advocate could hamstring would-be scholar-activists. Viewing activism as tainted with bias that removes the cultural authority of academics may deter those who want to make a difference through research. Academics who want to put ideas into action, in general and specifically for social justice, thus need to rethink the taken-for-granted association of objectivity with cultural authority. Perhaps scholars need to argue more effectively for the epistemological validity, and therefore the authority, of knowledge gleaned from venturing beyond participant-observation into participant-advocacy for social justice.

What steps can we take to enhance credibility for such work? I posed this question to several communication scholars who use the family of participatory-advocacy methods for social justice in their

research. Seth Kahn, coeditor (with Jonghwa Lee) of *Activism and Rhetoric* (2011), recognizes that “the big paradigmatic arguments are hard to win,” and therefore “maybe the most important way to win legitimacy for [action research] is to get practitioners in positions where we can advocate among our colleagues” (personal communication, June 17, 2011). To “win legitimacy” for such research, Kahn suggests placing practitioners in influential positions, including editorial boards, institutional review boards, and tenure and review committees. People working in these capacities, Kahn argues, have authority to “represent it as not especially strange.”

Another vehicle for getting to “not especially strange” involves publicizing participatory-advocacy research for social justice in printed forums, from basic methods textbooks to academic journals. Denzin and Lincoln’s qualitative volumes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011) include chapters on such work, and Reason and Bradbury (2008) focus on it, but communication and media methods textbooks generally neglect the participatory-advocacy family of methods (e.g., Berger, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Merrigan & Huston, 2008; Stokes, 2003). One exception is the textbook by Hearn, Tacchi, Foth, and Lennie (2009), which discusses such approaches in new media studies; however, as community media activist and college instructor Doug Schuler points out in the book’s foreword, the text stands outside mainstream communication research. Thus, as suggested by Lana Rakow, who collaborated with community members in North Dakota to create the Community Connect network of public physical, virtual, and print spaces for communication, “More publications, including more textbooks, of examples and of discussion of the methods and the literature, would help make the methods more widely known and acceptable” (personal communication, June 7, 2011; see also Rakow & Nastasia, 2011). Lawrence Frey calls on journal editors to support first-person research for social justice: “Imagine if every journal, just for one issue, called for advocacy research, there would be a ton of it done” (personal communication, June 7, 2011).

An additional discipline-level step to win legitimacy for participatory-advocacy research for social justice would be to reward such work through faculty hiring, promotion, and merit awards. Frey explains the usefulness of such tactics by arguing that “professors are like worker bees; if you tell us the criteria to be successful, we will meet them” (personal communication, June 7, 2011). David Silver, who uses participatory-type approaches to help libraries “explore and exercise freedom, justice, democracy, and community” (the September Project), proposes that communication associations give an annual award for the best participatory-advocacy research project for social justice.³ He also suggests including criteria related to participatory-advocacy communication research for social justice in academic job advertisements, because job advertisements provide opportunities for flexible language that job contracts cannot.

Building solidarity among scholars engaged in participatory-advocacy research for social justice within and beyond communication can also promote its acceptance. As Tony Palmeri explains:

³ See <http://theseptemberproject.org/connecting-the-world-one-library-at-a-time>

We definitely need to develop an ethic of solidarity among activist scholars. Currently, too many of us are working in isolated conditions without the support network necessary to have the confidence to do and protection for this kind of work. (personal communication, June 7, 2011)

Palmeri writes from the experience of supporting a student-run alternative newspaper and watching it fold under structural impediments, including the lack of institutional support (i.e., funds and credit; Palmeri, 2006). His experience suggests that building campus-wide, intra- and interdisciplinary support is key. The Free Press's National Conference for Media Reform enables networking between scholars and activists, as does the academic association Union for Democratic Communications (UDC), whose express purpose is to make communication more democratic in the interest of social justice.⁴ Informal support within campuses and departments as well as outside academia might offer additional forms of sustenance.

Conclusion

I have argued that communication scholars should participate in and advocate for social justice by working with others to solve problems characterized by a lopsided distribution of resources and rights. Having also shown that embracing such research as mainstream is a timely challenge, I have suggested ways to support such work.

I want to conclude by calling on critical communication scholars to foreground participatory-advocacy research for social justice as a crucial next step in the field. Embracing such a future would infuse our research with usefulness that reaches beyond the academy to extend to nonelite stakeholders. Our journals, for example, could become forums for discussing best practices in designing transformative, democratizing political strategies and for debating how best to win short-term political reforms while working to end exploitative systems of capitalism, racism, misogyny, and heteronormativity. In some ways, my call builds on Tony Bennett's proposal to "put policy into cultural studies" (1992).⁵ By this Bennett means that cultural studies scholars should consider "culture" as more than a set of practices and symbols (a "whole way of life") observable in texts and groups of people. Instead, we should view culture as an "instrument of government" in the Foucauldian sense: as a means to exert official state power and perhaps, by extension, to administer specific forms of domination (domination of the working class under capitalism, of women under patriarchy, etc.). Bennett draws on earlier, forgotten definitions of culture to make his point.

Thus, borrowing from Bennett's argument for a fuller genealogy of culture, I argue that our genealogy of "criticism" should include Marx's famous provocation to accomplish the "*ruthless criticism of*

⁴ For information about the Free Press media reform conference, see <http://conference.freepress.net/>. For more about the UDC, see <http://www.democraticcommunications.net>. I have been a member of the UDC since 2006 and a Steering Committee member since 2007.

⁵ Cultural studies is a branch of critical communication scholarship, although some may see them as indistinguishable.

all that exists" (Shirmacher, 1997, p. 87). More to the point, our genealogy should include the rest of Marx's exhortation, which is less widely referenced: "ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be." If Marx's "ruthless criticism" elicits conflict, it does so because it participates in struggles for social justice—that is, it involves action. I call on critical communication scholars to put action into criticism.

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