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SSRC Forum

Making Research Matter . . . Matter to Whom?

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Traveling in Europe recently, one of us struck up a conversation with a young guest worker. His hands sported a rash caused by low-grade cutting oil used in his factory (10 workers, no union). "Doctors say, 'Get a different job.' But all factories use cheap cutting oil. Everywhere is the same."

Asked if he had family locally, he smiled sadly. Not yet, he said, but at Ramadan, he would visit home. There, he taught high school social science till he migrated; his wages had not supported his family.

He blamed his country's political leaders for his predicament: "My president is a very great thief with millions in Swiss bank accounts. No one stops him." He concluded, "The political leaders do nothing and the intellectuals have no power. They write papers that no one reads. They matter nothing."

Told we were writing about making research matter, he held up a blistered hand and laughed.

Making research matter ranks high on communication scholars' agendas for good reasons. Neoliberal policies encourage deregulation and privatization of communication systems, promising that global efficiency, technological innovation, and expanded consumer choice will follow (Jessop, 1999). As collateral damage, however, neoliberal policies limit the influence of citizens and reduce mass communication to hollow noisemakers. Much as the guest worker concludes that intellectual work "matters nothing," social theorist Paolo Freire argues,

> The neo-liberal wave withdraws from men/women—as social beings having diversity of interests, opinions and wills—the right and the power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis. (Freire, 1994, p. 12)

As scholars who value systematic, evidenced-based investigation of social patterns, we tend to resist the guest worker's charge that our research "matters nothing." It definitely matters to us and to our peers. We recognize, however, that making our research matter beyond the academy is complicated. Communication researchers routinely analyze how communication systems affect democratic governance, but academic norms discourage scholars from applying their findings. Nor is academia organized to assess, much less reward, scholars who open the research process to marginalized populations and organizational partners in policy and movement settings.

This forum provides a rare opportunity for communication scholars to reflect on how neo-liberal policies affect our collective ability to make communication research matter. Assuming a broad democratic agenda, we focus on the question of inclusion: To whom should our research matter? Who needs to be involved? In broadening our engagements, we do not depart from systematic, evidence-based, social science research. Rather, we strengthen both our research's validity and its potential applicability. We conclude that collaboration with under-represented populations is, in fact, a prerequisite for research that claims to be rigorous and transparent. And, it may hold one key to making our research matter.

We introduce the Movement Media Research Action Project (MRAP) and link our work to the growing tradition of engaged communication scholarship. We then sketch our project—testing how well the Internet serves Mexicans considering migration. The discussion compares our Freirian-influenced *collaborative research* approach to *consultational* and *translational* research cultures described in earlier Social Science Research Council (SSRC) forums.

The Growth of Engaged Communication Scholarship

We are not the first or only scholars to suggest that engaged scholarship may help make research matter. *Communication Activism* (Frey & Carragee, 2007) documents this sea-change in considerable detail. Editor Kevin Carragee explains,

> My co-editor, Larry Frey and I expected a modest response to our call for contributions from engaged communication scholars. We were surprised by the quantity, quality and breadth of the submissions. Many not only *called* for engaged scholarship but *actually had tested interventions* designed to secure meaningful social and political change.[1]

Engaged communication scholars draw from many research traditions. Our work taps feminist, Freirian, cultural Marxist, indigenous, and social movement theories and methods. We build on constructionist criteria for "good democratic public discourse" (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 233) to distill four

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[1] K. Carragee, personal correspondence, November 11, 2008.

core elements of a research stressing collaboration:

- We acknowledge and try to address the power inequalities permeating social relations.
- We revise research approaches to include disenfranchised communities.
- We form learning communities that engage in and reflect on practice.
- We integrate our learning into future change efforts.

A reimagining of knowledge production is not easily achieved by a lone thinker. We had support from the Movement and Media Research and Action Project (www.mrap.info), a network of scholars and activists who reject the thinking/acting binary and seek to develop a theory-informed practice. Here, we describe research that emerged from questions posed by students in Postprimaria, a large, Freirian-oriented rural education project in Mexico (Cámara et al., 2004; Cámara, 2008). Many of Postprimaria's students were weighing whether to stay in México or migrate to the United States. We turned to the Internet to answer their questions. In the process, we uncovered gaps in the World Wide Web to which we had been blind.

Should I Stay or Go? The Web's Response to Rural Mexicans' Questions

In 2001–2002, Dr. Gabriel Cámara, a Mexican educator with decades of experience in Freirian education, was leading Postprimaria, an expansive effort by the Mexican government and World Bank to establish 340 rural education centers in Mexican villages with fewer than 500 inhabitants (Cámara & Lopez, 2000). Cámara and colleagues urged Postprimaria teachers to let students explore subjects of their own choosing, and students commonly chose literacy and/or English. Many numbered themselves among the two-fifths of Mexican citizens considering migration to the United States (Suro, 2004).

Postprimaria students were also curious about the Internet. However, while Postprimaria rural centers had computers, powered by electricity or solar power, most lacked Internet connections; the Internet remains largely unavailable in Mexico's 200,000 towns with less than 2,500 residents (AMIPCI, 2007, pp. 4–5; Arrellano Lopez & Meza Contreras, 2003). To address this digital marginalization, Postprimaria teachers "collected queries among local students during the week. Then, when the instructors visited larger towns or the capital city for their open system studies on the weekend, they searched the Internet. They stored the information found on disks usable by students" (Cámara, 2003, p. 3).

Postprimaria students did not simply ask about the practical logistics of migration. As would any rational organization, the family of a potential immigrant weighs the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that immigration poses. Does migration improve or hurt the individual and the family's relative life chances? Postprimaria's Cámara explains, "The fact of immigration permeates practically every aspect of the life in the rural communities where we work."[2]

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[2] Cámara to Ryan, personal correspondence, August 2001.

MRAP's co-director, Ryan, asked Cámara, a seasoned engaged scholar, if we could collaborate. He suggested that MRAP's access to digital resources could extend Postprimaria teachers' efforts to surf the Web for their students. We developed a simple plan: two bilingual MRAP students, Michael Anastario and Vanessa Salas, would conduct Internet research using Postprimaria students' questions. Cámara provided an extensive list of questions gleaned from his visits to the centers, ongoing conversations with teachers, and from the queries that teachers had researched in Internet cafés. Anastario and Salas each searched the Web for 100 hours (200 total) on English and Spanish language Web sites, respectively, tailoring searches to address Postprimaria students' questions (Ryan, 2007).

MRAP promised to organize the findings onto a compact disk with hyperlinks to additional information. While the information would become dated over time, Postprimaria teachers and students could use the CD to answer students' questions about immigration, as well as to practice Web searches. By working together, we would begin to bridge the digital divide.

As an unintended benefit, MRAP researchers learned much about how Internet sites were framing immigration; virtually no Web sites addressed the questions that rural Mexican adults asked about immigration—how to weigh their family's relative life chances in Mexico vs. the United States. Extending our search to academic publications, moreover, we found that few immigration experts write for those considering immigration—a potential audience of millions. The Web's promised democratization of information was hollow, not only because poor people lacked access, but because content providers did not write for potential immigrants whom they assume do not use the Internet. Assumptions about Internet audiences, in other words, were constricting knowledge production. We could not help but wonder about the benefit of opening discourse to immigrant communities themselves.

Instead, content creators for Internet immigration policy sites generally targeted U.S. citizens as their "implied audience" (Livingstone, 1998, p. 198). Most sites failed to recognize large potential audiences of immigrants. Focusing largely on immigration debates among native-born U.S. citizens, Internet treatments of immigration were often digitized updates of the nineteenth-century view of the Global South as the "white man's burden." México's dependence was framed as inevitable, as were the desires of rural Mexicans to migrate.

MRAP researchers' field notes registered surprise at the practical limitations of Web-based resources. Anastario explained,

> I had been using the Internet since high school, so I thought the task was simple enough—with 100 hours to spare I'd probably have more hits than I would be able to count. I found myself up at night, surfing the Web for hours trying to find just one Web site that could provide a potential immigrant with adequate, reliable information on immigration to the United States. I couldn't imagine trying to find this information if I had limited time and access to the Internet—the same Internet that I had considered an endless source of readily accessible information (12–12–02).

Salas concluded similarly,

> I was able to see how Web sites and organizations were basically portraying Mexican immigration as well as immigration in general. It is interesting to see how few Web resources were available for Mexican citizens weighing the costs of immigration. Web sites offering suggestions for recently arrived immigrants were uneven and often dated with entire regions of the U.S. underserved.
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> Where I always imagined the Internet to be an infinite hub of knowledge and information, I additionally realized that there are services that are not provided or available to certain groups of people. Additionally, given the way that Mexican immigrants were described, I realized that for an average, well-intentioned U.S. citizen trying to learn about Mexican immigration on the Internet, it might be difficult to acquire empathy toward immigrants (12–02–02).

As we conducted Internet research for Postprimaria, MRAP researchers realized the extent to which we, ourselves, had been blinded by the World Wide Web's promise of comprehensive content. Focused on access, we had not grasped how Web content creators' failure to serve global audiences would undermine claims of content universality. Our blind spot became obvious only when we undertook research for Postprimaria, whose students represented an *under-recognized*, and thus *underserved*, audience.

Having largely ignored immigrant viewpoints in research and policy planning, policy makers and communicators had narrowed the immigration debate. They overlooked the fact that rural Mexicans, including Postprimaria students, did not want to migrate as much as they wanted family security. A transnational framing—migration pegged to a transnational economy in which immigrants (and scholars) lose control over their/our lives—was seldom seen in the *Internet* discourse. It appears more routinely in the publications of scholars (Salas, C., 2006) and journalists (Bacon, 2008a, 2008b) who include immigrants' perspectives.

Discussion

"As scholars, we are only as good as the conversations in which we participate," suggests Margaret Mies (2006, p. 9)—a helpful insight for scholars trying to make research matter. Deciding with whom to converse is a pivotal issue in any research culture. As we have noted above, dialogue partners influence how researcher perceive and focus the questions they research. A previous SSRC exchange (2008) described two research cultures that develop working relationships with constituencies beyond the academy. In each, choice of collaborators influences how the scholar approaches making research matter.

Scholar Peng Hwa Ang (2008) proposes a *research culture of consultation* which places scholars in dialogue with the existing elites who set communication policy. Researchers' chances of influencing policy rise if leaders are "open to academic input" (Ang, 2008, p. 451). But Ang cautions that the consultational model accepts existing leaders' rights to "pick and choose" from scholars' recommendations

(ibid., p. 450–453).   Scholars—whether volunteering or hired—have little power to insist that their proposals are accepted. Ang thus recommends that consultational scholars should adopt an attitude of hopeful resignation.

Scholar Mei Ning Yan cautions that, in the consultational model, corporate interests can overpower scholarly input. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, Yan explains, is the "main driver" of Hong Kong communication policy, but it "can be heavily influenced by the commercial sectors, namely the broadcasters and telecommunication services operators" (2008, p. 405). To counter this, Yan proposes including advocacy groups: "Thanks to the effectiveness of the Internet in connecting strangers with common endeavors . . . loose alliances have formed" that could expand civil society (ibid., p. 405). She cites American and UK media reform groups to exemplify such alliances.

U.S. communication scholars, however, temper her optimism. Rob Frieden raises the public relations industry's fabrication of pseudo-grassroots lobbying groups:

> An ever-increasing number of foundations, institutes, center and organizations offer assistance to the Federal Communication Commission in its generation of an evidentiary record. However, most of the work product represented as empirical research and attached to advocacy filings suffers from the taint of financial support from organizations with obscure or undisclosed affiliations with specific stakeholders. Put more bluntly, much of the research filed with the FCC would not pass muster with rigorous peer review, not only because of the financial strings attached to the product, but also because the research seeks to endorse a preordained outcome. The FCC receives reams of "research documents," but little, if any of it, reflects research as opposed to rationales for specific policy recommendations. (2008, p. 424)

He urges the Federal Communication Commission to "quit driving research on the basis of politics, economics and regulatory philosophy or a preconceived notion of what the agency should decide" (ibid., p. 427). Instead, he argues, the FCC should embrace evidentiary-based policymaking.

Communication scholar Sandra Braman shares Frieden's call for evidenced-based policy, but she argues that the United States represents an "evidence-averse environment" which is unlikely to heed Frieden's call for facts and rigor. She argues for a research culture that moves beyond consultation (truth offered to those in power) to propose *a translational research culture* that actively translates research into accessible policy documents to be promoted by selected advocates and political leaders.

Her argument is this: U.S. political leaders have suppressed critical research and adopted "policymaking processes that are not open to either research or public inputs" (Braman, 2008, p. 434). Other trends that weaken citizen influence include the privatization of government functions and the rise of global regulatory-like bodies that move "decision-making away from the state-level processes …established with the participation of identifiable publics in mind" (ibid., pp. 434–435). Finally, Braman cautions that citizen advocates fixated on their own single-issue initiatives may miss state- or corporate-

driven policies that de facto narrow citizen rights (ibid., p. 442). To balance government and/or industry promotion of status quo interests, Braman therefore calls scholars to engage in a *translational research culture*—e.g., scholars should train Congressional aides and advocates to lobby for scholar-initiated policies.

While *both consultational* and *translational* cultures work with a non-academic constituency—ruling elites or interest lobbyists—neither systematically engages with constituencies historically marginalized from knowledge production and policy formation. As a result, neither culture positions scholars to participate in the social processes most associated with fundamental change—social movements. As they stand, each operates within what Freire calls the "banking model" of education, in which the scholar "issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive." (Freire, 2006, p. 72). In short, without deepening ties to disenfranchised constituencies, scholars cannot challenge the growing disempowerment noted by the guest workers, as well as by UK researcher Georgina Born, who warns scholars to beware the "two-headed media and political class [whose] consensus is broadly economically neo-liberal" but is cloaked under a public service veneer (Born, 2008, p. 693).

Without discounting research cultures stressing consultation (with ruling decision-makers) or translation (pluralist competition of interests), we share the guest workers' and Born's concerns that scholars lack sufficient power to challenge neo-liberalism's marginalization of publics. If markets and politicians join forces to control global communication systems, protecting democracy may require that scholars join movements of disempowered constituencies to defend spheres of public discourse. Those movements need scholars who are able to reflect and to conduct rigorous research.

In contrast, a *collaborative research culture* answers the question, "How can we make research matter?" by asking an explicitly normative question, "Who needs to participate for democratic research to matter?" In other words, if evidence-based research and related policies "matter nothing" to ruling powers and corporate interests, making research matter may entail collaboration with disenfranchised constituencies and their movements. Social movement scholars would argue that movements have produced most of the social reforms of recent decades. Forging a *collaborative research culture* that brings movement-building constituencies into the knowledge production process may offer scholars the best chance to make research matter.

More than existing research cultures, we flag the danger of ignoring disempowered constituencies such as Mexicans contemplating immigration. Postprimaria (and in a smaller way, MRAP) extended the research *culture of consultation*, stressing dialogue with powerful actors to include dialogue with disempowered constituencies. We also extended *translational research culture* into a two-way process that placed the research questions of rural Mexicans at the center of research design and planning.

Our *collaborative* efforts to make research matter have met mixed results. In mattering directly to Postprimaria students, we failed. In testing claims of Internet democracy, creating inclusive research methodologies, and building sustainable working relationships with disenfranchised communities, we strengthened our understanding of democratic knowledge production and created replicable tools. We continue to explore how inclusion can make research matter.

Conclusion

"We are responsible for what we learn how to see," says social theorist Donna Haraway (1997, p. 286). Our effort to build a collaborative research culture illustrates her point. In adopting immigrants' questions as our research focus, we saw how immigrants were falling through gaping lacunae in the World Wide Web. This insight opened opportunities to build theory and methods, and to make communication research matter—opportunities less clear when viewed from the lens of research cultures that consider disempowered constituencies peripheral to knowledge production.

We also find that engaged scholarship has helped us to anticipate social changes. While scholars link social problems to discourses and multiple historical antecedents, communities challenging inequalities of power often identify rising trends a decade or a generation ahead of academic discourse. For instance, Postprimaria students' questions anticipated the transnational framing of immigration by Central American activists focusing on the right to stay home, "*el derecho de no migrar*" (Bacon, 2008a, p. 20).

In closing, let us return to the guest worker, whose bemused laugh illustrates the troubling disconnect between academic debates about democratic communication policies and the need to use communication research to strengthen democracies. In exploring how to make communication research matter, our own scholarly practice—like that of ruling elites—too often "withdraws from men/women—as social beings having diversity of interests, opinions and wills—the right and the power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis" (Freire, 1994, p. 12).

Put bluntly, if we want communication research to matter—to contribute to forging democratic communication policy and systems—why not include the demos? Freirians, feminist standpoint theorists, and social movement scholars would agree that movements catalyze new knowledge and relationships of mutual benefit. Movements both need intellectuals and offer intellectuals new opportunities. In partnering with disenfranchised communities and their movements, scholars exercise agency. Our partnerships shape our research questions, and ultimately, they influence the ways our research matters.

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Other resources:
Movement and Media Research Action Project: www.mrap.info

As exemplars of theory-informed activist organizations, see:
www.grassrootspolicy.org
www.publiceye.org,
www.mediaactioncenter.org
www.thepraxisproject.org
www.centerformediajustice.org

MRAP also collaborated with theory-welcoming activists in coalitions such as www.rihomeless.org,
www.progressivecommunicators.org
www.ufe.org
www.dorchesterhealthyboston.org
www.projectright.org
www.ufe.org
www.miracoalition.org
www.centroopresente.org