

## **Out of the Tower and Into the Field: Fieldwork as Public Scholarship in the Face of Social Injustice**

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I argue for a new model of public scholarship in the field of communication—one that defines public-ness not in terms of publicity but in terms of the public good. Synthesizing work on public scholarship in communication and sociology with participatory action research frameworks, I narrate my experiences of fieldwork in the U.S. transgender rights movement. In doing so, I demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of fieldwork for both scholars and the publics served by social justice organizations. I further discuss the depths of public engagement permitted and achieved via fieldwork relative to publicity-centered scholarship. Finally, I address the ideal role of public engagement as scholars: contributing specialized skills and knowledge toward the mitigation of social problems. Ultimately, I argue, if a scholar publicly engages in issues of social justice without orienting their public work toward alleviating injustice, then they are actively sustaining the systems of oppression they benefit from researching.

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On October 21, 2018, I was about two-thirds of the way through a seven-month stint of ethnographic fieldwork at the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in Washington, DC. Over the course of my fieldwork I had observed—and participated in—activities at NCTE responding to various assaults on transgender people’s civil rights and basic ability to live their daily lives. These included Donald Trump’s ban on transgender service in the U.S. armed forces, the administration’s leaked plans to remove protections for transgender health-care access under Rule 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, the appointment of antitransgender judges to federal courts, crises over the State Department revoking transgender citizens’ passports, and the death of transgender asylum seekers in detention camps at the U.S.–Mexico border, among many other national and local crises. October 21 saw perhaps the furthest reaching acts of discrimination and disenfranchisement, though: *The New York Times* leaked a memo containing the administration’s plans to define gender legally as “a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth” (para. 1)—to, as *The Times* headline put it, “define transgender out of existence” (Green, Benner, & Pear, 2018).

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The day was a flurry of activity: drafting a press release, organizing press calls, interviews with journalists, coalition meetings, putting together a rally outside the White House for the next day, and so on. From these activities, perhaps most notably, launched the Won't Be Erased campaign, a mix of media activism and grassroots public rallies organized by NCTE, which continues to shape the discourse of transgender resistance in the U.S. and abroad today. I was exhausted, but probably less so than NCTE's staff. I, after all, had time to scroll through social media and become annoyed at my fellow academics. My time lines were full of concerned and activated trans people fighting for their most basic rights alongside cisgender (i.e., nontransgender) university faculty who, to quote my outraged Facebook post from the day, "did one transgender-related study of little to no relevance to the issue currently in the news cycle nonetheless using this news cycle as a hook to increase attention to their own work—and not to fighting back."

The post, perhaps unsurprisingly, prompted a bit of controversy. Well, more specifically, it bristled a few cisgender academics; the comments section and my direct messages were filled with agreement from other trans scholars. As one senior scholar replied to my comment that "talking about trans issues would be great if they were talking about what was going on and taking a stand instead of just plugging their pub[lication]": "Alas, such is the incentive structure and reward machinery of the academy. . . . Our system incentivizes that kind of behavior." Though this academic agreed with my point and was sympathetic to my frustrations, I was distressed by this idea. As I said in a reply, "It's hard not to feel like it's exploitative. No one would see Hurricane Maria in the news and say, 'hey, look at this research I did on non-hurricane-related Puerto Rico things that in no way speaks to or helps the people suffering there,' and I don't understand why people don't feel like it's the same when it's focused on marginalized social identities." Maybe this senior scholar was right, but if so, then the field needs to change its idea of what public scholarship is.

As I sat down to write this article, October 21 kept running through my mind. I kept revisiting the disappointment in and frustration with my academic colleagues that coursed through me that day. It encompassed, I realized in reflection, many of my fundamental problems with how communication scholars—among scholars in other fields, I'm sure—conceive of "public scholarship." This was an extreme example and one of a very specific kind, but the dynamics at play apply more broadly. Even in less dire crises and even when the publicity-seeking is not centered around plugging one's publications, academics are all too comfortable considering their own visibility and/or the visibility of their work as "public scholarship," regardless of how useful (or useless) their work is to addressing public issues.

When academics discuss "public scholarship" they usually mean one of two things, depending on their age and/or technical competencies. They are typically referring to either publication in popular media outlets (ranging from *The New York Times* to the *Monkey Cage* to personal blogs) or maintaining an active social media presence (typically with more than 1,000 followers). Though these activities form the core of much public scholarship—and the emergence of social media and their attendant network logics has afforded scholars greater public visibility—engagement with the public need not entail publicity. Indeed, myriad opportunities for public engagement as a scholar exist, including, but not limited to, public lectures, exhibitions, Web-hosted resources, public reports, community partnerships, and artistic and cultural productions. Some of these entail more publicity than others, and likewise some of these entail more public good than others. But while we are used to talking about scholarship's degrees of public-ness on the axis of publicity, we are not used to talking about it on the axis of public good.

This article aims to address that by focusing on one underconsidered means of public engagement in the discipline of communication: fieldwork conducted with social justice organizations. Synthesizing recent work on public scholarship in the field of communication by Silvio Waisbord (2019) with Michael Burawoy's (e.g., 2004, 2005a, 2005b) classic work on public sociology, as well as drawing on participatory action research (PAR) frameworks (e.g., B. L. Hall, 1992; Wadsworth, 2005; Whyte, 1989), I narrate my own experiences of fieldwork in the U.S. transgender rights movement. In doing so, I demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of fieldwork for both scholars and the publics served by social justice organizations. I further discuss the depths of public engagement permitted and achieved via fieldwork relative to popular publication and social media posting. Finally, I address the ideal role of public engagement as scholars: contributing our specialized skills and knowledge toward the mitigation of social problems. Ultimately, I argue, if a scholar publicly engages in issues of social justice without orienting their public work toward alleviating injustice, then they are actively sustaining the systems of oppression they benefit from researching.

### **Public Scholarship as Publicity**

Perhaps the most widely held understanding of public scholarship is actually of public intellectualism. That is, when most people—including most academics—think of public scholarship, they think of the media-centered careers of well-known academics like Manuel Castells, Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Krugman, Steven Pinker, and other (usually White, cisgender, straight, and male) scholar-celebrities from elite universities. And public intellectualism is certainly a form of public scholarship, particularly as practiced by some. Some public intellectuals focus(ed) their media-based work on public education, such as Stuart Hall, who among other feats of incredible media visibility presented the television series *Redemption Song* (1991) on BBC2, and Melissa Harris-Perry, who hosted the *Melissa Harris-Perry* show on MSNBC from 2012 to 2016. Other public intellectuals provide(d) cultural criticism, such as Susan Sontag, who wrote essays on art and culture in many popular publications, and Slavoj Žižek, whose opinions on everything from cinema to politics seem unavoidable no matter how hard one tries. But public intellectualism is not the totality—nor even the majority—of public scholarship (Waisbord, 2019).

Nonetheless, the prominence of public intellectualism has definitely, to a certain extent, remade public scholarship in its image. As commonly practiced, public scholarship is less often oriented toward public education (Gayatri Spivak comes to mind as an exception) or toward cultural criticism (Andrea Long Chu is a salient example); rather, it is oriented toward self-promotion and self-branding (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Waisbord, 2019). To be a public scholar is, for many, to be a scholar who is public, who has publicity; it is to be a scholar whose work is, in the most literal sense, self-centered. As Silvio Waisbord (2019, forthcoming) summarizes, public scholarship is

driven by self-promotion—personal interest in boosting one's reputation. It is a narcissistic act to build and maintain public recognition, a rather popular and sought-after commodity at a time of the "promotional intellectual" (Williams, 2018). Building a personal, public brand is common and even encouraged by universities, publishers, friends, and peer pressure. Academics are certainly not immune to the politics of branding in the promotional society (Marwick, 2013).

Indeed, there has been much-deserved hand-wringing over how the neoliberalization of the university has centered the scholar-as-brand as the ideal academic laborer (e.g., Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Duffy & Pooley, 2017). Tools meant to increase the public availability of scholarship, like Academia.edu, are inextricably tied to data-driven marketing and venture capital business models that, in the words of Brooke Duffy and Jeff Pooley (2017), “both amplify and accelerate the logic of self-branding among scholars” (p. 2). Initiatives like The Conversation—which works much like a wire service to place articles by academics (for which, it should not surprise you, they are not paid) in mass media outlets across the world—present similar problems to those presented by opinion-editorial articles published in leading newspapers and news blogs—namely, a reliance on metrics to indicate the value of a scholar’s public writing (e.g., Anderson, 2011). Much like followers, likes, and retweets on Twitter, these quantified distribution and reception assessments form a secondary (to citation counts), but nonetheless relied-upon index of a scholar’s public-ness. Universities promote highly visible scholars because of the “value” of their personal brand, which in turn serves as an extension of and boon to the school’s own brand (Schor, as cited in Burawoy et al., 2004; Waisbord, 2019).

Already in 2011, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Alexandra Juhasz reflected with concern on a feminist blogging panel they had attended at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference. The panel, which primarily consisted of graduate students and early career scholars, focused on the value of an “on-line presence” for establishing a “self-brand” (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1771). As Juhasz expressed, the focus of the panel made her uneasy because, whereas blogging could act as a means of unifying around feminist struggle, “the concepts of ‘self-branding’ and ‘self-promotion’ served to shatter any sense of cohesive community or commitment” (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011, p. 1769). The public scholarship performed by blogging thus became acts of personal publicity rooted in the “self-branding ethos” (Duffy & Pooley, 2017, p. 2) rather than acts of scholarship aimed at benefiting some public.

Lest there be any confusion, my intention is not to disparage the social media practices, popular press publications, or any other acts of visibility seeking among communication scholars. I am not advancing, for example, the hard-to-tell-if-he-was-joking-but-yikes-I-hope-so “Kardashian Index” proposed by genomicist Neil Hall (2014, para. 1), which he describes as “a measure of discrepancy between a scientist’s social media profile and publication record based on the direct comparison of numbers of citations and Twitter followers.” Whereas Hall (2014, para. 1) contends “there is a danger that this form of communication [social media] is gaining too high a value and that we are losing sight of key metrics of scientific value, such as citation indices” (cue eye roll), my critique is more narrow (and less sexist): scholars often view visibility—via both mass and social media—as the essence of engaging in public scholarship. Yet, as I argue in the following section, this view is predicated on a limited perspective on “public-ness” and a problematic relationship to the (relevant) public(s).

### **Beyond Publicity: Public Scholarship as Scholarship in the Public Interest**

My critiques of publicity-centered public scholarship are hardly novel, even within the field of communication. Already Waisbord (2019, forthcoming) has argued that centering public scholarship around publicity (in his critique, specifically as the idea of public intellectualism) produces a number of “analytical and normative problems.” Perhaps most obviously, it depends upon an outdated understanding of the public

sphere as the mass mediated arena of verbal and oratorical communications. Accordingly, to be public is to be published in the pages of national newspapers or major periodicals, or to appear as a commenter on broadcast news or in a documentary. Beyond that, however, publicity-centered public scholarship entails hierarchical relations between elite academic communicators with superior knowledge and the ignorant mass public to whom they gift their expertise and opinions. It is, in Waisbord's (2019, forthcoming) words, "premised on an individual-centered, hierarchical model of knowledge production and dissemination." Yet even if we expand this definition to account for the introduction of digital—and especially social—media to the (increasingly networked) public sphere, we are still left with an understanding of public scholarship that is inextricably linked to both mediated presence and to individual-centered knowledge dissemination.

As scholars of communication, we are often used to and comfortable with being at the forefront of communication technologies. We adopt early and have deep knowledges of how our tools of communication function. Moreover, we understand—and indeed celebrate—the importance of public communication. As such, it makes sense for our conceptualization of public scholarship to center communication, which we tend to see as a normative good. But the field of sociology has a longer history of considering the consequences of their public work than our field does. They have worked out—in theory, if not in practice—important issues pertaining to and arising from public scholarship, which we have not. They attend more closely to relationships of dominance and hierarchy and they have more thoroughly conceptualized the publics their work addresses. Most significantly, however, lacking our disciplinary biases toward media and communication, they have conceptualized public scholarship beyond publicity. Indeed, as Michael Burawoy (Burawoy et al., 2004, p. 2014) writes of public scholarship in sociology,

we should not simply think of writing op-ed pieces for *The New York Times* with its invisible, thin, passive, and national public, but of carrying sociology into the trenches of civil society, where publics are more visible, thick, active, and local, or where indeed publics have yet to be constituted. (p. 2014)

Burawoy's model of "public sociology" is now classic. In fact, it enjoys acceptance as a fundamental core of the sociological enterprise and resonance across subdisciplines to a degree no theory or practice in communication even approaches. (Our closest analog would be the now-classic debate over critical versus administrative research; Melody & Mansell, 1983.) Since its introduction in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2004,<sup>2</sup> Burawoy's model of public sociology has blossomed into its own subfield represented by more than a dozen monographs and edited volumes and hundreds of journal articles. At the core of this model is a distinction between public sociology and three other "types" of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Burawoy "invented" public sociology, or even coined the term. In fact, the term was introduced (by all accounts) by Herbert Gans (1989) in his presidential address to the ASA in 1988. Moreover, Aldon Morris (2017) has compellingly argued that W.E.B. Dubois, beyond forming the first "scientific" sociology department at Atlanta University, first practiced what we might consider public sociology in applying his research to the liberation and empowerment of Black Americans. However, public sociology as specifically constructed and advocated by Burawoy has taken root as the organizing concept of contemporary public sociological practice, even among those who position their work in opposition to Burawoy's ideals.

sociology: professional sociology, policy sociology, and critical sociology. Drawing on Bourdieusian field theory, Burawoy envisions two axes generating a two-by-two matrix. On the one axis is audience—either academic or “extra-academic” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1607). On the other axis is forms of knowledge—either instrumental or reflexive. Whereas public sociology sits at the intersection of reflexive knowledge and extra-academic audiences, professional sociology sits at the intersection of instrumental knowledge and academic audiences, while policy sociology sits at the intersection of instrumental knowledge and extra-academic audiences, and critical sociology sits at the intersection of reflexive knowledge and academic audiences. (To further analogize the critical versus administrative debate in our own field, critical research would be professional sociology and administrative research would be policy sociology.)

As with all typologies, this four-fold model is necessarily flawed. What it offers, though, is a way of thinking through how public scholarship distinguishes itself from other forms of scholarship. Rather than being accountable to professional peers or to clients or patrons, as other forms of scholarship are, public scholarship is accountable to designated publics. Rather than legitimating itself through scientific norms, administrative effectiveness, or ideological purity, public scholarship is legitimated by its public relevance.

For our purposes, Burawoy’s (e.g., 2004, 2009, 2016) distinctions within public sociology are where he is most helpful. Specifically, Burawoy distinguishes between what he calls “traditional” public sociology and “organic” or “grassroots” public sociology. (I will retain his terminology here for the sake of fidelity, though I find his choice in labels somewhat distracting and inaccurate.) “Traditional” public sociology is much like the publicity-centered public scholarship within communication that I have already critiqued, though it is somewhat broader, including columns in national newspapers, blogging, and social media presence, as well as academic books that reach large nonacademic audiences—what we might consider a “cross-over” book; recent examples of relevance to our field might include Safiya Noble’s (2018) *Algorithms of Oppression*, Virginia Eubanks’ (2017) *Automating Inequality*, and Zeynep Tufekci’s (2017) *Twitter and Tear Gas*. Though these forms of scholarship are public in that they speak to, if not form, common publics, they also do so “at arm’s length” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1607). “Organic” or “grassroots” public sociology, on the other hand, “engages the particularistic interests of more circumscribed publics—neighborhood groups, communities of faith, labor organizations, and so on” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1608) through “an unmediated face-to-face relation of sociologists with publics” (Burawoy, 2016, p. 390). As Burawoy (2016) argues, “This subterranean form of public sociology is often more effective and longer lasting” (p. 390), particularly because it speaks to more active publics, both mainstream and counter. “What headway can a sociology critical of the market make in a public sphere colonized by powerful market forces?” he asks (Burawoy, 2016, p. 390). And in answer to his own question, but years before he posed it, he answers, “We need to pluralize and democratize the very notion of public sociology . . . to include more than those few who have access to national media” (Burawoy et al., 2004, p. 127).

Another primary conflict within public scholarship Burawoy attends to—as indicated in that final quotation above—is those of power relations, both among academics and between academics and publics. Regarding the former, “organic” public sociology—like most “organic” public scholarship—has primarily been the purview of the marginalized—for example, feminist scholars, queer scholars, scholars of color, postcolonial scholars (Burawoy, 2016). As he writes, “Organic public sociologists are more modest and less visible than the traditional public sociologist. Their relations to publics—narrower but thicker and more

active—are unmediated rather than mediated, not resting on a vast accumulation of academic capital” (Burawoy, 2009, p. 452). Marginalized scholars generally lack the vast accumulation of academic capital that enables “traditional” public scholarship, that enables mediated visibility, that enables thin and passive relations to publics.

This then brings us to the second set of power relations Burawoy addresses: those between academics and publics. Public scholarship necessarily entails “two-way influence” (Burawoy et al., 2004, p. 125). Contra those who view publicity as constitutive of public-ness, public scholarship demands that publics influence scholars as well as scholars influence publics. Public scholars must be accountable to their publics, engaging in dialogue and in relationships of consensus (Burawoy, 2009; Burawoy et al., 2004). None of this is achievable in a model of public scholarship that centers on the publicity of the individual academic.

What, then, is public scholarship? Or rather, what ought it be? Waisbord (2019, forthcoming) defines public scholarship vaguely as “the engagement of scholars with nonacademic publics.” While this is certainly true, it is true in a dictionary-like manner. Public scholarship needs to be more than just engagement with nonacademic publics. It needs to be engagement rooted unambiguously in the public good. Synthesizing arguments made by both Waisbord and Burawoy, I contend public scholarship demands scholars employ their “personal skills and competencies” to “do good with and for others” (Waisbord, 2019, forthcoming), to “bolster the organs of civil society” (Burawoy, 2005a, p. 319) and “defend the interests of humanity” (Burawoy, 2005b, p. 24), ultimately “making societies more humane, egalitarian, democratic, tolerant, rational, other-oriented, and emphatic” (Waisbord, 2019, forthcoming). The essence of public scholarship is contributing one’s specialized skills and knowledge toward the mitigation of the social problems facing relevant publics.

### **Participatory Action Research and Fieldwork**

To practice public scholarship as I have advocated for it entails new relations between researchers and publics. To say that one’s work helps fix a problem is not enough. Rather, the work must be done in participation with the relevant publics. It is quite easy for scholars to think about engaging with publics in what we might call a “professional expert” model (Simonson & Bushaw, 1993; Whyte, 1989). In this model, scholars come into a space—or perhaps more often are brought into a space—to act as consultants—to collect data rigorously, analyze it scientifically, and to present results in an accessible way to the client organization or host group. Scholars provide empirical answers to administrative questions so that their information can be used to make decisions. It is far more difficult, however, for scholars to think about engaging with publics as participants—both because it muddies the idealized “neutral” scientific observer and because it requires a flattening of the relationships between the researcher and the researched.

PAR and its many variants (participatory research, action research, community-based participatory research, etc.) offer tools to think through the ideal relations between scholars and publics in acts of public scholarship (e.g., B. L. Hall, 1992; Simonson & Bushaw, 1993; Stoecker, 1999; Wadsworth, 2005; Whyte, 1989). As an orienting paradigm, PAR maintains that the activities of research are neither the purview of the academic alone nor divorced from the daily activities of the “community of practice” (i.e., the public being researched [with]; Wadsworth, 2005; Whyte, 1989). Rather, scholars and publics work together to identify

the goals of research, enact research, and find meaning in research as equal partners. For researchers, this often means rethinking what their “skills” are (as they relate to the needs of their publics), rethinking what counts as research activities, and rethinking what “successful” research achieves. As Randy Stoecker (1999, p. 854) argues, PAR research has three goals, which may clash with conventional research goals:

- learning knowledge and skills relevant to the task at hand,
- developing relationships of solidarity, and
- engaging in action that wins victories and builds self-sufficiency.

Ethnographic fieldwork is naturally suited to this kind of research because at the heart of fieldwork sits participant observation, which necessarily entails a certain degree of participatory work. Of course, there are certain dynamics to ethnographic fieldwork that do not automatically translate. For example, ethnographic fieldwork rarely involves members of relevant publics engaging in the research process in as obvious a way as one might find in, for example, a community health promotion campaign (e.g., Parker & Becker-Benton, 2016). In ethnographic fieldwork, the engagement of relevant publics in the research process often occurs more subtly in interaction—though this will vary widely by field site and by research situation.

One key tension involved here is the extent to which ethnographic fieldwork can be described as participant observation versus observant participation (see Seim, 2019). We can conceive of these two as end poles on a spectrum with few, if any, studies occupying the absolute ends of, on one side, completely inactive observation as if through a two-way mirror and, on the other, completely inattentive participation in every activity at the field site. Most studies will fall somewhere in between, with the majority falling further toward participant observation than toward observant participation. However, public scholarship and PAR necessitate being closer to the observant participation side than most scholars are likely comfortable with. To do public scholarship means to orient one’s work toward alleviating social problems, which necessarily means engaging in a higher degree of participation in one’s public’s actions.

Most scholars—perhaps because of academic arrogance—can easily conceptualize the benefits their work might have for relevant publics. The benefits of participatory research, however, are mutual. Just as academics offer perspectives uncommon or inaccessible to the public, so too do publics offer perspectives uncommon or inaccessible to academics. Whyte (1989), for example, documents several cases of theoretical innovations derived from PAR that would not have been possible through standard methods of researcher-directed investigation. And because of the participatory nature of the research, these innovations can be seen as a product of the equitable, dialogic relationship between both academic and nonacademic participants, which further ensures the public-ness of the scholarship being conducted; innovations in theory are built out of work that benefits the public.

In thinking through how to orient one’s work toward alleviating the social problems facing relevant publics, scholars must consider which nonacademic publics to participate in. One key category of public with which scholars can engage in participatory research is social justice organizations (e.g., Dawson & Sinwell, 2012). The benefits of partnership are largely obvious: social justice organizations work toward the alleviation of social problems, and so making your work contribute to them necessarily contributes to the

public good. Beyond that, social justice organizations offer an intermediate means through which scholars can have broad public impact by indirectly reaching the publics served by social justice organizations. Contra the publicity aims of much public scholarship, however, such work is largely invisible. Moreover, it is often difficult, both because of social justice organizations' lack of material resources and their overwhelming work volumes, to engage in participatory projects that would increase demands on their (material and temporal) resources. In the next section, I narrate my own experiences of fieldwork in a social justice organization in the U.S. transgender rights movement, discussing how I navigated the tensions of participatory research and fieldwork, and how I practiced my fieldwork as a form of public scholarship.

### **Into the Field: Public Scholarship at the National Center for Transgender Equality**

I entered the field for the first time in June 2017. I joined the NCTE for a three-month term as a Consortium on Media Policy Studies (COMPASS) Fellow, through which I conducted the "prestudy" (Swedberg, 2014) for my dissertation research. In my capacity as COMPASS Fellow, I worked closely with the communications and outreach and education departments, which together coordinate all of NCTE's communicative activities. As part of my work, I contributed to these activities, drafting official statements from executive director Mara Keisling; ghostwriting editorials as Mara (one of which was picked up by the *Washington Post*, though unfortunately not run); pitching stories to reporters; coordinating activities for NCTE's 2017 lobby day on Capitol Hill; writing blog posts; and recruiting members for the growing Voices for Trans Equality and Families for Trans Equality projects, among others.

My participation in this first round of fieldwork fell cleanly on the observant participation side of the spectrum laid out in the previous section. Following Josh Seim's (2019) distinction, my ethnography was, at that point, one of incarnation rather than inscription; I learned by taking notes with my body rather than with a pen (though I certainly took plenty of notes by pen, as well). On June 26, 2017, for example, the day of Trump's announcement of the transgender military ban, I became just as immersed in the flurry of activity as every NCTE staff member. It was all hands on deck, and I spent a 10-hour day involved in every form of communications activity there was. In the morning, I played press assistant to Mara. Then-communications director Eric Dyson gave me his phone so that between his, mine, and Mara's phones, I could queue up journalists, one after another, to hand Mara in rotation in the back seat of an Uber (much to the confusion of our driver). The rest of the day I worked out of the impromptu "war room" we had set up in the office, working with journalists across the country (and some internationally) to schedule interviews with NCTE staff members, as well as transgender veterans in the Voices for Trans Equality project. I worked with journalist Mattie Kahn at *Elle* magazine, for instance, to secure an interview with Air Force veteran Cynthia DeVille that ultimately took the form of a confessional-style video titled "A Trans Air Force Veteran Responds to Trump's Ban" (Kahn 2017). By the end of the day, I had no energy to turn jottings into fieldnotes in the full narrative style, as I would have done on a slow day that consisted only of meetings. Instead, I had frenzied jottings, sketchings and diagrams, e-mail threads, and my own embodied memories of the day; days like that don't leave your memory.

For NCTE, the benefits of having me around were clear: They were used to undergraduate (and occasionally high school) interns, as well as legal fellows, but PhDs were a whole new class of unpaid help

for them (outside of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey and U.S. Transgender Survey, which were specialized projects with teams of research consultants). In fact, within the first day of my arrival I was already recruited as a strategy advisor for Eric, who was somewhat new to the job and eager to implement new strategic practices, and who felt my expertise in the field could help him direct his energies. But my own understanding of my role was still uncertain. At times I struggled with the tension between the fact that sometimes what NCTE needed was just another body (not an expert), whereas at other times my expertise was in high demand.<sup>3</sup> I was more comfortable acting under their direction, but I didn't want to introduce "bias" into my data by sharing my own expertise. That is, I worried that if I offered my expert opinions and NCTE acted based on them, I would not really be studying their practices. By the end of my first round of fieldwork, I realized that this concern arose out of my own misunderstanding of the participatory research process. My role as a participatory researcher was to work to the benefit of their mission, and theirs was to inform my research through inviting my participation in the areas they deemed it most helpful.

Out of the "prestudy" phase of my research, I gained two important things that helped my participatory fieldwork move forward appropriately. First, I learned through action what NCTE needed. I gained intimate familiarity with the work they did, how they did it, why they did it, and what my skill sets could contribute to it. Perhaps more importantly, though, my time at NCTE established "flattened" relationships between myself and organization staff; I was an equal participant, rather than an outside intervener or consultant—and this was a perception shared on both sides. Not only did they come to view my research as integral to their own working, but I came to view their active participation in my research as more integral to my academic objectives.

Before my departure from the first round of fieldwork in August 2017, I discussed how I might return for the "main study" (Swedberg, 2014) of my dissertation research. Each of the staff members with whom I discussed these plans expressed excitement at the prospect of my return, although they were uncertain under what auspices I might work with them. In my debriefing with deputy director Lisa Mottet, she suggested that one auspice could be the creation of an historical archive of the policy wing of the U.S. transgender rights movement at NCTE. As she said, the organization had myriad uncatalogued documents sitting in boxes both in the office and in (present and former) staff member's homes. She also expressed interest in collecting oral histories from some of the organization's departed founders and key staff. Though the development of a historical archive was somewhat outside my domain of expertise and would require me to develop new skills, it was an important project for the organization (and the movement), and one they lacked both the capacity and the skill set to do. And, despite being outside my primary area of focus, it would benefit my dissertation research, too. Per Lisa's suggestion, I prepared a formal proposal for such an archive, which was approved by NCTE leadership and my dissertation committee.

For the nine months I was away from the field (completing my coursework, taking my qualifying examinations, and finishing a dissertation prospectus), the research process became "mine" again; there

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<sup>3</sup> Tensions over just needing another body recurred in my second round of fieldwork as well, particularly when I would work rallies or press events, or when I was deployed for field organizing in the Yes on 3 campaign in Massachusetts over election week 2018.

was little to no participation from NCTE, except for the occasional feedback from Lisa on archive proposal drafts. I worked my embodied observations into a tentative theory that informed my prospectus and planning my “main study” research questions. I also found theoretical ideas that I could weave together to explain (and find absences of explanation) for my experiences in the field. But in that time I also forgot, to a certain extent, what I had learned about participatory fieldwork; I began thinking of my role as an observer again, and not as a participant. The participatory aspect of my research, I began thinking, was the archive (which, of course, it also was).

When I returned to the field in June 2018, it was to a much-changed organization. (Social justice organizations move fast.) NCTE had hired several more staff members, and a few had left. The communications team had lost its director and digital media specialist, but gained two new staff members plus an interim director. The outreach and education team had gained two new staff members as well. And those were only the changes to the departments I worked most closely with. It was, in a few ways, a resetting for me; I still had flattened relationships within the organization, but I also had several new relationships, which took time to settle into. Also having a new role as archival fellow, rather than working on the communications team, the nature of my participation changed and shifted much further toward the participant observation side of the spectrum. In this new position, I participated in communications (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, outreach and education) work, but I also had my own discrete set of participatory research obligations to the archive. Most of my time with the communications team was in the daily morning check-ins, the weekly operations meetings, the weekly messaging meetings, standing meetings for various campaigns and special projects, general staff meetings, and ad hoc strategy meetings. In these meetings, I was an active participant (eventually), but more of an observer than I had been before. (In other settings, I was more active a participant, such as in trainings, rallies, press conferences, and various other relevant events.)

Finding my footing with, and remembering the importance of, actively participating in NCTE work took time and took the encouragement of my new collaborators. In my first week back in the field, I observed a messaging meeting on education issues. I sat toward the end of the table with my notebook out and took notes quietly as everyone discussed and debated. We broke for lunch and I went back to my desk, resuming work on the archive project. A couple of hours later, the team reconvened in the large conference room for a follow-up messaging meeting on criminal justice issues. I resumed my place at the end of the table, notebook out, and waited for everyone to arrive so the meeting could begin. Harper Jean Tobin, the policy director, walked in and seemed a bit surprised to see me. “Were you at the previous meeting?” she asked. I replied that I was, but I was just in the corner. She commented that I had been so quiet she hadn’t realized. Laurel Powell, then-rapid response communications manager, who was new to me, as she had joined staff while I was away from the field, quipped that I needed to speak up—I was no good if I just sat quietly. I joked back that I wasn’t there to speak, but to listen. She looked at me in a mockingly stern way over her glasses, and we began the meeting. Over the next few days, her words echoed in my head, and I slowly started remembering the importance of conducting my fieldwork as participatory research.

Over the next couple of weeks, especially as I grew comfortable around and working with the new staff members, I leaned in to my participatory obligations more. I spoke up more in meetings, I offered my critical, research-based perspective on issues, and I often found—somewhat to my surprise—interim

communication director Dave Noble and media relations manager Gillian Branstetter turning to me in meetings as ideas were being discussed, asking me if I knew what research had to say about certain things. But because, despite my research prowess, I am sometimes slow to learn, I still didn't make myself as valuable to the team as I could have until the communications team realized I had conducted research on things of significance to their work that I hadn't mentioned to them. When it was announced in July 2018 that Nicole Maines, a transgender actress and longtime friend of the organization, would be joining the cast of the CW's *Supergirl* as the first transgender superhero on network television, I mentioned excitedly to Gillian that I had written a book chapter about transgender superheroes in comic books early in my career (Billard & MacAuley, 2017), and so to see one finally on television was incredibly gratifying. She screeched at me: "How did I not know this before! Why didn't you mention it?" She mused that she could pitch me to journalists as an expert commenter. (She ended up not doing so because her media relations energies were better served working on stories about more pressing issues.)

When Dave walked by, Gillian shouted out to him, asking if he knew I had done research on transgender superheroes. He expressed surprise and said no. He then turned to me and asked why I hadn't shared it with them and what else I had researched that I was "holding out on" sharing. I muttered uncomfortably that I didn't think my work would interest any of them, that people usually wanted me to talk about my research less and not more. Dave gave me a look that told me I was being daft.

After that, Gillian went to my website to download and read my papers and to find out more about my work. She began asking me questions about the work I had published, and some of the work I was still doing, but that hadn't come out yet. When I had another paper accepted for publication on transgender news coverage (Billard, 2019), I shared it with her, and we had extensive conversations about its implications for her work. We eventually set up a number of meetings to talk about NCTE's communications strategy and what my research might be able to contribute. In one meeting, she asked for my feedback on the current draft of the style guide that NCTE used in-house and that she often shared with journalists; I had published about how journalists should write about trans people (Billard, 2016), and she thought I could help improve the style guide. I was most uncomfortable here, because I felt like I was stepping over the participant-researcher boundary. I worried that I was finally breaching the role of the researcher and was now acting more as a "professional expert."

My worries were unfounded, though, and I realized later stemmed from the fetish academics have for the "neutral" scientific observer, who in actuality does not exist. And I realized that, in line with participatory action research and public scholarship, I could improve that which I studied while also gaining valuable research insight from the process. In discussing the style guide and what improvements or alterations were possible with Gillian, I learned far more about why the style guide took the form it currently did and the logics underpinning it than I had in all my other interactions and conversations about it. From then on, I was more steadfast in my participatory research approach, often bringing my research and expertise to bear and learning immense amounts about NCTE's communicative strategies in doing so that I otherwise would never have discovered.

All of this is to say little of the participatory research I conducted in the archiving project while at NCTE, which involved numerous stakeholders with whom I shaped the archival collections, developed its

policies and structures, collected oral histories, and worked with archival institutions to secure permanent storage of the archived materials. Moreover, I worked with Mara to bring the executive directors of the other national transgender rights organizations on board to archive their institutional records together with NCTE, ensuring the single largest windfall of transgender political history to be preserved for the public.

Through my fieldwork (and the archive, in its own way), I was able to make my research process truly public scholarship to the extent that I oriented my work, via participatory methods, toward improving the social justice work at NCTE. While I would not claim to have made a large influence or even to have been unambiguously helpful—those claims would need to be made by NCTE—I can claim with certainty that the work I did added to NCTE’s capacities, bringing my own unique skills and expertise to bear on their work, all without placing increased demands on their material (and relatively few demands on their temporal) resources.

### **Discussion: Alleviating Social Injustice via Fieldwork**

Taking the view that public scholarship must aim to contribute our specialized skills and knowledge toward the mitigation of social problems, participatory fieldwork affords depths of public engagement impossible through publication in popular media and self-promotion via digital media. Though the work is more invisible—had I not written this article, you would not have known the public-oriented work I did at NCTE—it serves a more direct and more impactful public good. Participatory fieldwork increases the capacity of research collaborators to influence their publics in ways that informing the readers of *The New York Times* does not.

More importantly, though, what participatory fieldwork affords is opportunities to for scholarship to have substantive and meaningful impacts on the issues of the social justice we study. Popular publication and self-promotion improve our own reputations, advance our own self-brands, and (hopefully) secure our own career objectives—but they do so without serving the publics who face the issues we research. Ultimately, then, in orienting our public work toward visibility rather than toward alleviating injustice, we simply serve to sustain the systems of oppression that our publics face while benefiting ourselves. This cannot be an acceptable model of public scholarship.

There are, of course, questions of scale that arise here, both in terms of the breadth and the depth of impact public scholarship can have. That is, scholars might have modest influence on large social institutions, or they might have large, meaningful influence on local communities. My work with NCTE, for example, was modest in its impact, but, because of the national scope of the organization I worked with, diffused more widely. The Consortium on Media Policy Studies program, which first brought me to NCTE as a COMPASS Fellow, is another example of an initiative for public scholarship at this scale. The program, which places doctoral students from participating universities in summer fellowships in DC-based media activist and public policy organizations, allows early-careers scholars to establish long-term and meaningful relationships with civil society institutions and teaches them how to translate academic skills and theoretical knowledge into professional practice outside the academy. Moreover, in instilling fellows with the mandate to apply their academic expertise to issues of public relevance, COMPASS works to cultivate a nascent norm

within the field to apply the specific strengths of communication scholarship to a world in dire need of those strengths, and to do so in ways that have broad, if not always particularly deep, public impacts.

At the opposite end of the scalar range from my work and the work of the COMPASS program, we might consider Sandra Ball-Rokeach's Alhambra project (Chen, Ball-Rokeach, Parks, & Huang, 2011; Gerson, Chen, Wenzel, Ball-Rokeach, & Parks, 2017). In the course of their engaged community-based research, Ball-Rokeach and her Metamorphosis research team identified Alhambra as a community in somewhat of a communication infrastructure crisis: levels of civic engagement were perilously low, the city had "lost its last dedicated independent local newspaper, the *Alhambra Post-Advocate*," and media attention to community issues was negligible (Gerson et al., 2017, p. 337). Seeking to address these issues, in 2010 Metamorphosis launched *the Alhambra Source*, a "local multilingual community news website" headed by a professional journalist editor but sustained by Metamorphosis-trained community contributors (Gerson et al., 2017, p. 336). The Alhambra Source has, since its launch, helped alleviate the civic crisis in Alhambra while giving the Metamorphosis team the opportunity to research the role of local media in revitalizing community life. Thus, though the project affected one singular community, it did so to an incredible degree, entirely transforming the communication infrastructure and, as a result, civic culture of the city.

These programs serve as exemplars of just a few ways to engage in public scholarship that are oriented toward the public good, rather than toward publicity. They are to say nothing, however, of the positive social impact communication scholars can have working in media and technology industries. As Larry Gross reminded us in his 2012 ICA Presidential Address, our field owes it to doctoral students, who are unlikely to find stable academic employment, to normalize industry employment, and communication scholars are also uniquely positioned to contribute valuable insights to the development of our society, especially as our world is increasingly mediatized and as media technology sits at the center of culture and economy (Gross, 2012). In their recent call for social scientists to be brought into "the very heart" of the design teams of major tech companies, Rebekah Tromble and Shannon McGregor (2019) write that "social science is underutilized by technology firms, even as they espouse uniformly social missions" (p. 239). Indeed, technology firms proceed with work that reshapes our very world, and they do so without communication scholarship—but think how they might be shaping the world if they did so with communication scholarship. Certainly, scholars engaged in making these technologies more ethical, more transparent, and more prosocial would be acting in the greatest public good.

Finally, we consider that disregard for the kinds of public scholarship I have advocated is fueled by racism, (cis)sexism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice against the marginalized, because those most likely to engage in this work are people who face these injustices. That is, the people most likely to make their scholarship public by fighting for public good are the affected, while those most likely to be public via publicity are the unaffected (see Burawoy, 2009, p. 463). In transgender circles, we frequently speak of "mining" communities for the resource of knowledge while giving nothing in return. If the metaphor of mining brings to mind images of exploitative back-breaking labor, that's the point. Let us not be miners.

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