



## **Seizing the Social Justice Opportunity: Communication Activism Research at a Politically Critical Juncture**

### *Epilogue*

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We thank J. Kevin Barge, Robert W. McChesney, and Michelle Rodino-Colocino for their thought-provoking responses—from their respective perspectives of applied communication research (ACR), media studies, and critical-cultural communication research (CCCR)—to our essay explicating communication activism research (CAR) as a distinct form of engaged communication research. This response acknowledges important connections among our views of engaged communication scholarship, in general, and CAR, in particular, and focuses on some specific points on which we might disagree.

Clearly, and most important, we all are interested in seeing more engaged communication research conducted that makes an important difference in people's lives, especially with regard to promoting social justice, because, as McChesney points out, the significant crises that the world is experiencing make this a decisive moment—a "critical juncture." In that light, Rodino-Colocino views opposition to oppression as the *raison d'être* for CCCR, and she encourages those scholars "to engage in more [CAR] interventions to advance social justice" (Rodino-Colocino, this Special Section). McChesney has devoted his professional life, both through scholarly writing and involvement with media reform organizations, to promoting access to media by members of oppressed and underresourced communities, to counter capitalist ideologies and practices, and to promote social justice, although he is the most critical regarding the communication discipline's ability, given its current state, to accomplish CAR's goals. Barge champions connections between ACR and CAR for promoting social justice, although he is concerned with confronting an array of other "ethical, social, and civic problems . . . [through] collaboration between academic and nonacademic communities of practice . . . [that] cocreates and coproduces knowledge" (Barge, this Special Section). We, thus, all agree on the need for engaged communication research, in general, and engaged social justice communication research, in particular, and there are many important connections that these scholars identify between CAR and the research perspectives (or "discourses," to use Barge's term, à la Deetz, 1996) from which they work.

However, although CAR can complement research conducted in media studies, ACR, and CCCR, as well as any area of the communication discipline, Rodino-Colocino and Barge, respectively, understate the degree to which CAR critiques CCCR and ACR (and other research), including work in those (and other) traditions that are identified as “engaged” communication research, some of which seeks to promote, in particular, social justice. Rodino-Colocino’s essay, for instance, endorses, inadvertently, our view that CCCR has produced little engaged research, despite its long-standing commitments to combatting oppression and contributing to emancipatory politics. Most of the CCCR examples that Rodino-Colocino offers, and she is clear about this point, do not constitute CAR because they do not involve interventions by researchers, working with oppressed communities and activists, into socially unjust systems. Being involved with oppressed communities and/or activists, and writing scholarly critical work in the first-person voice are not the same as CAR’s first-person-perspective research, in which researchers intervene into and attempt to reconstruct unjust situations to be more just (with their reports, typically, but not necessarily, written in the first-person voice; an essay could say, “The researchers intervened . . .”). The lack of such first-person-perspective research to promote social justice is why Rodino-Colocino used the term “CAR-enabling” to describe that CCCR work, which could be labeled a *weasel word*, “a word used in order to evade or retreat from a direct or forthright statement or position” (Merriam-Webster, 2016).

We believe firmly that all communication research—whether descriptive, interpretive, explanatory, critical, and/or recommendatory—can make valuable contributions to promoting social justice writ large. Moreover, those research practices, certainly, can lead to CAR; in fact, they are absolutely necessary for engaging in CAR. Description of social justice problems and critiques of systemic influences on those problems, for instance, are needed prior to intervening into those systems to confront those social justice problems, but there is a significant difference between CAR interventions and descriptive and critical research practices. Hence, CCCR, and other communication research, *can* “enable” CAR, but whether it *does* lead to CAR is questionable, as demonstrated by the lack of such CCCR research.

Barge, certainly, understands and appreciates that

the unique focus of CAR on using communication theory, research, and/or pedagogy to work with oppressed communities and activists; the social justice nature of the issues that CAR addresses; and the role of researchers as intervention activists, clearly differentiate CAR from typical ACR. (this Special Section)

However, Barge, in “viewing CAR and ACR as complementary approaches to engaged communication scholarship as opposed to competitive ones” (this Special Section), glosses over our claim that “the vast majority of applied communication research . . . privileges purposes and populations/sites other than social justice for oppressed communities” (Carragee & Frey, this Special Section). We, of course, respect ACR researchers’ right to choose what to study, but their focus on other issues has resulted in a lack of social justice ACR and, in the worst-case scenario, may or could have contributed to further social injustice.

Moreover, Barge takes the position that engaged research, including CAR, involves the coproduction of knowledge between researchers and groups/communities with which they work. "Knowledge coproduction," of course, is not a singular phenomenon; there are varying degrees of it, ranging from relatively weak forms (e.g., "bringing members of scholarly and practitioner communities into conversation with one another"; Barge, this Special Section) to stronger forms (e.g., community-based participatory research, which, ideally, involves all partners equitably in all phases of research, although we would challenge the extent to which such full involvement actually occurs). Similar to the elasticity of the term "engaged scholarship," the weaker forms of knowledge coproduction, undoubtedly, apply to all engaged communication research, including CAR, given that there is interaction between researchers and community members, but the stronger forms do not characterize and should not be requirements for all engaged communication research, including CAR.

All three respondents also agree regarding the need to grapple with the significant challenges involved in conducting CAR and, according to Barge, engaged communication research, more generally, within the university setting, with Rodino-Colocino and McChesney underscoring our point regarding the importance of combatting the increasing corporate nature of universities, which suppresses activist research (and teaching). Rodino-Colocino points to the need to create and support "activist academic spaces," and McChesney highlights the importance of faculty unions, which Rodino-Colocino also endorses. Barge agrees with the need for collective action to confront university obstacles to conducting CAR and other engaged communication research, but he focuses more on, and offers useful practical suggestions for, how individuals can navigate the difficult university environment and still produce that research.

Activist research interventions that challenge, in particular, the universities (and their corporate sponsors) in which engaged communication researchers work will be met with fierce resistance by those with power in those institutions. Neither of us has received criticism from our universities regarding the CAR that we have conducted (or published in Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012), but that research also has not focused on our universities per se. Efforts that we have made in our respective universities to realize the goal of shared governance, however, have been met with resistance from administrators. We are not suggesting abandoning efforts to democratize and make more socially just universities but there are real risks involved in doing so. Challenging the neoliberal character of universities, thus, will be particularly risky for nontenured faculty, and those in tenured faculty positions must lead that charge and support untenured colleagues who engage in that important and needed form of CAR.

Finally, even if we all were to agree on making CAR a, or *the*, priority for engaged communication research, and confront successfully challenges to conducting such research within universities, McChesney questions CAR's adequacy to address the critical juncture facing the world, because our essay fails to provide "historical context and specificity" as well as a "*broader narrative, that larger context, to inform the specific struggles for social justice,*" resulting in "a lack of ambition for critical research" and the need for CAR to "think big, very big" (this Special Section). These significant concerns demand reflection by scholars who conduct CAR and other engaged communication research.

We suggest, first, that, *in practice*, CAR does locate specific interventions within broader historical and political contexts, as revealed in the case studies in our three edited volumes (Frey &

Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012), which provided detailed discussions of the social justice communication interventions within their historical contexts. To offer one example, Belone et al. (2012) took considerable care to show how the broader context of historical and continuing oppression has created underresourced and marginalized American Indian communities that experience a wealth of problems, including alcohol abuse by adolescents, and they explained the troubled history of researchers who often have exploited these communities, leading them to conduct community-based participatory, culturally appropriate CAR interventions to improve the general health of the Rama Navajo community (and its individual members and families) with which they partnered. Moreover, repeatedly, our essay connects CAR to recurring forms of exploitation and oppression that can be understood only within their broader historical, political, and cultural contexts. CAR, therefore, does offer the contextual approach to engaged communication research that McChesney endorses.

With regard to the critique that CAR needs to provide a broader narrative to inform social justice struggles, CAR's emphasis on social justice issues, use of researcher interventions, and attention to collective action to obtain political change represents a wide-ranging perspective to inform engaged communication research. We also, certainly, support the broader narrative that McChesney describes: a political economy perspective that provides "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" (this Special Section). That broader narrative (especially the first part), however, hardly is new, for as Rodino-Colocino points out, that understanding of capitalism can be traced back at least to Marx, and it has received extensive coverage since that time, yet social justice problems have just grown more pronounced. One reason, we contend, is precisely because scholars have engaged in far more abstract critical theorizing than on-the-ground interventions that engage in collective action to promote social justice.

Indeed, to respond specifically to one of McChesney's reservations about on-the-ground CAR interventions, the "microvictories" obtained have significance because they provide valuable lessons for future interventions. More broadly, frequently, the accumulation of microvictories produces the "democratic waves" or "flurry of radical reforms" (this Special Section) that McChesney, properly, from our perspective, views as essential to meaningful political change. The suffrage movement provides a striking example of this process; through collective action, the movement won a local victory in Kansas in 1887 granting women the right to vote in municipal elections, and continuing struggles obtained voting rights for women in Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896). These and other local and statewide victories culminated, ultimately, in the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920. A similar pattern of collective action resulted in victories for same-sex marriage on the state level, beginning in Massachusetts in 2004, which helped to produce the landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling granting gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. Our essential points here are that social justice microvictories matter, and that, at this time, the communication discipline lacks the adequate building blocks, in the form of researchers' social justice interventions, to create or aid broader movements that are capable of producing systemic changes in contemporary political and social systems.

CAR's emphasis on the significance of collective action in securing meaningful political change also represents an important element in its broader narrative for engaged communication research. CAR

views collective action as a fundamental requirement for securing social justice for marginalized groups and communities, which, in fact, McChesney (1999) agreed with when he emphasized the need to link efforts to democratize the U.S. media system with broader collective action:

The only way to wrestle some control over media and communication from the giant firms that presently dominate the field will be to mobilize some semblance of a popular movement. As Saul Alinsky noted, the only way to beat organized money is with organized people. (p. 318)

Moreover, CAR represents a significant opportunity to establish collaborations between communication researchers and grassroots activist groups, which McChesney views as both essential to promoting systemic political change and lacking in actual practice.

We also believe that CAR researchers have thought big, tackling substantial social justice problems (e.g., poverty and human trafficking) in ways that align with McChesney's response, but, certainly, there is more that could and should be done. To point to one potential example, there are major opportunities for forging collaborations between CAR researchers and the U.S. labor movement. The decline of the U.S. labor movement corresponds directly to dramatically rising income inequality in the United States and to increased corporate economic and political power (see, e.g., Covert, 2015; Gordon, 2016; Greenhouse, 2011; Stiglitz, 2012). The percentage of unionized workers has fallen to 11.1% of the total U.S. workforce, with only 6.7% of workers unionized in the private sector (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). In contrast, in the 1950s, almost one-third of the U.S. workforce was unionized (Bui, 2015). Despite these trends and the potential of a revitalized labor movement to secure progressive political change, communication scholars have done little engaged research to aid labor unions on the local, state, or national level; indeed, we did not receive a single submission that focused on labor unions for our three edited volumes of CAR (Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012). (Rodino-Colocino notes an exception in the work done by the Cultural Workers Organize.)

We, thus, encourage CAR scholars to create, in McChesney's words, "deep alliances" with labor unions to challenge expanding corporate power and to democratize society. For example, researchers with expertise in group and organizational communication could aid labor unions in democratizing their internal communication by forging a more robust role for rank-and-file union members to shape unions' decision making. Similarly, communication researchers who focus on the framing of public issues and on interactions between social movements and the news media could forge partnerships with unions to assist them in influencing news coverage of, and shaping public opinion about, labor issues. In keeping with McChesney's argument, these interventions need to be located within the historical contexts that confront labor unions and, therefore, necessarily take into consideration issues that are highlighted by political economy approaches to communication and media. This brief example illustrates CAR's ambitious character.

In closing, we hope that this forum encourages researchers from all areas of the communication discipline to engage in CAR, producing communication research that confronts the significant social justice issues facing contemporary societies. The responses to our essay by Barge, McChesney, and Rodino-

Colocino, undoubtedly, will enhance CAR as a form of engaged communication research, and we welcome further conversations to increase the quality and effectiveness of combining research interventions and social justice activism, although those conversations should not be done at the expense of conducting CAR interventions with and on behalf of underresourced groups and communities. By engaging in and examining critically challenges confronting CAR, communication scholars will produce research that changes the systemic injustices and inequalities that affect the lives of marginalized groups and communities.

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