The relationship between ideas and action in the political world is a fascinating topic. To what extent do the products of intellectuals—such as normative theories of the public good or empirical social science research—actually shape policy and politics? Should academics strive to make their work relevant in this way, or is the course of history determined mainly by political and economic bargains among powerful players, with researchers’ output used instrumentally or opportunistically according to political actors’ dictates? When researchers get involved in politics, must they sacrifice their objectivity and the scientific quality of their output? The whole topic raises a number of important philosophical, epistemological, and political questions, among them the validity of the fact-value dichotomy or the endless but still-relevant debate over Marx’s concept of praxis, encapsulated by his famous quotation “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

The volume under review here is rooted in an encounter with this problem. Communications Research in Action: Scholar-Activist Collaborations for a Democratic Public Sphere emerged from a Ford Foundation program designed to promote collaboration between media activists and scholars involved in the study of communication and information policy. The project, “Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere,” abbreviated NK hereafter, involved the New York-based Social Sciences Research Council as the administrator of numerous small grants, along with the Center for International Media Action and others. The NK project bears the stamp of Dr. Becky Lentz (2010), a former Ford Foundation program officer who funded the activities documented in this book and led a valiant effort within the Foundation to bridge the worlds of communication policy research and media activism.

The problem Lentz and her collaborators at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and Centre for International Media Action (CIMA) confronted is a deep and interesting one. Research and researchers intersect with activism in at least four distinct ways:

1. In research about activism itself, social scientists can study citizen advocacy, social movements, and activism in communication policy just as primatologists can study groups of orangutans or economists can study the operation of markets. The purpose is to achieve an abstract and theoretically grounded understanding of the causes, consequences, history, and modes of operation of a social process. There is, in fact, a large and growing literature about social movements and the role of advocacy groups in the political process, both domestic and transnational (though one would not know that from reading this volume).

2. In direct contrast to the first approach, scholars can cast away the social and professional distance that goes along with examining activists/activism
from a detached, scientific point of view, and instead join in with a sense of solidarity. Here, the idea is for scholars not just to gain the concrete contextual insights that come from direct on-the-ground contact, but also to use their expertise in serving what is presumed to be a common cause. This approach is often associated with radical forms of egalitarianism or communitarianism, which valorize marginalized populations and look to the oppressed as unique or privileged sources of knowledge. This mode tries to erase status distinctions between scientists and their subjects.

3. Intellectuals can contribute to the normative constructs that shape politics and guide policies. Academia provides a relatively autonomous space for critical perspectives on what is happening in society and what is in the public interest. The intellectual is thus in a position to construct and apply ideals (justice, freedom, equality), ideologies (liberalism, democracy, socialism, authoritarianism, religious belief systems, etc.), or policies that activists inevitably draw upon in forming their movements and analyzing current events. This critical perspective necessarily distances the intellectual from the activists in the trenches; insofar as academics uphold abstract ideals applied impersonally to flesh and blood actors, the former always stand apart from the latter to some degree.

4. Last but not least, researchers can conduct empirical social science studies that can be used to support or undermine specific policies, laws, or regulations in a narrower policy discourse. Here the research provides instrumental value to regulatory agencies and interest groups engaged in policy debate, by analyzing the effectiveness of a policy or by exposing its unintended consequences. (Usually some kind of ideology as defined in the third instance is implicit in this kind of empirical social science; its presence is revealed in the selection of the questions asked or the interpretations of the data.) As society becomes increasingly complex, regulated, specialized, and technocratic, the demand for this kind of research and its currency in policy debates as well increases.

When considering scholar-activist collaboration or interactions, one must have a clear idea of which of these four aspects is being addressed. In Communications Research in Action, there are some tantalizingly insightful engagements with numbers two and four, but one cannot help but come away with the impression that there was not enough clear thinking about the distinctions between them. It also appears as if differing assumptions among the NK administrators and evaluators about which mode they were engaged in caused some tensions.

This is precisely what makes this book so interesting. If one were to evaluate the book entirely on the reports on the specific studies commissioned, it would be only moderately important. If instead one assesses it as a conversation about the results of a pioneering and highly original attempt to forge new connections between communication scholars and grass-roots media activists, the level of interest and importance
dramatically increases. Indeed, the best parts of this volume come from the meta-discussion about the goals, accomplishments and tensions of the NK concept.

The volume begins with a brief introductory chapter by the editors that, in my opinion, is disappointing. It does not recognize the conceptual distinctions noted above and fails to situate the volume properly within a broader literature. It thus misses a great opportunity to explore and clarify the political, epistemological, and field-specific implications of the NK approach. As noted before, there is a large and growing body of literature about social movements, public interest groups, and activism (see for example: Diani & Bison, 2004; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Patomäki & Teivainen, 2004; Smith, 2005; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). A growing part of that literature focuses on the domain of communication and information policy (see for example: C. J. Bennett, 2008; W. L. Bennett, 2003; W. L. Bennett, 2004; Bob, 2005; Bob, 2008; Mueller, Pagé, & Kuerbis, 2004; Mueller, Kuerbis, & Pagé, 2007).

The editors were either unaware of this oeuvre or chose not to avail themselves of it, instead contenting themselves with a few references to Habermas. A big part of the problem here is that the editors’ conceptual framework seems to have been arbitrarily bounded by the field of communication studies, whereas a lot of the most interesting work on this relationship derives from political science, sociology, and international relations. This problem of the communications field ghettoizing itself and attempting to reinvent, in isolation, discourses already well-developed in other fields is a persistent and pervasive one and needs to be challenged.

Partly as a result of this insulation, one of the real missing links in the volume’s conceptualization of scholar-activist relations is the third intersection as defined above: the scholar as proposer of interpretive frameworks and norms, whose political engagement serves the cause of critical analysis and commentary about the ends and means of public policy. The NK project seems to have flirted with the assumption that all right-minded people agree on which communication policies are the correct ones, and that any social movements associated with media policy are homogeneous in their values. Both assumptions are obviously false. But there was little if any attempt to interrogate or challenge ingrained assumptions among media activists about what they were doing—despite the existence of major debates and disagreements across the spectrum of public interest activists regarding the value of public access television in the Internet age, the role of regulation, markets and the state, the importance of the local, national or transnational, the tension between populism and individual rights, and so on. The radically changing institutional environment created by globalization, digital convergence, and new technologies often requires new thinking about policies and norms forged in the era of mass broadcasting. Intellectuals need to be engaged with activists and the public to understand these problems, but activists need intellectuals to provide wider historical perspective and an awareness of empirical evidence and ongoing theoretical debates about policy and policy processes.

Communications Research in Action breaks down into a section on “exploration of movement actors,” “media ownership,” “alternative and community media,” “infrastructure,” and finally, a reflective section in which things get really interesting. The chapters on media ownership tend to fall squarely with mode four, empirical social
science studies by academics attempting to facilitate activist challenges to regulatory orthodoxy at the agency level. Most interesting about these sections is not the empirical findings themselves, but the authors’ accounts of the frictions and rewards of attempting to mesh standard social science research with the constraints and demands of political action and public policy debates. Contained within the book are gems such as this observation by Dharma Dailey and Alison Powell:

If academics and analysts want their work to be more widely useful to an expanded engaged public, they must spend time in person to become a trusted source for that engaged public. Making such a shift will require shifts in workflow and funding. (p. 58)

Similarly, a chapter by Leslie Shade on policy-related projects funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) emphasizes the instability of the policy environment and the need for researchers and their funders to be agile and flexible. Indeed, Shade’s analysis hints that policy engagement, to maintain its relevance, may even require serious compromises with the kind of systematic research design and data collection processes normally associated with empirical social science, because those who adhere to standard procedure will often be bypassed by the onrushing political process.

The reports in the section on alternative community media on the other hand, tend to follow mode two: scholars merging and identifying with the involved community. This is especially true of the study of the VozMob Project, which involved the use of mobile phone applications by immigrant workers in California, who were accessed through the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA). The project uncovers some interesting attitudes and behaviours regarding mobile media. Here the researchers adopt a posture as mere vehicles for the voices of the marginalized and oppressed, so instead of reporting “research results” they conclude with a series of emotional testimonials by immigrant workers.

The chapter by Dorothy Kidd reveals some of the creative tensions between mode two and mode three. Her study of broadband advocacy in Oakland, California, concludes that we need to change the frame of concepts of “digital inclusion.” We are, she claims, too focused on “markets, governance and regulation” rather than “democratic participation, strengthening civil society, and promotion of rights” (citing Hearn, Tacchi, Foth and Lennie, 2009, p. 140).

This sounds reasonable enough, but the civil society campaign mounted in Oakland was pushing for governance of broadband as a public utility, net neutrality and content management protections, and the unyoking of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) from telephone companies that also own the infrastructure or spectrum. (p. 24)

Those demands, however, seem to thrust the movement right back into the world of “markets, governance and regulation,” because effective implementation of such policy objectives raises all kinds of legal, economic, and technical issues, and requires all the kinds of technocratic, specialized expertise that grass roots community activists tend to either not have or reject as hierarchical.
One of the most interesting and well-structured reports concerns the attempts of a group called Common Frequency (CF) to help community groups apply for non-commercial-educational radio broadcasting licenses. CF was able to identify open radio frequency channels but had great difficulty motivating groups to apply for them despite heroic outreach efforts. The report concludes that, paradoxically, it is more difficult to find activists willing to apply for community media outlets in small cities and towns—where the need for diverse local media is, presumably, much greater—than in large cities. The report also notes how avidly conservative religious media take advantage of these spectrum licensing opportunities but link their locally owned stations into national satellite-delivered programming chains. “Christian media is organized, influential and growing; community media is fragmented and does not appear to have a coordinated expansion plan” (pp. 281).

These findings raise vital questions about the whole ideology and policy of community media and localism. Is Christian media an expression of a social movement? Is it a form of localism? Should left-progressives try to be as coordinated as rightwing religious activists? Is there something out of step with the expectation that small communities can—or even want to—own and operate their own media outlets? These questions, while perhaps anathema to left media activists, need to be explored. But they cannot be properly explored if one is too locked into an ideological homogeneity that stifles or discourages critical analysis. Indeed, some of the CF report’s recommendations such as “make more funding available for community media” (p. 281), or “a media literacy education program needs to be directed towards rural cities and small towns” (p. 283), seem to be re-assertions of existing habits of thinking and unrelated to the on-the-ground realities uncovered by their own research. This is but one of many examples of the need for the critical perspective described in mode three above.

The most interesting overview of the NK project comes at the end of Communications Research in Action, in two chapters by Joe Karaganis of SSRC and Catherine Borgman-Arboleda of CIMA. I would almost recommend that readers of this volume start by reading Karaganis’s analytical essay (Chapter 15) and Borgman-Arboleda’s response (Chapter 16) because it will make clearer what the individual projects reported were trying to accomplish and what went into their selection. They post an interesting debate over the relative value of what I have called mode four and mode two. Karaganis does an excellent job of articulating the “hypotheses” that went into the project and the challenges that went with testing and realization in the NK project. Karaganis makes it clear how and why the NK project pushed “everyone—SSRC staff, grantees, and numerous other collaborators … outside their professional and intellectual comfort zones” (p. 288). His discussion of the assumptions about the need for a “social movement” around communications policy, his distinction between “media reform” (national, DC policy-focused advocates) and “media justice” advocates (grass roots groups following the civil rights movement paradigm), the rise of Washington, DC-based advocacy group Free Press and its role as perceived “gatekeeper” in the movement-building process, and his analysis of the role of research and court challenges in affecting FCC policy toward media ownership in particular all provide essential context.
for understanding what went into this volume and the tensions affecting the NK project. Karaganis’ chapter was riveting, and the conclusions he draws about the roles of funders, academics, and grass-roots activists are well worth reading.

Karaganis’ also makes clear, at least to this observer, how US-centric the whole project was. Despite the presence of a few chapters about Latin America or Canada, the assumptions and objectives that went into NK were squarely grounded in a discourse centred on national media policy in the US. The whole volume does not engage with the groundswell of new forms of transnational civil society advocacy and activism that emerged around Internet governance and the World Summit on the Information Society after 2003 (see for example: Hintz, 2005; Klein, 2001; Padovani & Tuzzi, 2004; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004). This narrowed focus is of course fully justifiable, if for no other reason than it would be impossible to cover the entire world, but the fact remains that, due to the Internet, the contours of media and media policy are transnational and increasingly globalized, and any social movement, if it is to be aware of and responsive to the economic and political forces shaping communication and information policy, has to look well beyond the FCC.

Borgman-Arboleda positions her analysis squarely within mode two as described above. She conceives of the project as encouraging “the co-production of knowledge” by activists and intellectuals and asks what “model of public and community participation” is behind that objective and how “knowledge production and use support this broader model of participation” (p. 314). These are important questions, ones that involve deep issues in political science and political economy, and I reiterate my earlier statement that the introductory chapter should have done a better job of setting the stage for them with a more comprehensive and critical analysis of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Borgman-Arboleda’s chapter brings to the surface the tension between the so-called “media reform” approach, with its emphasis on victories in litigation and regulatory policy, and the grass-roots social movement development perspective, which seeks to fundamentally restructure social relations from the ground up. Borgman-Arboleda argues that “the infrastructure needed to support short-term policy research [mode four] was fundamentally different from that needed to support strengthening the capacity to serve the broader knowledge-collaboration needs” of a social movement [mode two] (pp. 321). There is both a clash of priorities and of time-horizons, as the “justice” proponents see the “media reform” advocates as having a short-term time horizon and the latter seeing themselves as in a position to actually realize changes or gains that the grass roots may have been pursuing for years. The tension between these two perspectives is sharply delineated in these final two chapters, and I will leave it to the reader to explore them and to think about the strengths and limitations of both.

To conclude, this is a fascinating exploration of the intersection of scholarship, activism and politics, and while one wishes that the linkages to existing scholarly knowledge and theory had been better developed, the case studies and the assessments by the program participants are worth reading.
References


Milton Mueller, Syracuse University