

Kevin M. Carragee, **Communication Activism Research for Social Justice: Engaged Research, Collective Action, and Political Change**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2024, 205 pp., \$43.99 (paperback).

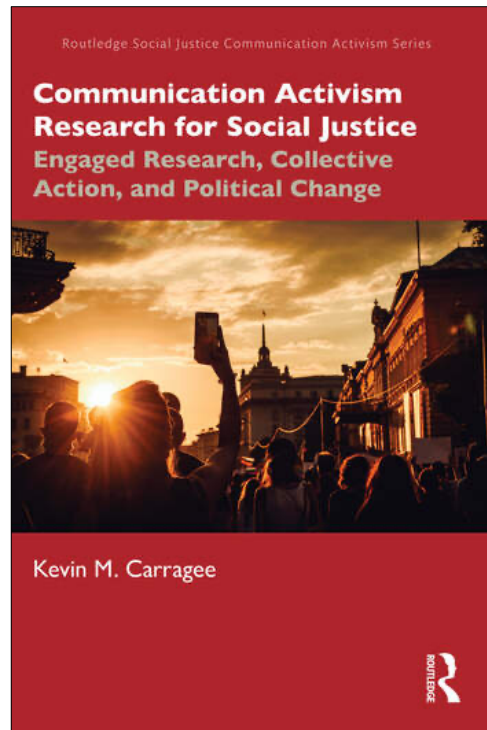
Reviewed by
Billie Murray
Villanova University

In the early 2000s, I found myself pursuing a graduate degree in communication after spending about three years working in the corporate and nonprofit worlds. During this time, I was an “activist on the side,” and I did not want to lose my activist identity. I loved critical and rhetorical inquiry but wondered how I could bring these two parts of my work and identity together, how I could be an activist and a scholar. I was then introduced to a relatively new area in the field of communication—scholar-activist research—one that took seriously the idea that research *could be* for the common good, *should be* focused on and with activists, and *would be* important in the pursuit of social justice.

Now, more than 20 years later, it is my privilege to have the opportunity to review this book, **Communication Activism Research for Social Justice: Engaged Research, Collective Action, and Political Change**, which provides a superb overview of what communication activism research (CAR) is (chapter 1), where it came from and how it can work (chapter 2), and where it is going in the future (chapters 4 and 5). It would have been wonderful to have a book like this in my early years as a scholar-activist, and I am excited to know that such a book is available for subsequent generations of students. Although solidly grounded in the field of communication, this book has great interdisciplinary appeal, serving as an important tool for students, pedagogues, activists, and researchers who want to continue to learn about and conduct CAR.

As Kevin Carragee argues on the very first page of the introduction, “making communication research matter demands that the communication discipline address the most significant issues of our time and to do so in a way that assists historically marginalized communities in their quest for social justice” (p. 1). Both of the key goals of the book, to provide a comprehensive introduction to CAR and to define CAR as a distinct form of engaged scholarship, are clearly met and make the book an excellent point of entry for emerging scholar-activists. This book provides an excellent choice for those teaching research methods at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, or for early career scholars, as it provides both theoretical grounding and on-the-ground CAR applications and examples.

Chapter 1, “Communication Activism Research, Social Justice, and Collective Action,” traces a host of social justice problems that desperately need continued focus. Carragee provides a succinct but thorough overview of many of the issues CAR is poised to address—police violence, wealth inequality and poverty,



BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and women's continuing struggles, the global refugee and climate crises, and the imbricated threats to democratic norms and institutions, among others. Such a litany of problems can be overwhelming, but Carragee takes care to trace the types of scholarship meant to address these issues and sharing his great hope for scholars' work "interacting with community stakeholders to produce knowledge to solve community problems and serve the public good" (p. 15).

The chapter's biggest strength is its focus on CAR's characteristics in practice, which Carragee argues are what distinguish CAR from other forms of research. This provides a clear pathway for teachers to guide students' exploration of those issues that motivate their particular social justice and academic impulses. Carragee is careful to distinguish critique from collaborative interaction as he explores how communication researchers *engage with* oppressed communities or activists via direct action that supports community efforts. In distinguishing CAR from other forms of research in his many examples, Carragee takes care to highlight how CAR works to accomplish the goal of praxis. Theoretically informed CAR is essential for understanding how CAR is not just *activism*; it is *research*. The theoretical pluralism inherent in CAR contributes to its interdisciplinary appeal and makes it a viable option for all areas in the field of communication, with examples of CAR scholarship in journalism; interpersonal, group, and organizational communication; health communication; intercultural communication; rhetoric; performance studies; and media studies.

Chapter 2, "Influences on Communication Activism Research," looks into the many theoretical approaches that have contributed to CAR, including applied communication research, social movement scholarship, feminist research, and critical cultural studies (including organizational communication, critical rhetoric, and media studies, specifically). This extensive review of CAR-related literature is particularly useful to early career or graduate student scholars who are looking to both expand and refine their expertise in the history of this area and its many forms.

Chapter 3, "Challenges in Communication Activism Research," details areas of possible concern for those engaging CAR both in terms of the activism engaged by researchers, as well as the challenges that may come from studying that activism within the confines of university contexts. This chapter continues to use a number of successful CAR interventions across many subfields to balance these challenges with a sense of optimism that researchers committed to CAR can overcome through collective action (p. 148). The honest assessment of the difficulties facing CAR is important for scholar-activists to engage and reflect on as they take on these complex contexts. The CAR interventions detailed in the chapter, though, provide hopeful exemplars for how researchers have resisted and/or overcome these challenges to create quite an inspiring compendium overall.

Complementing the foundations of CAR reviewed in chapter 2 with more of an explicit focus on method, chapter 4, "Methodological Issues in Communication Activism Research," tackles the ongoing fight for legitimacy of CAR in terms of its ability to produce knowledge—the primary goal of research in all areas of the academy. Carragee is clear in the very first paragraph that "CAR needs to be understood as an epistemological perspective, advancing a particular philosophical approach to how knowledge is constructed" (p. 155). Such a perspective calls for a methodological pluralism that produces knowledge by engaging with different ways of knowing, especially those that arise from the collaborative moments between researchers

and the communities they work with in the pursuit of social justice. It is this co-creation of knowledge that transforms "communication activism into communication activism research" (p. 155).

The concluding chapter, "Lessons Learned from Communication Activism Research," provides an examination of eight lessons learned from conducting and writing about CAR. Some are mentioned above, but others, including Lesson 2, focus on the unique benefits of conducting CAR in the researcher's local community, not simply for ease of conducting research but to pursue opportunities for *localized* civic engagement and support of marginalized communities. Lesson 3 connects this local focus to the importance of collaboration and connection to *broader* social movements. In Lesson 4, Carragee argues that "CAR's ability to cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries in communication takes on added significance given the often-criticized fragmentation of communication research" (p. 189). Such fragmentation can also be addressed by Lesson 5, which calls for increased dialogue and debate among CAR and other, complementary, communication research. Such dialogues, Carragee argues, can improve the quality of scholarship through a focus on best practices across different subfields.

In pursuing the coproduction of knowledge, Lesson 7 reminds us that "CAR places additional *demands and opportunities* on scholar-activists" in terms of time commitments, forging relationships across differences, and emotional tolls, among others (p. 191; emphasis in original). Carragee reminds us though, through Lesson 8, of the very real intellectual and emotional benefits of CAR interventions. For example, CAR creates opportunities to make meaningful change in collaboration with local communities while also providing "cognitive and emotional rewards" through the process of CAR itself (p. 193).

As a final point, I would like to draw attention to Carragee's plea that we continue addressing decades of exploitative, colonizing, and harmful research conducted on (not with) minoritized communities. I agree that CAR can play an important role in repairing these historically harmful relationships between researchers and oppressed communities, as CAR "explicitly stands against domination and oppression" (p. 41). The focus on relationship building and collaborative research (both in process and product) provides pragmatic ways to put that commitment into practice. Communication research for social justice matters, and in our current moment characterized by attacks on academic research, activists' work, free speech, and critical pedagogy about such efforts, it matters more than ever.

Carragee's clear focus on the importance of: 1) forming relations with and learning about community partners' social justice needs, 2) using research methods to study communication activism interventions, and 3) reporting CAR (particularly helpful for those new to the research and publication process in general) will be an important addition to the libraries of students and teachers in this area for years to come. As I return to thinking about that graduate student ready to engage in research for social justice, I am grateful that early career scholars have access to a volume such as this to guide them theoretically, methodologically, and ethically through the challenges and benefits of communication activism research.