



Critical-Cultural Communication Activism Research Calls for Academic Solidarity

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This essay underscores Kevin M. Carragee and Lawrence R. Frey’s call for communication researchers to engage in more interventions to advance social justice. Furthermore, I argue that communication activism research (CAR) and critical-cultural communication research (CCCR) make productive partners because both approaches oppose oppression. Several recent critical-cultural CAR and CAR-enabling research projects illustrate such productive potential, suggest ways to overcome obstacles, and explain how to realize social justice within and beyond the academy. Finally, I call for academic solidarity as a force that will enable social justice to be achieved, as CCCR and CAR intend.

Common Aims, Common Problems

Critical-cultural communication research draws on an array of “critical” and “cultural” perspectives. Broadly speaking, critical communication research is “critical” of systems of oppression, such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, heteronormativity, ableism, and empiricism, among others. Here, *critical* means “capable of passing judgment on social realities . . . [that are] undesirable, unjust, or ‘inverted’, to use Marx’s expression” (Larrain, 1996, p. 62).¹ CCCR comes out of Marxist and neo-Marxist schools of analyzing media and culture, including the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham School, as well as Foucauldian, poststructuralist, postmodernist, postcolonialist, feminist, queer, critical race, and other perspectives that center on systems of oppression. Thus, critical-cultural communication scholarship is interdisciplinary and multiperspectival. Some critical scholars draw closely from Marx (e.g., Fuchs, 2016; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016), whereas others apply neo-Marxist critiques of capitalism to analyze antidemocratic media systems (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2001) and to highlight activism that uses media to promote democracy and fair working conditions (e.g., Downing, 2001; Kumar, 2007). Still others study interlocking systems of domination, such as White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, in hopes of raising people’s consciousness to change lived realities (e.g., Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984).

The *cultural* in critical-cultural studies refers to scholars’ object of study (e.g., analyzing aspects of culture, such as media or everyday life) or to perspectives that take culture into account. Admittedly, there is no consensus on the meaning of “critical-cultural studies of communication,” and, in fact, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, on the occasion of journal’s 10th anniversary, devoted an

¹ “Inverted” social relations, in Marx’s (1867/1909) conceptualization, are upside down in reality and appearance. For example, wages are exploitative inverted relations that hide workers’ labor beyond that for which they are paid and, thereby, generate profits for employers.

issue (Volume 10, Issue 2–3) to defining keywords highlighted in the journal's title. Despite the interdisciplinary nature of critical-cultural studies and the many debates that have taken place about its directions, one enduring characteristic of CCCR is its opposition to what Lazarsfeld (1941) called "administrative research." Such research aids the administration of public and private organizations, and it tends to benefit elites by promoting their interests (e.g., in assisting marketing of products or services) or by not disrupting the status quo. The "critical" in "critical-cultural" research, thus, signifies opposition to an oppressive status quo—a shared opposition that makes CCCR and CAR productive partners.

Before exploring that partnership, it is worth considering one aspect of CCCR that Carragee and Frey, in their essay, signal as a potential barrier to critical-cultural CAR. Carragee and Frey argue that their diagnosis of CCCR's failure to engage in CAR "connects to a long-standing critique of cultural studies regarding its declining political character over time and its neglect of issues related to power distribution" (p. 13). In reviewing research, Carragee and Frey assert that CCCR's lack of CAR stems from a disciplinary focus on polysemic texts. The work that Carragee and Frey cited, furthermore, faulted media and cultural studies for applying Hall's (1980) classic "encoding/decoding" model in ways that led to celebrating active audiences at the expense of political engagement. Leaving aside arguments about whether correlation gave way to causation, in this case of CCCR's neglect of activism, it also is possible that embracing active audiences may have had the opposite effect: raising expectations for their political engagement. Thus, the relevant question to ask about CCCR's lack of CAR may be why, *despite* the cultural studies tradition of embracing active, resistant audiences, is there not more CAR in CCCR? Additionally, given CCCR's opposition to oppression and to administrative research that enables it, why is there not more critical-cultural CAR?

One answer is that, generally speaking, critical-cultural researchers face similar challenges as do other communication scholars when considering whether and how to integrate activism with research. Critical-cultural communication scholars experience problems that Carragee and Frey outline, such as the potential to exploit people with whom CAR scholars engage, difficulty evaluating movements, and working in academic environments that are unsupportive of CAR (e.g., lacking supportive colleagues, funding, or the time necessary to conduct CAR).

Critical-cultural scholars also may experience these problems in discipline-specific ways. According to some critical-cultural scholars who engage in activism but do not write about it in their research, such writing risks exposing activists' strategies before they are ready to go public.² Additionally, as I discuss in the conclusion, some critical-cultural scholars may fear being fired for their activism. Adding to these barriers, paradoxically, is critical-cultural scholars' long-standing opposition to administrative research, which, in some ways, mirrors resistance to applied communication research when it was viewed as being too practical (e.g., too involved with the world beyond an imagined ivory tower) and, therefore, not theoretical enough to be academic (although, as Carragee and Frey point out, communication scholars have come to embrace that form of scholarly research). Thus, CCCR's enduring opposition to administrative research may make some scholars wary of engaged research, even when it

² This comment draws from a discussion at the 2015 Union for Democratic Communications Conference about campus labor activism.

involves activists seeking social justice. Finally, given the corporatization of higher education that Carragee and Frey underscore as an obstacle to CAR, CCCR scholars, similar to other academic workers, may experience "intellectual and spiritual malaise" that gives way to "a profound disinclination on the part of students and scholars alike to take the 'risk of critique'" (Hearn, 2013, p. 273). If critique of oppressive political and cultural systems appears risky, intervening directly in struggles for social justice may appear even more so to researchers working in an atmosphere of perpetual (and manufactured) budget crises and austerity measures.

These barriers, however, have not precluded CCCR scholars from conducting CAR and research that includes components of CAR. Such work provides insights into how to nurture further critical-cultural CAR and illustrates how CAR and CCCR may support each other. It is worth noting that, despite obstacles to and risks of doing such critical and activist research, the following studies were conducted by pretenured scholars. I return to some implications of this tendency in the conclusion.

Critical-Cultural Communication Activism Research

As Cultural Workers Organize (n.d.), a "research project on collective responses to precarity," and books by Todd Wolfson (2014), Karma Chávez (2013), Sheena Howard (2014), and Erin Rand (2014) have demonstrated, critical-cultural studies scholars are working as activists for social justice and are outlining paths for partnerships between CCCR and CAR. Although the following works do not reflect consistently on those scholars' direct participation as activists in movements and organizations, they make valuable contributions to critical-cultural CAR. The conclusion pushes such contributions by considering the necessity of embracing solidarity to encourage more critical-cultural CAR and to refocus the social justice goals of higher education.

Cultural Workers Organize (CWO), a collaboration among communication scholars Enda Brophy, Nicole Cohen, and Greig de Peuter, exemplifies key principles of CAR. Drawing on Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques of capitalism, in addition to critiquing new forms of labor exploitation, CWO works with and for workers in cultural and communication industries (including journalists, actors, writers, computer and software workers, and unions, such as the Communication Workers of America and the United Scenic Artists) (see, e.g., Brophy, Cohen, & de Peuter, 2016; de Peuter & Cohen, 2015a, 2015b). Putting CAR's elements into practice, these scholars have interviewed activists and worked with them on various labor mobilizing actions, informational forums, and reforms in labor practice and policy. For example, CWO has created public forums in which activists have discussed policy changes, such as Cohen and de Peuter's (2015a) interview with advocates for unpaid interns, who suggested, among other policy changes, that labor laws need to be revised such that all interns are paid and covered by health and safety laws. That interview appeared in the special issue of an open-access academic journal that de Peuter, Cohen, and Brophy (2015) edited, with contributors critiquing and calling for stricter regulation of internship labor. Cohen and de Peuter (2015b) also published an essay about the strategy employed by Working Activists for a Great Economy (W.A.G.E.) to abolish nonpayment of artists via a voluntary certification program for art institutions that pays artists according to W.A.G.E.'s fee schedule. The CWO (n.d.) also has tracked the progress of labor activist organizations "to confront precarity, or the financial and social insecurity exacerbated by unstable employment" (para. 1).

By critiquing the very system in which cultural workers labor, and through their research of these organizations' activism, Brophy et al. have advanced activists' goals. As explained on the website, CWO (n.d.) aims to not only assess critically the celebratory promises of a "creative economy," but also [to] contribute to a labour movement that has had difficulty adapting to the growth of flexible employment and knowledge-intensive, communicative, and cultural work" (para. 1). Although Brophy et al. are faculty members in Canadian universities, they study labor organizing beyond their nation's borders by examining this process in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States.

The CWO project has been prolific in terms of research and activism. CWO has generated more than a dozen scholarly publications and almost as many translational writings, the latter of which receive little attention by CAR scholars, as Carragee and Frey note. Performing a key aspect of CAR, CWO also evaluates the success of activist interventions, as does a translational essay on journalists' labor union organizing (Cohen, 2016). Additionally, CWO upends the notion that critical, activist communication research must eschew administrative funding, because the project was made possible with a grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. CWO, however, does not publish articles about the activist interventions in which Brophy, Cohen, and de Peuter have engaged directly (first-person-perspective research); consequently, on this point, CWO departs from CAR. Nevertheless, CWO demonstrates the fruitfulness of critical-cultural CAR as an intellectual and political project wherein communication scholars work closely with and as activists.

Four recent books suggest how CCCR scholars might partner with CAR scholars to achieve their mutual aims of ending oppression. First, Wolfson's (2014) book *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* draws on his participation in left media movements to trace the origins of a new type of social movement organization, and, in so doing, it offers insights into how CCCR may inform CAR projects. Preparing readers for his critical historiography on left social movements' use of digital media networks (beginning with the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Independent Media Center [IMC] in Seattle, and ending with Occupy Wall Street), Wolfson described how his activism in these movements informed his theorizing: "My political and intellectual journey has colored my understanding of the logic of the Cyber Left—a fact that emerges throughout this text" (p. 7). As a participant-activist intervening in problems that he studied, Wolfson gleaned insights that he could not have as a detached observer (see Rodino-Colocino, 2011, 2012). Illustrative of this dynamic, Wolfson admitted to being first "captivated" by the "seemingly limitless possibilities at the intersection of networks, social media, and participatory democracy" (p. 7). Following this captivation period, however, Wolfson recognized disparities that the Cyber Left helped to reproduce in its embrace of technology and penchant for White (cis and straight), male, college-educated leaders.

Although *Digital Rebellion* did not elaborate on Wolfson's (2014) activism, and, for this reason, the book may not exemplify pure CAR, the book was CAR-enabling, because the activism and research in which Wolfson engaged to write it led to his cofounding of the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP; <http://mediamobilizing.org>). Realizing the limits of Cyber Left media, Wolfson built a coalition with activists with whom he had worked while researching *Digital Rebellion* to found MMP as an organization that helps other social justice organizations to use media. MMP supports organizations representing public schools, new immigrant women domestic workers, labor unions, and landless workers in Brazil, to share

some examples. That *Digital Rebellion* begat MMP illustrates its success in achieving a central CAR tenet of “communication scholars using their communication knowledge to work with oppressed communities and activists to *intervene* [emphasis added] into unjust social conditions to make them more just” (Carragee & Frey, this Special Section). Perhaps future scholarly and translational works on MMP’s founding, objectives, interventions, and strategies will demonstrate how this work constitutes CAR, and how it may inspire other collaborations between CCCR and CAR scholars.

Second, Chávez’s (2013) book *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* detailed elements of critical-cultural CAR. Chávez discussed how her activism in immigrant and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movements informed the book’s analysis of “coalitional moments” (p. 8) and mobilizing rhetoric. Chávez described, specifically, how her long-standing activism in queer rights movements and more recent activism as an Arizona resident informed her scholarly analysis and prompted her “activist research project” (p. 115) that studied coalitions between the LGBTQ group Wingspan and the immigrants’ rights group Coalicion de Derechos Humanos.

Abandoning first-person discussion of her activism (including interventions in which she engaged) for a third-person, analytical style in much of the book about those groups’ activism, *Queer Migration Politics* shares insights into how critical-cultural scholars may overcome obstacles to CAR. By identifying as a member of the groups that she studied, Chávez (2013) reduced the potential to exploit those group members and, therefore, earned their trust. Thus, by working *with* and *as* a member of the oppressed groups that she studied, Chávez showed how acting locally may overcome (or, at least, ease) concerns about exploitation of such groups. Chávez also intended for her book to speak to scholarly and activist audiences, “because I am an activist as well as a scholar. I am also a queer (cisgender), U.S. citizen Chicana whose communities and networks are affected by the things I write about” (p. 16). Moreover, Chávez’s work suggests that creating inclusive environments in the academy is key to enabling scholars to conduct research with and as members of oppressed groups.

Third, similar to Chávez (2013), Rand (2014), author of *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance*, also works *with* and *as* a member of an oppressed community being studied. Aimed at academic readers, the book urged scholars to act in the academy. By documenting the street activist work of queer movement associations, such as the Lesbian Avengers and ACT UP; providing a genealogy of academic queer studies; and putting the two spheres of work in conversation, *Reclaiming Queer* showed that knowledge production is a problem needing activism for social justice. Queer activism, as Rand showed, gave rise to queer theorizing that questioned the disciplining categories of gender and sexuality, and that exposed Western thought’s heteronormativity. Thus, Queer Street and intellectual activism, at least in part, can be thanked for the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court’s upholding of marriage equality and for the 2016 federal guidelines that recognize transgender public school students’ right to use bathrooms of the gender with which they identify. The book may not represent pure CAR, because it did not reflect on Rand’s interventions with activist groups, but, nonetheless, *Reclaiming Queer* called on academics to transform the very process of intellectual production, chose the academy as a site for queer activism, and sought to smash heteronormativity as an oppressive system. Thus, early in her analysis, Rand urged readers to flip the admonition: “What might it mean to ask not how theory is put into practice but how practice is put into theory?” (p. 11). Responding to Carragee and Frey’s question about how CCCR

uses the term "intervention," I read *Reclaiming Queer* as seeking to *intervene* in the academy, to make it and the wider sociopolitical world more socially just. Put plainly, Rand challenged readers to view academic institutions and their production of knowledge as "the scene of the real fight" (p. 11).

Fourth, Howard's (2014) book *Black Queer Identity Matrix: Towards an Integrated Queer of Color Framework* also underscored the social justice stakes of knowledge production. Howard agreed broadly with Rand (2014) that the academy is a key scene in the fight for social justice, but for Black lesbian scholars (a "triple jeopardy minority group"; p. xv), their historic marginalization calls for knowledge production that takes matrices of oppression into account to smash them. Although this book did not constitute a pure CAR approach, because it did not discuss Howard's interventions with specific activist groups, it illuminated how Black lesbians negotiate their sexual identities, and, in this way, it can inform a CAR project. Thus, in addition to making the academy inclusive of queer studies and queer people, Howard's and Rand's books promote a broader CCCR goal of transforming the "ethical machinery" (Bennett, 2013, p. 108) in which academics work. Recalling the common ground, CCCR and CAR communication scholars should partner to translate analyses, such as those by Howard and Rand, into activist interventions in the academy and beyond.

Conclusion: Intellectual Activism and Academic Solidarity

Carragee and Frey conclude their essay by calling on communication scholars to eschew the myth that they can stand outside of the problems being studied. The political and intellectual benefits of jettisoning that belief may be the most valuable element that links the CCCR projects and books discussed here. Wolfson's (2014) and Chávez's (2013) books demonstrated the intellectual and political fruitfulness of abandoning this myth by conducting research as activists; Howard's (2014) and Rand's (2014) books called for scholars to take action for social justice inside the academy; and Brophy et al.'s CWO work demonstrated how fruitful critical-cultural CAR can be, especially as federally funded labor activist research and as translational work.

By working within and beyond academic circles, these projects demonstrated the value of engaging in what Patricia Hill Collins (2013), drawing from late-20th-century social movements, called *intellectual activism*, which involves both "speaking truth to power" and "speaking truth to the people" (pp. xii, xiii). Following this critical insight, and as implied in the works discussed here, doing research that intervenes in movements for social justice means speaking to academics and wider publics, and to *academics as wider publics*. Thus, to produce a supportive climate for CAR, academics need to change the very system in which they work. Academics need to recognize, as Rand (2014) did, that the academy is a "real" battleground and, consequently, engage in CAR in that workplace. The education system—which includes research, teaching, and service—therefore, must support social justice.

Communication scholars, and critical-cultural communication scholars in particular, are especially equipped to work as intellectual activists who critique, oppose, and act self-reflexively against systems of oppression, including higher education when it promotes injustice. The CCCR discussed here points to questions that should be asked to encourage the intellectual activism that will produce more CAR and more socially just academic labor conditions: How do policies, cultural attitudes, unquestioned rituals,

evaluation rubrics, even the hours that faculty members are expected to keep (and often exceed), and other aspects of academic production uphold systems of oppression? How can academic production function in more democratic ways that respect all scholars' voices, despite the many matrices of domination in which scholars work? What coalitions should scholars build, and how might these coalitions transcend notions of "inside" and "outside" the academy? How can academic disciplines, campuses, programs, and associations become spaces for social justice? Answers to these questions should guide academics' research, teaching, and service, and they should inform critical-cultural CAR, more specifically.

Central to such work is producing activist academic spaces. Such spaces must include intellectual and activist safe spaces, where scholars feel comfortable and are protected when planning activist interventions into social problems (i.e., free from harassment and threats and, instead, nurtured and encouraged). In Fall 2015, University of Missouri (Mizzou) students were trying to create such a space in which to strategize when protesting racist threats against students and calling for top administrators' resignations (and, ultimately, succeeding after a hunger strike by a graduate student that was supported by a striking football team and its sympathetic coach). Inspired partly by Black Lives Matter, Mizzou's Black liberation movement illustrates the extent to which colleges and universities are scenes of very real struggles. Moreover, Mizzou's Assistant Professor Melissa Click was fired in February 2016 for stopping a person who claimed to be a student sports journalist from breaching the "safe-space" line in the 2015 protests. As Click's firing showed all too clearly, supporting students' safe spaces without a wider academic one is risky business, indeed. That firing also may have—and may be intended to have—a chilling effect on scholar-activists. Such a chilly climate imperils scholars' engagement in CAR.

Despite such risks, emerging scholars are undertaking critical-cultural CAR. Drawing on Black liberation activism related to that which led to Click's firing, Chenjerai Kumanyika (2016) reflected on his participation in Black Lives Matter in Missouri and elsewhere to examine how the metaphor of war applied to the militarization of U.S. police and police violence against Black bodies. This activist-inspired reflection led Kumanyika to call for Black Lives Matter to reject that metaphor.

More research like Kumanyika's (2016) is needed, research produced at risk to the lives and livelihoods of those who produce it. Thus, academics should create climates that support and overcome challenges to CAR, and that nurture partnerships between CCCR and CAR scholars. Senior faculty members should join Carragee, Frey, and the scholars authoring essays in this Special Section to take risks in producing CAR, and in guaranteeing socially just academic environments for students and faculty. Creating an academic climate in which social justice activism research can grow, however, will require intellectual activism and academic solidarity, meaning that scholars from across programs, associations, disciplines, campuses, local communities, regional areas, and national borders must have each other's backs in academic solidarity. Organizations that may generate such support include academic labor unions, associations, and networks. Critical-cultural CAR must contribute to these organizing efforts, because realizing social justice within and beyond the academy demands critique of oppressive systems, intervention to make those systems more just, and solidarity between all those working to achieve social justice.

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