Commentary

The ActivateT.O. Speaker Series,
Border Crossing, and Public Media

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This commentary addresses some of the challenges and possibilities of merging critical, academic thought and community-based political activism in the form of a free, public, university-sponsored speaker series. Since late 2012, the ActivateT.O. speaker series has helped a variety of people engaged in political activism, art, and community outreach to share and discuss their work with Toronto’s graduate student communities. The series was created by graduate students in York and Ryerson’s Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture. It was introduced alongside the program’s longstanding graduate student conference (Intersections) and supplemental student art show (Cross-Sections). Enabled by small, annual grants from Ryerson Students’ Union, our series was designed to forge links between the academic work of graduate students and the activist, outreach, and artistic practice of social and political actors in Toronto. ActivateT.O. panelists have included sex educators, environmentalists, social workers, artists, and filmmakers representing Toronto’s feminist, queer, trans, multicultural, multiracial, and First Nations communities. We intended the series to reveal some of the alignments and discontinuities between the critical, theoretical projects of students enrolled in the joint program and the concrete, strategic work of Toronto-based political activists and community outreach practitioners.

The discussion that follows frames the ActivateT.O. speaker series according to Henry Giroux’s (2006) model of “border pedagogy” and examines the series from a critical media studies perspective. As organizers, our hope is that the series contributes to the kind of expressive, dialogical, small-format media that Innis (1951) identified as sorely lacking in modern, Western society, and that he and his commentators (e.g., Salter, 1981; Stamps, 1995; Stamps, 1999) ascertain as potentially corrective to the alienating effects of spatially extensive, centrally managed forms of mass communication.

The ActivateT.O. speaker series
Events in the series featured speakers who engage in critical thinking outside of the classroom environment, and whose social justice concerns and efforts we thought would resonate with the daily lives of our colleagues. The first event, held at Ryerson
University in October 2012, featured the founder of Women in Toronto Politics, Stephanie Guthrie. Since then, ActivateT.O. events have included the global chair of the International Community of Women Living with HIV, Jessica Whitbread; the executive director of the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS), Cathy Edwards; artists such as Elinor Whidden; and Pramila Javaheri, a mediator and trainer engaged in alternative dispute resolution.

Our organizing team envisioned a series that would operate both on- and off-campus by opening up university space for presentations by community groups and socio-political actors, and by inviting graduate students to participate in off-campus workshops hosted by social justice or community outreach organizations (e.g., our winter 2014 workshop at the Native Women’s Resource Centre of Toronto). Apparent in the moniker “ActivateT.O.,” the series was intended to foreground actors committed to social and political engagement in various, concrete ways for audiences of graduate students who are often engaged in more academic, theoretical, and analytical accounts of communication and culture. For example, Cathy Edwards detailed her strategy for establishing a community media hub in Toronto, and trans performance artist Cassils led a discussion in the performance of gender.

By featuring speakers who are focused on material practice, and who are engaged in social action and critical thinking, the ActivateT.O. speaker series aligned well with the Communication & Culture program and received significant support from our respective universities. Our graduate program director, Paul Moore, served as ActivateT.O.’s faculty sponsor and, for two years, the series received steady, modest grants from the Ryerson Students’ Union. These grants were supplemented by small donations from York’s Communication & Culture program and the York University Graduate Students’ Association (YUGSA). Following a number of events held at student spaces on Ryerson’s campus, we hosted speakers and panels at various donated and rented venues throughout Toronto, including the Native Women’s Resource Centre of Toronto, Toronto’s High Park Library, and the Centre for Social Innovation – Annex.

ActivateT.O. has since become a registered non-profit organization, and our online communication has migrated to a new website, www.activateto.org. As we pursue government and corporate funding sources for the series, and thanks to the efforts of our two co-directors and team of four volunteers, ActivateT.O. continues to host free, public speaker events and workshops in Toronto.

Border crossing

ActivateT.O. was not a part of our classroom learning; rather, it materialized as a project of self-education by graduate students who participate in, organize, or attend the speaking events. Our series was premised on the recognition that Toronto’s universities, and the work emerging from them, cannot be wholly separated or abstracted from the struggles and possibilities that animate graduate students’ lives and intersect with their learning. The ActivateT.O. series can be framed according to Henry Giroux’s (2006) model of “border pedagogy,” a teaching practice focused on crossing physical and cultural borders, and on decentring and remapping socially organized rules, regulations, and identities. Central to border pedagogy is a contextualization of learning amidst historically specific conditions and struggles, and an affirmation of student voices and
experiences that challenge “the separation of school knowledge from the experience of everyday life” (Giroux, 2006, p. 62).

Our speaker series, in the tradition of border pedagogy, aspires to a radical contextualization of learning amidst historically specific social, political, and cultural boundaries both within and beyond learning institutions. The practice-based critical engagement of the activists, community leaders, and artists provides touchstones and springboards for discussions whereby graduate students can orient their own academic work and daily lives “within existing relations of domination and resistance” (Giroux, 2006, p. 62) and according to strategies of social transformation. By featuring speakers engaged in political activism and community outreach, we aim to facilitate critical interventions that go beyond simply describing the historically constituted struggles experienced by speakers and audiences, to actively engaging in material practices that challenge the social, political, ideological, and material constraints they encounter.

ActivateT.O. as time-biased media
Raymond Williams (1983) identifies how “media” refers to both a means of transmission (a particular material forms of communication, or the mass media generally) and to an intervention by an “intermediate agency or substance” (p. 203). Given that many ActivateT.O. organizers have an academic interest in media—in the cultural politics of particular kinds of representation, or the social, cultural, and economic implications of particular transmission practices—and because our speakers engage with and produce various forms of media, we were attentive to how our speaker events themselves functioned as media or as acts of mediation. Since we intended to provide a forum for graduate students to critically engage with the “historically and socially constructed forms” (Giroux, 2006, p. 62) within which they themselves live, as well as a platform for strategizing social transformation, it was crucial that our events encouraged dialogue rather than simply transmitting information from speakers to the audiences.

Canadian economic historian and communication scholar Harold Innis identified decades ago the role of extensive, centrally managed media in marginalizing diverse knowledge and experiences. Attentive to the ways specific, material forms of communication contribute to particular institutionalized forms of power and knowledge, Innis’ dialectical, materialist account of media is particularly useful for highlighting the progressive, disruptive role and effects of communication and cultural practice emerging in marginalized spaces and communities. Innis’ (1951) distinction between geographically extensive, centrally managed (“space-biased”) media and durable, expressive, localized forms of (“time-biased”) media provides a way to evaluate the progressive potential of the public dialogue we aspire to facilitate at our events. Judith Stamps (1999) stresses Innis’ characterization of the oral tradition and dialogue, which continue to be marginalized by spatially extensive, centrally managed media, as “the key antidote” (p. 93) to modernity’s rigidly defined, visually biased, and short-sighted system of beliefs and communicative practices. While Innis does not share Giroux’s focus on the socio-historical context of individuals’ self-identification and self-expression, Innis is attentive to the relations of imperial, economic, and cultural centres to marginalized communities and cultural practices. Innis, Stamps (1995) argues, “intended to show that the germs of new knowledge emerged at the margins of older systems,
always accompanied by new, rival media” (p. 79). Cognizant of this dynamic, we have worked to prioritize dialogue and to draw on the lived experience of speakers and audiences in order to advance or produce such “rival media” (Stamps, 1995, p. 79).

While many of our ActivateT.O. speakers addressed changing transmission practices, the speaker series itself, however, hardly constitutes new media. Keeping in mind Giroux’s border pedagogy, communication is not progressive or subversive simply because it is high-tech; rather, a pedagogical process that crosses the boundary between academic work and daily life, and contextualizes both according to relations of power, rivals the status quo as it affirms learners’ voices, critically engages their experiences, and contributes to “a public language rooted in commitment to social transformation” (Giroux, 2006, p. 61). The subversive “public language” to which Giroux resonates with Innis’ formulation of “public media”: media that can potentially “offset the alienating impact of mass media” (Salter, 1981, p. 193) by responding to the needs, aspirations, experience, and explanation systems of those who produce and use it. Public media, like border pedagogy, aims to overcome conceptual and practical borders—specifically, the separation of production from audience relations that “[serves] to cut the public off from a collective sense of its own reality” (p. 206).

Of course, any speaker series retains some distinction between presenters and audiences. However, by prioritizing dialogue, and by emphasizing points of continuity between activist presenters and graduate student audiences, ActivateT.O. aims to cross borders—to extend critical thinking beyond the classroom in order to evaluate and transform the social, political, and cultural relations graduate students encounter in their daily lives. In other words, we endeavour to make ActivateT.O. the type of media that avoids simply transmitting knowledge from speakers to audiences, and instead contributes to a process of truly public communication: small-format, expressive, border-crossing, and aimed at decentring and remapping socially organized rules, roles, and identities.

References