



Missing in Action: Engaged U.S. Communication Research in the Context of Democratic Decline and the Digital Revolution

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I am flattered to be asked to respond to Kevin M. Carragee and Lawrence R. Frey's provocative essay calling for an embrace in the communication field of the engaged scholarship approach represented by communication activism research (CAR). Their argument overlaps my approach in several ways, although I prefer a different emphasis and framing in some important areas. I argue that the world is entering a rare historical period—a critical juncture—that, above all else, must define how the communication field is viewed. What I found lacking in Carragee and Frey's essay, consequently, was the absence of historical context and specificity. For that reason, there is a lack of ambition for critical research: CAR scholars assist those who are oppressed and dispossessed, and offer their service to them, which is all well and good, but there is much more to do.

Where I agree decidedly with Carragee and Frey is on the necessity of the communication field to recognize the legitimacy of critical work with an eye toward scholars intervening to promote progressive social change. The importance of our mutual concern cannot be exaggerated, especially when taking into account the historical context. Take the United States today: The economy is mired in deep stagnation; inequality and poverty are mushrooming; prisons are stuffed with poor, mostly non-White people to an extent that is unrivaled in human history; the environment is careening toward a point where, within generations, human life may not be sustainable; and militarism entirely is out of control. Very few people in the United States can even name all the nations where U.S. military action has taken place in the past few years; I follow world affairs closely, and I cannot provide a comprehensive list. Individuals under the age of 30 have no reason to understand how bizarre this state of affairs is for people in this or any other nation.

Moreover, the political system has been colonized entirely by wealthy and large corporations, with systematic corruption the order of the day. This no longer is even a controversial proposition, as several important studies by leading political scientists have come to this exact conclusion (see, e.g., Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). In this context, it is understandable that voter turnouts are absurdly low; in the 2014 U.S. congressional elections, only 41.9% of U.S. citizens 18 years or older voted, the lowest percentage in records kept from 1978 to 2014 (File, 2015), and, compared to the overall population, those voters were disproportionately older, richer, and whiter (see, e.g., Fulwood, 2014; "Older, Whiter, Righter," 2014).

That is roughly one-half the voter turnout found in most other democracies (see Nichols & McChesney, 2013). If Venezuela, Ecuador, or some other "enemy" state had such low and distorted turnouts, U.S. officials and news media would attack them ferociously as shams, and dismiss categorically government explanations as apologia for an indefensible system.

Media and communication are at the center of these developments. It is not merely the long-standing recognition that news media and culture play central roles in both reinforcing and making it possible to challenge the status quo; more important, the digital revolution is having an effect upon the political economy and culture of a similar magnitude to the printing press or the invention of writing and the alphabet. In just two decades, capitalism has become digitalized: In December 2015, the three most valuable firms in the U.S. economy (Apple, Alphabet [Google], and Microsoft), five of the eight most valuable firms, and 12 of the most valuable 31 corporations were Internet-based firms ("U.S. Commerce—Stock Market," 2015). Many of these firms did not exist a generation ago, and almost all of them are "monopolies" in the economic sense of the term: They are large enough to control their markets and to determine how much competition they face by what is most profitable for them. There are not many other Internet firms on the list of the 500 most valuable firms in the U.S. economy; all the action goes to a very small number of giants at the very top (see McChesney, 2013, especially chapter 3, which discussed constituent parts of the political economy of communication and their importance today).

Monopoly power spawns stagnation, inequality, and political corruption; it poses a fundamental challenge to democratic theory and practice. Simultaneously, commercial journalism is in free-fall collapse, as advertising in the digital era no longer needs to subsidize it, and traditional notions of privacy, from the government and from commercial interests, have evaporated. There also are many wonderfully progressive aspects of the digital revolution, and no shortage of academics and pundits trumpeting them. At every level, digital communication is turning the world upside down, for better and for worse.

This, therefore, is a rare historical moment when everything is changing very quickly and the outcome is very unclear. What is done now can shape tremendously how matters develop. That means there is added importance to the work of scholars, and, in particular, communication scholars; consequently, this should be the communication discipline's moment in the sun. If there is to be a democratic and humane resolution to the significant problems confronting society, it is imperative, for instance, that the extraordinary promise of communication technologies be put to their best possible use, and that they not be used primarily to advance the interests of those presently in power.

My sense is that this is only the beginning of the digital transformation of societies; for example, the astonishingly rapid development of artificial intelligence likely means that tens of millions of jobs will be replaced by robots or computers in the next decade or two (see McChesney & Nichols, 2016). That outcome could be a panacea that allows everyone to enjoy a life once reserved for the wealthy, or it could be a living nightmare of poverty and destitution if the social structure remains unchanged and all the benefits flow to the few at the top.

These developments should provide the context for a golden age for communication research on university campuses, not only in the United States but worldwide. All the great social issues and

institutions of these times should be under intense scrutiny and debate. As Carragee and Frey argue, this is a time when all disciplinary traditions have a role to play, and the need for interdisciplinary work is magnified. It is a time to think big, very big, because all social institutions are being challenged and will be transformed; even if a specific research project may seem framed narrowly, it must be done in recognition of the revolutionary context in which people are living.

Given these comments, I do not know whether to laugh or to cry when assessing the state today of communication research and programs at U.S. universities. To the untrained eye, it almost seems that there is a concerted effort to avoid anything of consequence that deals with the central communication issues of the times. The greatest criticism of contemporary university economics departments is that they are the last place to go to understand how capitalism actually works as a social and political system. I take no pleasure in observing that the point is approaching where some may say the same thing about communication departments and the digital revolution—that the communication discipline is becoming irrelevant. This “put on the blinders and keep doing pretty much what we have been doing for decades” approach is encouraged institutionally and has been internalized by most faculty members. Graduate students are taught to think this way and pushed into familiar, risk-free, unthreatening research paths. As Carragee and Frey contend, the ongoing corporatization of higher education reinforces this approach. (It is why the decommercialization of higher education, and the demand that it return to public service principles upon which it was founded, is one of the great issues of the day. It is why faculty unions are mandatory as the one layer of protection for the public and students, and, of course, for faculty and academic freedom.)

Hence, I am entirely sympathetic to Carragee and Frey’s mission to establish a beachhead for CAR in communication departments. If I sound pessimistic, it is because I have been fighting this battle my entire career. As one example from a bit later in my career, in my book *Communication Revolution* (2007), based on my research, as well as my work with Free Press (2016)—an organization that “fight[s] to save the free and open Internet, curb runaway media consolidation, protect press freedom, and ensure that diverse voices are represented in our media” (para. 2)—I argued that communication scholars needed to play a crucial role in understanding the great issues of the time and shaping the coming era. I made the case for having the political economy of communication be accepted and embraced as a necessary subfield in every credible department, much like Carragee and Frey argue for CAR. I argued that the field of communication needed to be interdisciplinary, be open-minded, and take risks, asking big questions and not being afraid of big answers. If the communication discipline did these things, it could escape its purgatory as a backwater field and leapfrog to the center of intellectual dynamism. I had grounds for optimism, because it seemed that many leading communication departments were moving in that direction, such as those at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, New York University, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Southern California.

Alas, I fear that the communication discipline is farther from shore today than it was in 2007. The gravitational pull of institutional factors has overwhelmed the case for making communication a discipline that is intent on going eyeball to eyeball with the digital revolution. My pessimism is informed by what has happened where I have worked since 1999: the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. When I arrived, the university, generally, was regarded worldwide as the center of critical communication work in

the United States. It was exactly the place where the big issues of the digital revolution should have been incorporated into the heart of research and teaching. Today, for a variety of reasons (e.g., political timidity, funders' apprehension, and the rigidity of established mainstream practices)—and I regret that I did not do more to prevent that outcome—that tradition is on a fast track to being all but entirely extinguished.

Free Press, meanwhile, prospered in the past decade, and it now is the leading media reform organization in the United States, if not the world, but the deep alliances that I had hoped to establish between it and academics have been halting. The COMPASS program, coordinated by the Annenberg School at Penn (<http://compassconsortium.org>), has done impressive work linking PhD students with communication policy makers. However, I had hoped that researchers would work with activist groups with a more grassroots orientation, and that this collaboration would benefit both parties, but, largely, that remains to be done.

The case for legitimizing CAR becomes vastly stronger in the political context that I have laid out here. Carragee and Frey actually are too modest in their assessment of the current crisis and their demands upon scholars. An emphasis on working on individual social justice campaigns begs the question of what is the overall objective. Where does this work lead? What world do they envision, where does communication fit in, and how do we get there? Do we just add up a stack of microvictories and, suddenly, get a society that does not produce routinely so much injustice? I do not think that is how social change works; it comes in democratic waves when many ideas that, once, were thought to be marginal become mainstream and a flurry of radical reforms ensue. A victory won in isolation of broader social change will likely not be sustainable unless it is a victory in an area about which wealthy interests are apathetic or are divided. In that scenario, the present crisis of the political system will grow ever more severe with mounting economic, environmental, and social problems. There is going to be increased pressure to weaken what remains of democratic institutions and practices and, in its wake, the resurgence worldwide of fascist politics—in fact, that already is occurring.

The way out must be through a reinvigoration and vast expansion of democratic practices and values. Such expansion, in fact, is the only way out if the goal is a humane and sustainable future, a world worth living in—a world, to use Carragee and Frey's nomenclature, where social justice is the norm and not something that is on perpetual thin ice. Specific battles must be won, of course, but social justice campaigns must have a broader vision that guides, motivates, and draws people together. *It is imperative that communication scholars work to provide that broader narrative, that larger context, to inform the specific struggles for social justice.* This broader narrative must include an understanding of capitalism and its relationships to democracy, the environment, and militarism, as well as a historical sense of social change and alternative courses of action. Without that broader narrative, even microvictories will be difficult to win, and, if won, they may prove ephemeral. With social change, especially in times of crisis and sweeping change, a lot will either be won or lost—there is not much in between.

It was this belief that motivated my effort to elevate political economy in communication research, and I believe that without a political economic component, CAR could end up tilting at windmills. CAR then will seem either inconsequential or ridiculously orthogonal to the mainstream world of corporate-

supported/supportive communication research. What political economy provides is a context that explains how the entire system works, allowing various types of injustice and their intersections to be explained in relationship to economic, political, and other forms of power. Political economy was an exploding area of communication research in the 1970s, but with the decline of social movements and activism, it has been all but eliminated in the United States and, to a lesser extent, hopefully, in the rest of the world. Its rejuvenation is mandatory for CAR to be muscular, win important victories, and to generate fear in those who benefit most by present inequities.

In particular, I have emphasized the importance of studying the history of media policy struggles and efforts to establish independent media organizations and systems. If media have important effects and if media structures influence significantly, if not determine, the nature of media content and effects, debates and struggles over policies that determine those structures are the nucleus of the communication atom. In current debates over the future of the digital revolution, those policies can be of singular importance to scholars and activists. This research can be of great value to contemporary activists and is necessary as a foundation for CAR scholars—or, at least, CAR scholars for whom media are a central concern.

Truth be told, though, even if CAR scholars embraced that approach, it would not get very far with academic administrators, any more than my plea for political economy and policy work did a decade ago. Dominant patterns in the communication field, unfortunately, are impervious to rational arguments if they go against dominant institutional practices.

Those dominant patterns, however, are not immune to change. Indeed, the history of the communication field reveals that the two great moments when there was a burst of legitimacy for critical work came when there was tremendous social upheaval in the broader society: the 1930s (see McChesney, 2007) and the period that I know better, the 1960s. In the late 1960s and well into the 1970s, popular activism by those who were dispossessed, as well as pressure from university students, forced the communication field to allow space for critical work, to connect communication to concerns for social justice and democracy. That is the space I inhabited when I came to the field in the 1980s, but even then, it was clear that once activism declined off-campus, critical work was on precarious footing in the academy; that, more than anything, explains the decline of critical work to its present state.

This is the source of my optimism, for the United States and for the communication field. As conditions have grown more severe for countless people in the United States and elsewhere, they are beginning to turn to radical politics to address root causes, meaning a hard evaluation of all dominant institutions and their legitimacy. This point goes entirely against the conventional wisdom that most people in the United States are permanently and hopelessly apolitical, if not ignorant, or that they are enthralled so deeply with the inherent genius of the status quo that they will “shop ‘til they drop” and never consider changing the system.

Because readers may think, possibly, that I have been indulging in hallucinogenic drugs to offer up this heresy, allow me to explain. For starters, the apathy and depoliticization exhibited by so many people in the United States is not something that enters the DNA once one crosses the border from

Canada or Mexico; it is a learned behavior. That “depoliticization” also is no accident. After the upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s, U.S. elites in the 1970s were candid about their concern to depoliticize the nation, because “democracy” worked best if a large part of the population—generally, those who were poor and dispossessed—did not participate and, instead, let the “natural” rulers rule. This became a stated and explicit goal (see McChesney & Nichols, 2016, chapter 4), and the campaign has been a smashing success until now. However, in the past decade, especially the last five years, there has been a sea change in U.S. Americans’ attitudes, especially among the young, concerning the deterioration of life in the United States. The massive uprisings of 2011 were just a glimmer of what is happening. The polling that finds repeatedly U.S. Americans under 30 favoring socialism over capitalism is another change. If there were much of a news media remaining in the United States, there would be broader public awareness of the vast growth of activism on climate change, against racist police violence, and to get money out of political elections. The Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, which befuddled entirely conventional wisdom, drew spectacular support from young U.S. Americans. Another world is not only possible, it is necessary. The Rubicon has been crossed, so to speak: Politics no longer is a lifestyle choice; increasingly, it is a matter of survival.

Second, there is a persistent bias to assume that tomorrow always will look like today, which looked like yesterday, because that is the case 99.99% of the time. The understandable bias is to think that social change is implausible, which means that even the smartest observers almost never predict sweeping social change before it happens. Even in South Africa, just a year or two before Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, many anti-apartheid activists thought that the prospect of peaceful social change was the worst that it had ever been in their lifetimes, with an activist who was a good friend telling me in 1988 that it was hopeless.

In fact, scanning the United States today, there are signs that the nation is poised for radical change. Scholars’ job is not to make crazy predictions, like filling out brackets for the March Madness NCAA Basketball Tournament; it is to do what is possible to understand what is happening and to see that there is peaceful change that promotes social justice, sustainable economies, and democracy. It is a future that bodes well for a wave of interest in CAR and social justice, in general. Nothing, however, is guaranteed; if scholars do nothing or give up hope, there still will be change—because, after all, this is a turbulent period,—but it will be change that is determined by those elites who now make decisions, which is an unacceptable option.

Because I am unusually optimistic about a rebirth of popular small “d” democratic politics in the United States and worldwide, CAR’s arrival as a distinct form of engaged communication scholarship might be at just the right time for it to succeed, if it thinks big and understands the broader context being experienced. I know that there is a growing legion of undergraduate and graduate students at the ready.

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