



Communication Activism Research: Engaged Communication Scholarship for Social Justice

Introduction

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The *scholarship of application*, introduced by Boyer (1990) and later called the *scholarship of engagement* (Boyer, 1996), redirected academics' scholarship from insular disciplinary concerns to mutually beneficial community-based research and teaching collaborations with those outside the academy. Today, *engaged scholarship* is woven into academic disciplines across the humanities, physical sciences, and social sciences; indeed, a Google Scholar search of that concept yielded 1,450,000 citations (and 2,440,000 citations for "engaged research"). The communication discipline is no exception; it, too, has stressed the importance of "engaged communication scholarship" (e.g., Anderson, 2014; Barge, Jones et al., 2008; Barge, Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Cheney, 2008; Cheney, Wilhelmsson, & Zorn, 2002; Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Dempsey et al., 2011; Eschenfelder, 2011; Gunn & Lucaites, 2010; Manning & Houston, 2015; McConnell, 2012; Milan, 2010a; Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005).

Although we applaud this focus, engaged communication scholarship (and engaged scholarship, more generally) has become such an elastic term that it can refer to virtually any interaction that occurs between communication scholars and those outside the academy, regardless of with whom scholars interact, the purposes of their interactions, and their outcomes. Indeed, engaged scholarship has become what Hayakawa (1949) called a *purr word* (p. 44)—"a word that sounds nice (like a cat purring) and conveys pleasant connotative thoughts, but a word that has virtually lost its substantive denotative meaning because of the many different conceptions that people have of it" (Underwood & Frey, 2008, p. 371). Accordingly, more focused approaches to engaged communication scholarship need to be articulated.

Recently, Frey and Carragee (2007a, 2007b, 2012) advanced a form of engaged communication scholarship called *communication activism for social justice scholarship* (hereafter, *communication activism scholarship*). *Communication activism scholarship* involves communication researchers (and, in the case of teaching, communication educators and students) using their theories, methods, and applied practices to work with and for oppressed, marginalized, and underresourced groups and communities

(hereafter, *oppressed communities*), as well as with activist groups and organizations (hereafter, *activists*), to intervene into unjust discourses and material conditions to make them more just, and documenting and reporting their practices, processes, and effects to multiple publics.

The communication activism approach has generated a growing body of research (see Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012) and teaching (see Frey & Palmer, 2014b) scholarship. In 2014, that scholarship helped to establish an Activism and Social Justice Division in the National Communication Association (NCA). Communication activism scholarship, thus, is having an important influence on the communication discipline.

This forum focuses specifically on communication activism research (CAR) as a new and important form of engaged communication research. Given that focus, this essay examines engaged research within the communication discipline, although at times, we cite engaged research in related fields (e.g., sociology). We start by explicating CAR and how it differs from some other engaged communication research, followed by important challenges confronting CAR. Three scholars then respond to our essay by examining and evaluating CAR, primarily from three communication traditions that emphasize, at least in part, engaged research: applied communication research (written by J. Kevin Barge), media research (written by Robert W. McChesney), and critical-cultural studies¹ (written by Michelle Rodino-Colocino). The forum concludes with a brief response by us to these essays.²

Communication Activism Research (CAR)

Although CAR has been shaped by multiple influences from within and beyond communication scholarship (see Carragee & Frey, 2012), it emerged from Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy's (1996) *social justice communication perspective*, defined as "the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced" (p. 110). Such engagement and advocacy, Frey et al. argued, is grounded in a "social justice sensibility" that "(1) foregrounds ethical concerns; (2) commits to structural analyses of ethical problems; (3) adopts an activist orientation; and (4) seeks identification with others" (p. 111).

CAR focuses on the third characteristic of adopting an activist orientation. According to Broome, Carey, De La Garza, Martin, and Morris (2005), *social justice activism* involves

action that attempts to make a positive difference in situations where people's lives are affected by oppression, domination, discrimination, racism, conflict, and other forms of

¹ Although there are important differences between cultural studies and critical-cultural studies, with the latter offering criticisms of the former that are highlighted in this essay, we refer to them together, because, as argued, both perspectives have made few contributions to engaged communication research that share CAR's key emphases.

² We thank Lee Artz (Purdue University Northwest), Benjamin Broome (Arizona State University), and Stefania Milan (European University Institute) for serving as reviewers for this Special Section.

cultural struggle due to differences in race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other identity markers. (p. 146)

CAR's social justice activism takes the form of communication scholars using their communication knowledge to work with oppressed communities and activists to intervene into unjust conditions to make them more just. CAR interventions aid the formation of, or assist established, collective actors to secure social justice, based on the belief that social justice change is produced through collective action.

CAR interventions have included (in the United States, unless otherwise specified³) teaching public speaking to those who are imprisoned to combat racism in prisons (Hartnett, 1998), cultivating interpersonal communication competencies of people living in poverty to successfully run a small business (Papa, Papa, & Buerkel, 2012), facilitating group communication between Greek and Turkish Cypriots to promote peace in Cyprus (Broome, Anastasiou, Hajipavlou, & Kanol, 2012), leading public discussions to help a community heal after a racist shooting incident (Jovanovic, Steger, Symonds, & Nelson, 2007), employing public relations to try to shut down a factory farm (Drake, 2012), making a documentary to stop the execution of an innocent person on death row (McHale, 2007), and performing energy justice theatre productions in indigenous Guatemalan Mayan communities to promote use of clean-burning stoves in homes rather than toxic burning fires (Osnes & Bisping, 2014). Importantly, these and other social justice interventions revolve around communicative practices, which make them *communication activism*, as opposed to other forms of activism. As Carragee and Frey (2012) pointed out:

Communication activism for social justice, thus, is a unique form of scholarship that uses the very essence of the discipline—communication theory and practice—to promote the goal of social justice, meaning that activism, fundamentally, is a communication process and practice. (p. 22)

Social justice communication interventions also span areas of the communication discipline, meaning that all communication scholars can conduct CAR. Additionally, CAR interventions are informed by theory—including critical, interpretive, and postpositivistic theories—demonstrating CAR's theoretical pluralism, and simultaneously heeding Wood's (1996) warning that scholars need to integrate their passionate commitment to social justice with "theoretical understandings" (p. 165); in turn, CAR interventions inform communication theory. CAR, thus, accomplishes the elusive goal of praxis by "practicing theory and theorizing practice" (Wood, p. 157).

Conducting social justice communication interventions, however, is not sufficient; CAR demands that scholars study their interventions, by planning, documenting, and reporting their purposes, practices, and results. Importantly, although CAR studies, primarily, have relied on qualitative methods, potentially,

³ CAR has been conducted, primarily, in the United States, although, as some of these examples illustrate, it also has been done elsewhere (albeit, typically, by U.S. scholars). In that light, CAR, currently, may be characterized by a North American centrism that will be revealed and revised when scholars from other parts of the world conduct CAR.

any method can be employed, including naturalistic inquiry (e.g., autoethnography, critical ethnography, discourse analysis, and ethnography), textual analysis (e.g., content/interaction analysis, performance studies, and rhetorical criticism), survey, and experimental⁴ methods, demonstrating CAR's methodological pluralism. CAR, consequently, is an epistemological perspective regarding communication research and researchers' roles and practices, rather than a prescriptive set of methods for studying social justice communication interventions.⁵ Regardless of the method used, planning, studying, and reporting scholars' social justice communication interventions turns communication activism into communication activism research.

Distinguishing Communication Activism Research from Other Engaged Communication Research

CAR shares many characteristics with, but differs in significant ways from, other communication research that claims or desires to be "engaged."⁶ Because we cannot review those approaches comprehensively, and although all of them conduct research that reflects the characteristics below, we concentrate on three important ways in which CAR differs from those approaches (especially those represented in the other essays in this Special Section): CAR's focus on social justice, use of researcher interventions, and emphasis on collective action.

First, CAR's focus on social justice, with attention to issues of oppression, power, and structural inequalities, among others, is similar to traditions that emphasize critical reflection/evaluation (e.g., critical-cultural studies, critical ethnography, critical media studies, and critical rhetoric). Although other engaged communication research traditions, certainly, focus on social justice, they do not necessarily do so, nor is it their highest or even a high priority. For instance, the vast majority of *applied communication research* (ACR)—the study of "real-world communication concerns, issues, and problems" (Cissna & Frey,

⁴ For an example of CAR that used an experiment, see Rich and Rodríguez (2007).

⁵ This essay does not focus on methodological issues related to CAR (although we discuss some methodological challenges that confront this form of engaged research) but, certainly, CAR scholars have ethical obligations to oppressed communities and activists with whom they work that need to be considered in their interactions with those groups and in the methods that they use to design and study CAR social justice interventions.

⁶ Engaged research cuts across the communication discipline, but of particular importance to this essay and those that follow, it has been associated (in alphabetical order) with applied communication research (e.g., Barge, Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008), critical-cultural studies (e.g., Allen & Orbe, 2008), feminist research (e.g., Putnam & Dempsey, 2015), media research (e.g., Greenhow & Gleason, 2014), organizational communication research (e.g., Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005), performance studies (e.g., Harter, Ellingson, Dutta, & Norander, 2009), and rhetorical research (e.g., Hartelius & Cherwitz, 2010). Engaged research also has been associated with employing particular research methods, including autoethnography (e.g., Walker & Curry, 2007), critical ethnography (e.g., Foley & Valenzuela, 2005), ethnography (e.g., Hartwig, 2014), participatory action research (e.g., Simonson, 2009; see also Rodino-Colocino's, 2012, "participant activism" methodology), and performance ethnography (e.g., Pollock, 2010).

2009, p. xxix)—privileges purposes and populations/sites other than social justice for oppressed communities, such as (a) better understanding of communication between/among romantic partners, family members, employers and employees, healthcare providers and patients, and politicians and voters; and (b) assessing effects of communication campaigns conducted (typically, by others; see below) to encourage people not affected necessarily by social injustice to engage in healthy behaviors or to be better prepared for natural disasters. Indeed, although some research published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, the area's flagship journal, studies oppressed communities and social justice issues without citing "social justice" in the article's title, the term has appeared in only seven article titles of the journal's 44 volumes (with all but one of those articles in a special issue on social justice communication research; Frey, 1998), and it has appeared in only one abstract since that special issue and not in any keywords since the journal started listing them in 2000.

Other engaged communication research traditions that conduct social justice research also do not necessarily privilege it. For instance, although performance studies speaks to social justice (e.g., Alexander, 2010) and related concepts (e.g., *human rights*; Madison, 2010), and such studies have been featured in Frey and Carragee's (2007b, 2012) communication activism books, *justice, injustice, and social justice* did not appear in the index to Madison and Hamera's (2006) performance studies handbook, nor has "social justice" appeared in the title of any article published in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, the area's flagship communication journal (although 49 articles mentioned it somewhere in the essay). As another example, although autoethnography (personal narrative) can be employed to address social justice issues (see, e.g., Berry & Patti, 2015; Toyosaki & Pensoneau-Conway, 2013) and has been used in CAR (Walker & Curry, 2007), most of that research focuses on personal experiences that are not related to social justice, such as coping with illness or grief over the loss of a loved one, a focus that led Conquergood (1997) to express concern about autoethnography, potentially, displacing the political with the personal.

CAR's work with oppressed communities and activists to promote social justice also distinguishes this approach from communication research that emphasizes civic engagement. Dempsey and Barge (2014), writing from an organizational communication perspective, "emphasized the value of a model of engaged scholarship aimed at cultivating civically-oriented, democratic praxis" (p. 680). Although "cultivating civically-oriented, democratic praxis" is valuable, not all forms of civic engagement advance social justice. For example, from a social justice perspective, getting more people to vote (a typical civic engagement goal) is not positive per se; it depends on the policies for which people are voting: If people are voting to discriminate against others on the basis of race, gender, and other identity markers, it is not better to have more people vote. Moreover, as Frey and Palmer (2014a) noted, because civic engagement's foundations reside in liberal democratic theory, that engaged research

often overlooks (both conceptually and in pedagogical practice) structural conditions that generate social problems in the first place, and frames those problems, instead, as enduring symptoms (or as outcomes) of natural social processes that are treated through civic-based individual (persons, groups, or organizations) volunteer work. (p. 7)

Civically engaged communication research (and teaching; see Artz, 2001), thus, often adopts a charity model, which is antithetical to a social justice sensibility (see Frey et al., 1996). Moreover, civic engagement focuses frequently on the individual level rather than on the collective engagement that is necessary to conduct social justice campaigns (see below).

Dempsey and Barge (2014), in line with the typical ACR view, actually envisioned a much broader form of engaged research that went beyond civics, arguing for the “development of responsive and sustainable models of democratic conversation among diverse stakeholders” (p. 667) that included organizational leaders, practitioners, and clients. That perspective raises serious questions about those with whom engaged communication research is being conducted and for what purposes, as researchers (e.g., in ACR; see Frey et al., 1996) can and have formed partnerships with elites that benefit from structural injustices.⁷ Indeed, considerable engaged research in advertising, marketing, mediated communication, organizational communication, and public relations serves interests that perpetuate political and economic systems that are characterized by stark inequities; consequently, considerable engaged communication research comforts those who are comfortable and further afflicts those who are afflicted.

In contrast to those views of engaged communication research, CAR takes a preferential option for those who are oppressed, challenging powerful interests by first exposing pressing injustices and then working with and for oppressed communities, and with activists, to intervene to secure social justice. CAR scholars, thus, use their communication knowledge to create reflective partnerships with oppressed communities and activists that seek social change, in line with Freire’s (1970) notion of *conscientization* (critical consciousness) that arises from collective self-reflection and engagement with social justice by those most affected, in dialogue with allies.

Second, CAR scholars conduct social justice interventions, but that is not necessarily the case in other engaged communication research traditions. Frey and Carragee’s (2007c) distinction between *third-person-perspective research*—in which researchers observe, describe, interpret, explain, (in some traditions) critique what occurs, and (in some traditions) offer recommendations for others to enact—and *first-person-perspective research*—in which researchers intervene (e.g., with activists) to promote social change—helps to explicate this point. Using that distinction, the vast majority of communication research, including engaged communication research, constitutes third-person-perspective research. For instance, ACR (as well as social movement research conducted, e.g., by rhetoricians), primarily, observes/describes phenomena without intervening into them. Moreover, most ACR interventions are performed not by researchers but by other actors (e.g., organizations; see Frey & SunWolf, 2009). In the rare cases when applied communication researchers intervene, although some of that research might be characterized as social justice interventions, such as the facilitation of public dialogue about immigration (see, e.g., Pearce,

⁷ It is important to note that Dempsey and Barge have focused much of their engaged organizational communication research on nonprofit organizations seeking social justice.

Spano, & Pearce, 2009),⁸ most of that research focuses on other issues (e.g., developing adolescents' drug resistance strategies; see Hecht & Miller-Day, 2009).

Applied communication researchers, in contrast to many others, do go beyond description to offer recommendations for others to enact; indeed, *JACR* demands that "authors should clearly and explicitly describe ways in which scholarship makes a difference for communication practice" (Miller, 2016, n.p.). Media public policy scholars also advance proposals for progressive media reform, such as structuring a more democratic media system to represent the diverse views that are present in U.S. society but often are underrepresented in a media environment that is dominated by corporate interests. Those scholars have made significant contributions by advocating, for instance, for systematic reforms in the regulatory policies of the Federal Communications Commission, advancing proposals for a more robust public broadcasting system, highlighting the need for Internet policies that enhance the public sphere, and proposing ways to resolve the current economic crisis in U.S. journalism (see, e.g., Downie & Schudson, 2009; McChesney, 2014, 2015; McChesney & Nichols, 2010; Pickard, 2014; Pickard, Stearns, & Aaron, 2009). Offering recommendations or policy proposals, however, does not constitute first-person-perspective research, as it does not involve researchers intervening and studying their inventions but instead, relies on others to enact recommended interventions.

Other traditions, such as critical-cultural studies and critical media studies, organizational communication, and rhetoric, critique systemic injustices, hoping to create societal change for oppressed communities, but critiques, like recommendations, are not first-person-perspective social justice interventions that are studied, nor do they lead, necessarily, to change. Indeed, sadly, scholars from those (and other) traditions have issued far more calls for engaged research with oppressed communities and activists to promote social justice than they have engaged in actual interventions to accomplish that goal. One reason for that disparity is that despite the professed commitment to political engagement, the majority of critical-cultural research has remained theoretical and frequently abstract; largely missing from it is praxis-oriented research that combines critique with researchers working with oppressed communities and activists to change unjust conditions. As Rodino-Colocino (2011) concluded, critical-cultural studies that 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)" (p. 1,701).

The continuing gap between scholars' rhetorical commitment to promoting social justice and lack of praxis-oriented social justice research is highlighted by recent analyses of the evolution of critical-cultural studies and media studies. For example, in a special issue of the journal *Media, Culture & Society* on continuity and change in media studies (Punathambekar & Scannell, 2013a), the 20 essays did not provide any examples of media scholars working with oppressed communities to secure social change;

⁸ However, researchers facilitating public dialogue about social justice issues are supposed to remain neutral regarding their view of those issues; moreover, that work focuses almost exclusively on talk (with any subsequent action left for others to enact), and it often is not connected to forming or aiding established collective actors.

indeed, many essays made no mention of pressing social justice issues (e.g., poverty), and most lacked any discussion of collective action, despite the centrality of social movements in securing social change (see below). These omissions were especially troubling, given that the essays' primary goal was "to take stock of where we have come from, where we are now and where we are going" (Punathambekar & Scannel, 2013b, p. 3). A similar detachment from first-person-perspective intervention research characterized a forum on the evolution of critical feminist research on new media (Hasinoff, 2014), and, in a special journal issue evaluating Occupy Wall Street (Bratich, 2014a), none of the essays even mentioned the possibility of researchers partnering with social movement activists to secure reform; moreover, oddly, the essays were divorced from social movement research.

There also is a troubling tendency in critical-cultural studies, feminist research, and media studies (among other traditions) to use the term *intervention* in a misleading manner. For example, the forum on feminist approaches to new media was titled "Critical Feminist Interventions in New Media Studies" (Hasinoff, 2014). Additionally, although Bratich (2014b) called the Occupy articles "intervention essays" and they offered valuable insights into contemporary social issues, they were not first-person-perspective research interventions conducted with oppressed communities and activists to secure social justice.

Our discussion of such limitations connects to a longstanding critique of cultural studies regarding its declining political character over time and its neglect of issues related to power distribution. Although that critique is beyond this essay's scope, it is linked to our concerns about the lack of political engagement and researcher interventions in such scholarship. Critics have faulted that research for exaggerating the ideological diversity or polysemic character of media texts, and simultaneously discounting the media's centralized discursive power, as well as for overstating media audiences' ability to resist those texts' hegemonic meanings. Critics also have faulted that research for advancing broad and often romanticized views of resistance that are divorced from forms of resistance that connect directly to ideological challenges to powerful interests, as well as for its limited examination of collective action and social movements, despite their centrality in producing change (see, e.g., Budd, Entman, & Steinman, 1990; Carragee, 1996; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Philo, 2008).

Some engaged communication researchers (e.g., in ACR and media studies) do engage in *translational scholarship* (or *research dissemination*), translating communication research (conducted by them or others) into popular discourses, and, thereby, informing publics of how that research sheds light on social justice issues, critiques injustices, and/or leads to action recommendations. For example, communication scholars have translated their research for public consumption in NCA's online Web magazine *Communication Currents* (www.natcom.org/comcurrentsissue.aspx). Communication scholars also have shared research on radio and television shows (e.g., political communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson has appeared numerous times on *Bill Moyer's Journal*), as well as via podcasts, and some even have hosted shows (e.g., for many years, McChesney hosted *Media Matters*). Other communication scholars have blogged (e.g., Donald Ellis's *Peace and Conflict Politics: Israel, Middle East Politics and Communication*; www.peaceandconflictpolitics.com); given lectures, courses, and webinars (e.g., TEDx Talks; see www.natcom.org/commtedx); and posted YouTube videos (e.g., Koschmann's, 2012, explanation of organizational communication). Communication scholars also have produced documentaries that are supported by communication research (e.g., Jhally, 2007). These translational communication

scholars are reviving the threatened tradition of the “public intellectual” by connecting publicly communication research to current issues.

Although such translational efforts are valuable, most do not focus on social justice. Moreover, only a few researchers have published scholarly essays about their translational efforts (e.g., Giles, 2008; Parrott, 2008), and, to our knowledge, none have studied those efforts as first-person-perspective intervention research (see Frey, 2009). Hence, the few social justice translational communication efforts constitute communication activism, not CAR.

In contrast to the work described above, CAR moves beyond observation and description, critique, recommendations, and/or translational efforts to researchers intervening to address systemic injustices and documenting their efforts. Moreover, intervention is a necessary but not sufficient condition for CAR, for, as discussed previously, communication researchers intervene for many purposes other than to promote social justice. Researchers’ commitment to intervening with oppressed communities and activists to promote social justice, thus, distinguishes CAR from other engaged communication research.

Third, CAR differs from other engaged communication research by emphasizing interventions that partner with collective actors connected to oppressed communities. At times, CAR interventions contribute to establishing a collective actor, which include community groups and social movements. From CAR’s perspective, collective actors are essential to the mobilization of social justice campaigns; even a cursory examination of U.S. history reveals the central role of social movements, such as the civil rights, environmental, and feminist movements, in securing broad social change.

As social movement research shows, oppressed community members, although aware of systemic forms of discrimination, often lack the organized groups and supportive institutions that are necessary to mobilize and sustain social justice campaigns (see, e.g., Jasper, 1997; Meyer, 2005). Indeed, the existence of common grievances within oppressed communities does not guarantee the formation of collective actors; in reviewing 200 years of social protest, Gamson (1990) noted that “there is nothing natural about the ability to organize successfully” (p. 142). The formation of collective actors connected to oppressed communities, thus, represents a major political achievement, especially in the face of oppression and a lack of resources.

CAR’s focus on collective actors/action owes much to the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP; www.mrap.info), a group of Boston-based social scientists that Carragee joined in 1990. MRAP assists community groups and social movements in framing social justice issues, challenging barriers to news media access, and developing coordinated media and organizing strategies to secure progressive change. Since its establishment in 1986, MRAP has employed social movement theory and framing theory to guide more than 300 social justice interventions (see, e.g., Ryan, Carragee, & Schwerner, 1998).

CAR, therefore, emphasizes that the quest for social justice is connected directly to the resources and capacities of collective actors working in concert with oppressed communities. Ryan and Jeffreys (2012) pointed out that these actors assume “an organizational capacity to forge shared and sustainable strategies, and to amass the skills, resources, and knowledge needed to refine and execute those

strategies in multiple arenas, including the media and politics" (p. 206). CAR's interventions enhance those skills, resources, and knowledge with respect to a range of communicative practices, increasing collective actors' ability to obtain social justice.

CAR scholars have documented the effectiveness of interventions linking scholar-activists with collective actors seeking social justice with and for oppressed communities. For example, Carey (2012) formed the Daywalka Foundation as a collective actor to combat human trafficking in South Asia, and McHale (2007) linked the production and distribution of his documentary about a controversial death penalty case to Missouri's antideath penalty movement, to free an innocent person on death row.

In contrast to CAR's focus on collective actors, frequently, other engaged communication research neglects or minimizes the significance of organized groups engaged in collective action with and for oppressed communities (see, e.g., Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Putnam & Dempsey, 2015). Those approaches, thus, overlook the political potential of collaborations between engaged communication researchers and those groups—a potential that is at the center of CAR.

Finally, the influence of translational communication scholarship and other engaged communication research approaches that offer social justice change recommendations would be increased by integrating those efforts with collective actors' initiatives. For example, critical media research, at its best, recognizes the need to link substantive policy proposals with grassroots collective actors in the media reform movement (see, e.g., McChesney, 2009; Milan, 2010b), but this tradition often lacks that emphasis. McChesney's (2007, 2014, 2015) contributions are exemplary, given his extensive scholarship; his role in cofounding and advancing the initiatives of Free Press (www.freepress.net), a significant media reform collective actor; and his insights on relationships between research and progressive activism. Similarly, Napoli and Aslama (2011) detailed scholar-activist media reform/justice interventions that represent rare collaborations among researchers, foundations, social movement organizations, and other activists. However, in a perceptive appraisal of those interventions, Karaganis (2011) highlighted the need to connect the media reform policy agenda with local collective actors, underscoring the lack of connection between professional media reform organizations and local grassroots groups, which often focus on media justice. From CAR's perspective, there also is a corresponding need for scholars working with the media reform movement to explicate in their research reports challenges and opportunities that confront, as well as lessons learned from, those collaborations.

CAR, thus, represents a new type of engaged communication research that stands in contrast to other forms, including those that are concerned with social justice. Because of those differences, Hartnett (2010), in reviewing social justice communication traditions, labeled CAR as the "third and strongest wave," following the first wave of analytic studies of activist groups fighting for social justice and the second wave of critical work that "sought to debunk the mythologies holding the powerful in place . . . [and to] reimagine democracy by including forgotten or silenced voices" (pp. 78, 76, 77). As Hartnett (2010) concluded, CAR moves from

an implied politics to an engaged politics, where researchers are no longer studying objects from which they hope to glean some truths to be offered as tools to others;

rather, in this third stage, scholars build projects where they are directly implicated in and work alongside disadvantaged communities. . . . Practitioners of this third wave of engaged social justice scholarship approach issues of social justice not only as *sites of research* but also as *callings for engagement* with disadvantaged communities. (p. 78)

Challenges Confronting CAR

As a new form of engaged communication research to promote social justice, CAR confronts important challenges. Because many of those challenges affect all engaged communication research, we focus on those that are more endemic to CAR. Some challenges are related to CAR's activism; others arise from studying that activism (for a broader discussion of CAR challenges, see Carragee & Frey, 2012). In examining these challenges, we offer examples of how CAR scholars have confronted them.

First, CAR works with oppressed communities that have experienced social injustice and, consequently, are "particularly vulnerable to exploitation in research contexts" (Sherwin, 2005, p. 152); indeed, because of the long history of researchers exploiting oppressed communities, "research has been seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution Research [is seen] as irrelevant to their needs and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life" (Oliver, 1992, p. 105). Many oppressed communities, therefore, are wary of CAR scholars, as Belone et al. (2012) discovered regarding American Indians' (their term) historical mistrust of White researchers who have intervened without improving tribal communities. As their CAR, directed toward meeting health disparity needs, demonstrated, typically, there are deep differences between researchers and oppressed community members with respect to important identity markers (e.g., race and class) and experiences engendered. CAR scholars, thus, face the difficult task of establishing research relationships with oppressed communities and proving their social justice bona fides through their actions and not just their words. In Belone et al.'s case, among other things, their research team included three American Indians, and they conducted participatory action research that collaborated with community members during every phase of their project, in line with the view that "anti-oppressive practices must begin with the research production process itself" (Stone & Priestley, 1996, p. 703).

Sharp differences also often exist between scholars and activists, given their backgrounds, agendas, and needs. For example, Hintz and Milan's (2010) research revealed Internet activists' collectivist orientation versus researchers' individualistic orientation. With regard to CAR, Cagle (2007), the first Director of Research & Analysis at the Center for the Study of Media & Society, sponsored by the advocacy organization Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), noted important differences between GLAAD activists and media scholars he commissioned to conduct research to aid those activists. Activists, for instance, saw a disconnect between the information that they needed (e.g., when they appeared on television shows, such as the *O'Reilly Factor*) and what they perceived to be scholars' esoteric cultural studies and queer theory research, as well as the slow pace of producing research that did not meet activists' need to respond quickly to breaking news. Eventually, that disconnect became so great that GLAAD closed the Center.

Although differences between CAR scholars and oppressed communities and activists can complicate the shared struggle to achieve social justice, those differences can have considerable benefits (e.g., multiple perspectives and capacities) for pursuing social justice. For instance, despite severe tensions and conflicts among members of a heterogeneous coalition that included rural and urban residents, animal rights activists, sustainable agriculture advocates, environmentalists, progressives, and conservative Christians, Drake (2012) used her public relations expertise to coproduce a "joint rhetoric" that respected members' ideological differences but expressed their joint opposition to a factory farm in Ohio. Significant differences between communication scholars and oppressed communities and/or activists, therefore, simultaneously can constrain and enable CAR.

Interventions that navigate effectively difficulties associated with difference underscore the need to create partnerships between CAR scholars and oppressed communities and activists. Asenas, McCann, Feyh, and Cloud (2012), influenced by Alcott's (1991–1992) perspective on advocacy, highlighted the need to speak with rather than speaking for those who are oppressed, which includes respecting people's ability to define injustices that they experience and to devise means to confront them. CAR, therefore, rejects the view that scholars "give voice to the voiceless" or "empower the powerless," as those patronizing perspectives, no matter how well intentioned, neglect people's ability to identify and articulate their grievances, and to mobilize to challenge oppressive practices.⁹ Partnerships between researchers and oppressed communities, consequently, demand mutual respect; additionally, collaborative research must address power inequalities within relationships between researchers and oppressed communities (Ryan, Salas-Wright, Anastario, & Camera, 2010). CAR scholars, thus, have reflected in great length in their written reports on these challenges and lessons learned from them (see essays in Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012).¹⁰

Second, CAR scholars often face considerable challenges balancing their support of the goals of oppressed communities and activists with offering constructive criticism of and intervening into those groups' social justice strategies/tactics. Palmer (2007), for instance, was a member of an antiglobalization group that wanted to use consensus decision making to prepare for a protest in Miami, Florida against the 2003 Free Trade Agreement. He pointed out to members that the group demonstrated serious communication difficulties reaching consensus, and he offered to create and facilitate an emergent-consensus program to improve the group's discussions. Because of the urgency of the looming protest and because activists "focus more on talking about their causes, goals, tasks, and duties than they do on examining their goal-oriented talk" (Palmer, 2007, p. 328), members resisted initially, but Palmer

⁹ Oppressed nonhuman beings (e.g., animals) and places/sites (e.g., Earth) that cannot speak for themselves, of course, are exceptions.

¹⁰ Social movement studies (see, e.g., Gillan & Pickerill, 2012; Milan, 2014) and participatory development studies (see, e.g., Barranquero, 2011; Kincaid & Figueroa, 1999; Petit, 2006) have grappled with these same concerns in their embrace of participatory approaches to establishing mutually beneficial partnerships between researchers and oppressed communities that guide their social justice interventions to secure political change. CAR and these traditions would benefit from cross-disciplinary dialogue on challenges confronting research partnerships with oppressed communities and activists.

persuaded the group to let him facilitate a portion of its meetings, which had such positive effects that those consensus procedures became part of the group's everyday discourse. Hence, CAR scholars need to establish close connections to oppressed communities and activists, but they also must maintain sufficient distance from them to offer feedback that aids those groups' efforts, thereby navigating this "distance-empathy tension" (Dempsey & Barge, 2014, p. 16). As Ryan and Jeffrey (2012) explained:

The right tension between distance and engagement is an ongoing challenge: Too distant a relationship leaves activism scholarship without a reason d'être; too close a relationship may weaken opportunities to reflect critically and to add fresh perspectives from other fields. (p. 210)

Third, CAR involves the difficult integration of conducting high-quality research and engaging in effective activism. Ideally, both of these activities are done well, but "one likely outcome of the separation of intellectual inquiry about political activism from activism itself is that activists or scholars who try to do both jobs at the same time do neither well" (Meyer, 2005, p. 193). Although that outcome is a real risk for all engaged research, for CAR, the need to address social injustices, and the effects of not doing so, make this risk worth taking. Moreover, that outcome is a potential, but not inevitable, consequence of CAR; one way of decreasing that potential is by scholars (and others, especially those with whom CAR scholars work) reflecting on and evaluating the quality of the activism and of the research at all stages of the process. In terms of activism, CAR can be evaluated with regard to whether social justice communication interventions, for instance, (a) forged partnerships between scholar-activists and oppressed communities and activists, (b) increased communication capacities of those groups, and (c) were viewed by group members as aiding their social justice efforts. With regard to research, CAR is evaluated on criteria that are used to judge the merits of all social-scientific communication research in general, and engaged communication research in particular (see, e.g., Milan, 2010b), which include constructing clear conceptual and operational definitions of research constructs, conducting comprehensive literature searches to understand social justice issues and how they have been studied, explicating and justifying social justice communication interventions, using and reporting research methods conscientiously, offering concrete evidence to support claims made, identifying research limitations, and sharing lessons learned to guide future CAR.

However, an important issue, both for activism and research, is the difficulty that CAR scholars have making claims about whether and how their communication interventions affected the systemic social justice issues being confronted. It may be possible to document intervention effects at a relatively local level, such as whether a factory farm was shut down, but even at that level, and, certainly, at the broader level, CAR's contributions may be difficult to ascertain. Moreover, for many reasons, CAR interventions will not succeed completely. One important reason is because those interventions take place within broader political environments that limit the ability of scholar-activists and groups with which they work to advance intended social justice goals. By their nature, oppressed communities lack resources and power, limiting their ability to overcome structural inequalities. Their political mobilization is a difficult practical accomplishment, and even if it occurs, frequently, it produces a countermobilization by elites. In short, communication scholar-activists are confronted with a dramatically unequal "playing field" in which their expertise, although useful for those lacking power (and for activists lacking certain communication

competencies), does not offset considerable advantages that elites possess. That imbalance means CAR interventions will not be effective fully, either in the short or long term at the local or systemic level. Hence, given the difficulty of affecting social justice issues, evaluation of CAR's "effectiveness" in addressing those issues needs to be approached cautiously, with CAR viewed and evaluated as a process of attempting to secure social justice, rather than based on whether social justice was produced per se.

Ryan and Jeffreys' (2012) CAR to reduce domestic violence (DV) illustrated the successful integration of high-quality research and effective activism, despite the complexities of evaluating interventions in light of short- and long-term local and systemic consequences. Their longitudinal interventions, which included training sessions for activists associated with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) to enhance their ability to be spokespersons against DV, were based on an integration of multiple theoretical perspectives, including social movement theory, framing theory, and Global South participatory communication models (emphasizing dialogue and empowerment), revealing how activist praxis is informed by theoretical perspectives. For example, RICADV engaged in a dialogic and collaborative approach to developing news frames, assisting DV activists and survivors in shaping their messages, a sharp departure from a top-down development of frames had Ryan and/or Jeffreys just produced them. Those theoretically informed interventions expanded RICADV's communication capacity to confront DV, increasing its ability as a collective actor to frame DV as a public issue. The interventions also assisted RICADV in mounting a successful campaign to force the resignation of a Rhode Island legislator who battered his female partner. Although Ryan and Jeffreys could not assess the extent to which their interventions reduced DV in the local setting, and although DV remains a systemic problem in Rhode Island and elsewhere, their high-quality CAR certainly advanced social justice on this issue.

Fourth, most CAR scholars work in the university context and, consequently, they face challenges conducting this engaged research. The increasing corporatization of universities (see, e.g., Giroux, 2015) endangers all social justice research (see, e.g., Daniels & Porfilio, 2013) and teaching (regarding its suppression of communication activism pedagogy, see Palmer, 2014). Within this context, universities and their faculties, especially state universities, seek partnerships with corporations, not with oppressed communities, to stimulate economic growth and to offset the decline of public subsidies to state universities. Moreover, CAR is unlikely to receive corporate, foundation, and/or government funding, given that this engaged research challenges established centers of power and promotes social justice.

Another challenge for CAR within universities, similar to other engaged communication research, is that it often takes much longer to conduct compared with other research (e.g., survey research), which poses a problem for meeting traditional tenure and promotion (T&P) requirements that privilege the amount of research produced rather than its quality and significance, and almost never its impacts on people. Additionally, some critics have dismissed engaged social justice research as political action rather than as research (e.g., Fish, 2004; Horowitz, 2006). Those critics have argued that research should be "value neutral" and "objective," although, ironically, they remain silent about the amount of research that serves the interests of powerful elites; more broadly, they neglect a longstanding critique of the very possibility of research objectivity and value neutrality.

The current U.S. university environment, thus, represents a difficult context for CAR, meaning that untenured faculty will have to balance conducting CAR (and other engaged communication research) with more traditional research (see, e.g., DeWine, 2005; Eschenfelder, 2011). Anderson (2014) suggested that because of the risks involved, engaged research should be conducted only by tenured faculty, but that recommendation is far too sweeping and would result in marginalization of such research (and teaching; see Jovanovic, 2014). Collective action by faculty members clearly is needed to confront this issue, but such university-focused activism confronts daunting institutional, corporate, and political obstacles.

Despite this challenging environment, faculty initiatives have the capacity to overcome resistance to CAR and other engaged communication research. For instance, engaged communication scholars have called for revised T&P requirements to recognize the value of that research (see, e.g., Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Eschenfelder, 2011), and many faculty members who conduct such research now serve on T&P committees. Additionally, NCA's newly formed Activism and Social Justice Division should spark formation of similar divisions in other communication scholarly associations and more CAR; as more CAR is conducted, presented, published, and referenced, and as more CAR scholars serve on journal editorial boards, more scholars (and students) will have claim to the respectability of CAR within the discipline and the academy. Moreover, CAR partnerships with scholars in other disciplines who are committed to promoting social justice (e.g., anthropologists and sociologists) will demonstrate CAR's collective thrust and expand the ability to defend CAR in the face of attacks. Although the increasing neoliberal character of universities may make these goals appear to be a daunting organizing and political challenge, faculty members in communication (and other disciplines) engaged in similar and ultimately successful struggles to legitimize, for example, applied communication, critical-cultural studies, and qualitative research. Hence, over time, these and related steps are constructing a university context in which engaged social justice scholarship is celebrated rather than questioned.

Future CAR studies need to confront these and other complex challenges, but, as mentioned here, research in this tradition has provided insights on how to manage these challenges. CAR scholars, thus, can overcome these challenges, integrating high-quality research with effective activism to make an important difference in the lives of those who experience oppression.

Conclusion

The social justice issues confronting contemporary societies never have been more dire and daunting, from income inequality, environmental degradation, and a global refugee crisis, to continuing forms of oppression that are linked to class, gender, race, and sexual orientation, to name but a few. Communication research (and teaching) has much to contribute to addressing these issues; unfortunately, that research, in general, and even engaged communication research have made few contributions, because communication researchers have not intervened enough into social justice struggles, choosing instead to examine disciplinary issues, critique unjust conditions, and/or intervene to accomplish other purposes. Communication researchers, for the most part, thus, have remained detached observers and critics of continuing oppression, with some of that work actually supporting oppressive processes and practices.

More than two decades ago, Conquergood (1995) argued that

we must choose between research that is “engaged” or “complicit.” By engaged I mean a clear-eyed, self-critical awareness that research does not proceed in epistemological purity or moral innocence. There is no immaculate perception. . . . As engaged intellectuals we understand that we are entangled within world systems of oppression and exploitation. . . . Our choice is to stand alongside or against domination, but not outside, above, or beyond it. (p. 85)

Communication activism research offers an explicit engaged approach to standing against domination and oppression. In that light, we hope that this essay and the responses to it in this forum stimulate discussion of communication activism research, but more important, we hope that more communication scholars conduct this form of engaged research that connects the communication discipline to significant social justice issues, to produce research that matters for the political moment in which we live.

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