

IJoC

SSRC Forum

Introduction

Toward an Epistemology of Engaged Research

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This collection of essays emerged out of a shared willingness to reflect on the motivations, challenges, and methods for engaged research. We take engaged research to mean those inquiries into the social world which, without departing from systematic, evidence-based, social science research, are designed to make a difference for disempowered communities and people beyond the academic community. They may, for example, address issues of concern to the disadvantaged, or may support the attempts by social movement activists to set the agenda of policymakers.

Most scholars aspire to have an impact on the social world they inhabit. Sometimes, funding agencies even require it. Yet, academic norms often discourage academics from applying their findings.

This is equally true in the area of media and communication research. Media and communication research deals with technologies and processes which permeate everybody's life. Media and ICTs influence how we get to know the world, build our identity, and perceive other people's, as well as how we create and maintain connections.

Over the past two decades, the media and communications field has witnessed epochal transformations: Internet and digitalization have radically changed the technology we use to communicate, and they have expanded our possibilities for interaction across time and space. But new "types" of policy processes have emerged, too, in order to address the governance challenges accompanying these new technologies. Think, for example, of the many participatory experiments in Internet and telecommunication governance. These developments raise new questions for academics to address. Undertaking communications research that matters to citizens, policymakers, and practitioners has become even more urgent.

Faced with the opportunity offered by the IJoC/SSRC Forum on "Making Communications Research Matter," we asked ourselves *how to design and practice communications research that matters*. These essays are about *building bridges* between academia and the social world, from a perspective of social change. They are firsthand experiences of (often mutual) learning. What they have in common is a focus on grassroots activists: disempowered Mexican youth bound to migrate to the United States, radical Internet activists, community radio practitioners, and social change activists.

Charlotte Ryan, Vanessa Salas-Wright, Mike Anastario and Gabriel Cámara as well as Arne Hintz and Stefania Milan reflect on their experiences of collaborating with disempowered groups and radical social movements. Ryan et al. illustrate their collaborative research approach. In 2007, the Boston-based Media/Movement Research Action Project, co-directed by Ryan, collaborated with the Mexican educator Gabriel Cámara in order to answer, by browsing the Internet, the immigration-related questions important to Mexican young people. Drawing on this experience, the authors ask: *To whom should research matter? Who needs to be involved? Whose needs are met/unmet?*

Through the analysis of their involvement with radical Internet activists critical of mainstream academia, Hintz and Milan reflect on the question, *what is equitable collaboration ("co-labor")?* The authors explore *how equitable collaboration works on the ground*, and suggest possible ways to *bridge the gulf created by two radically different organizational cultures and routines*—academic individualism on the one hand, and activist collectivism on the other.

Peter M. Lewis presents a firsthand account of *what engaged research means in practice*. Taking from his three-decade-long involvement in the community media field in the UK, he illustrates how playing different roles—the activist, the advocate, the scholar—can positively serve the cause of community communication. Dialogue with policy makers is often not sufficient to change policies; however, academics can play the role of the Trojan horse, helping to further practitioners' demands.

Finally, Jethro Pettit addresses an issue that is relevant to making and teaching engaged research, and, at the same time, both methodological and institutional: *How can academia form capable engaged researchers and practitioners?* He illustrates the method of action research showing how facilitators of processes of reflection and action are formed in the framework of the MA program in Participation, Power and Social Change, offered at the Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex, UK), which uses action research and reflective practice as the basis of its approach to learning.

These accounts of engaged research allow me to identify three tensions that may emerge in designing, conducting, and assessing "research that matters."

First, I see a distinction between policy-oriented and action-oriented research, the first being concerned with changing policy directly, and the second aiming to empower people to push for change. The distinction may sound hopelessly subtle, but I believe it is one that matters. In policy-oriented research, we may want to speak directly to policy makers, using the strength of our social role and status as academics. In action-oriented research, social groups are the main recipients of research, which may address sociological or anthropological questions, or may be more explicitly policy-oriented (alongside having implications for theory development, which is what is expected from us). But the end users are advocates, citizens, and social movements. Both approaches are equally worthwhile—this is not intended as a value judgment. In policy-oriented research, academics can act, as Lewis suggests, as "Trojan horses," to advance social demands in the right circles. But I believe that what ultimately empowers social groups is to be given the tools to speak for and by themselves—in this perspective, action-oriented research embodies the potential for a greater (long-term) impact on social groups.

Second, I see a tension between “research about” and “research with.” Whereas most current social science is research *about* (social groups, processes, events), engaged researchers aim to make research *with* (i.e., in collaboration with) these subjects. Research *about* is usually considered to be the only objective, and therefore the only scientifically-sound, research, on the grounds that the observer is sufficiently detached from the object of study. So, is research *with* at all possible? I think so. It requires, however, a commitment from both sides to collaborate and come to terms with the reciprocal differences, a long-term time frame, recurrent cycles of reflection, and constant adjustments along the way.

Third, is research *with* desirable? I detect here a potential contradiction between engagement and academic rigorousness. I believe that engagement on the ground does not come at the expense of evidence-based scientific research. The types of questions which are asked, and the way we ask them, as well as the methods we select to approach social actors may partially differ, but the results can be equally systematic. It is at this stage that reflectivity comes in—we should be ready to regularly question our identities and roles as researchers immersed in a complex and challenging social world, torn between science and action.



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