A few months ago, a colleague asked me whether I considered myself an “activist-researcher.” To be honest, I did not know how to answer the question. Although I see myself as a researcher and as an activist, I hesitate to identify as an “activist-researcher.” In fact, I usually keep these two tracks of my life separate.

**On being (or not) an “activist-researcher”**

Over the past decade, I have become politically involved in several activist networks and initiatives, especially those related to free software and digital politics. I have also been active in social justice movements in Québec, have marched in numerous demonstrations during the 2012 Québec general student strike (Chapman, Loader, Olszanowski, Sawchuk, & Spencer, 2012; Massumi, Barney, & Sorochan, 2012), and regularly attend my university union assemblies. As a researcher, I finished a PhD and continue to publish scholarly articles and participate in academic conferences. These two tracks of my life complement and inform each other, but I still tend to distinguish them in my mind and in my work. When I am an activist, I do politics: I engage in debates, I sometimes take on a leadership role, and I defend collective decisions with which I may not completely agree. When I am scholar, however, I value rigour and subtlety and am still driven by the classical scientific ideal of staying “objective,” of keeping a critical distance away from my fieldwork and research subjects. In a way, I am struggling with the tensions between political and academic vocations (Weber & Dreiymantis, 2008). Therefore, the easiest way for me to negotiate my positions as an activist and as a researcher has often been to keep a clear separation between these two spheres.

But what is activist research? A quick review of the literature shows that this notion has been an object of scholarly interest for quite some time, at least in the Anglophone world. Hale (2001), for instance, describes activist research as a practice that: a) helps one to better understand the causes of inequality, oppression, violence, et cetera; b) is carried out, at each phase, in direct cooperation with an organized collective of people who themselves are subject to these conditions; and c) is used to-
gether with the people in question to transform these conditions. Speed (2006) defines activist research as the “overt commitment to an engagement with our research subjects that is directed toward a shared political goal” (p. 71), a position that she distinguishes from critically engaged research, understood as critical analysis without necessarily engaging politically alongside subjects. In a special double issue of *Studies in Social Justice* addressing the challenges of scholar-activism, Smeltzer and Cantillon (2015) write that some contributing authors contend that, “academia and activism don’t mix” (p. 11). While this position is relatively marginal, Smeltzer and Cantillon cite some of the difficulties authors highlight in mixing activism and academia, such as how individuals balance their time and emotions between academic and activist pursuits. In the following paragraphs, I would like to address two challenges I have faced when mixing activism and research.

**Institutional and ethical challenges of activist scholarship**

In 2004, as a research assistant, I was given the coordinating task of reviving the Laboratoire de communication médiatisée par ordinateur (LabCMO) at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), a research lab on computer-mediated communication that had become fallow due to the departure of the previous coordinator. At the time, I was also seriously involved in techno-activist community groups emerging in Montréal. To negotiate my demanding engagements, I encouraged closer relationships between the research lab I was coordinating and the community groups in which I was involved. As a result, the groups benefited from the physical spaces and intellectual interactions of the university and, taking the opportunity of having easy access to rich fieldwork, the lab oriented its research program toward the study of the use and development of digital technologies by community organizations, especially in Québec.

This period of research led to a collective publication (Proulx, Couture, & Rueff, 2008) in which a chapter was dedicated to a reflexive analysis that characterized this relationship as one of co-construction, meaning that both the lab and the community groups mutually constructed one another and mutually constructed knowledge (Goldenberg & Couture, 2008). However, our reflexive analysis also recognized the necessity of acknowledging the distinctions between these spheres, especially on an institutional level. We drew on Bourdieu’s concept of field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which states that a sphere of social life—a field—is structured by rules or “social forces” that define the position of its occupants, whether they be individuals or institutions (p. 97). Using this concept, we conceived of the academic and activist fields as separate, and structured by different modes of symbolic and material recognitions that can sometimes come into conflict. For members of community groups, participating in research (e.g., interviews, meetings) takes time and resources that are not usually covered by their traditional incomes or funding. For scholars, the situation is reversed: doing “pure” activism leaves less time for publishing and is not something easily justifiable in terms of what is considered to be effective academic work.

A similar analysis was conducted by Skinner, Hackett, and Poyntz (2015). Also using Bourdieu’s concept of field, they looked at how the academic and activist fields enable or constrain collaboration between scholars and activists. The authors note, for
instance, that while many activist initiatives emerged within an academic setting, collaboration is restrained by the pressure for academics to accumulate research grants and publish in peer-reviewed journals.

Based on these analyses, a first challenge of activist research (or activist scholarship) seems to involve negotiating these different modes of recognition. For instance, a researcher, in order to be competitive in the job process, to receive tenure, or to secure research funding, must publish peer-reviewed articles or books in scholarly venues. This involves a style of writing and a circulation of knowledge that do not necessarily match activists’ specific writing needs, which may include policy and/or pedagogical interventions. A scholarly article that is published in an obscure and closed-access journal is usually not of direct (or even indirect) use to activists. It is very difficult for academics to contribute to activist causes and agendas while keeping up with current neoliberal “publish or perish” academic evaluation discourses and standards.

Paradoxically, public interventions quite often receive more public visibility than peer-reviewed publications. A few years ago, I published a policy paper on the use of free software by the Québec government (Couture, 2013). It received significant media coverage and opened new research opportunities and collaborations. Yet, since it is not peer-reviewed, the paper tends to receive less formal recognition within academia (especially when seeking academic funding).

A second challenge for activist research relates to “ethical boundaries” between activism and research. What happens when an activist or an activist-centred activity transitions from “pure” activism to more research-oriented work? For instance, over the past two years, I have been working closely with colleagues at McGill University on the World Forum on Free Media (Couture, King, Toupin, & Lentz, 2016). This is a thematic event of the broader World Social Forum addressing issues of media and communication, and its most recent event took place in Montréal in August 2016. Although I present myself as a researcher within this context (highlighting my academic affiliation), I am mostly acting as an activist by, for instance, taking part in organizing the event, drafting a charter of alternative media, and mobilizing local activists. Yet the issues I address through this process—such as alternative media, free software, and Internet governance—are very close to my research interests, and my involvement is time-consuming. I am thus considering using my work with the World Forum on Free Media as fieldwork for producing research outcomes that can be submitted to peer-reviewed venues. The tension then is: how do I negotiate my changing role, especially in relation to ethical requirements?

These ethical questions—to which I have no clear answers—are especially important to consider when one is taking part in debates or controversies relevant to one’s research. As an activist, I sometimes am in a privileged position to understand and document controversies or debates. However, understanding a controversy is not the same as conducting research on it and publishing about it. As an activist, especially when I am in a leadership role, I become involved in controversies and have to take a position—sometimes against my own personal opinion if I am representing an organization. I also engage with people who see me foremost as a fellow activist and not as someone who will make them an object of study. Where is my loyalty in such situa-
tions? Is it to the organization, to the research, or to myself? I think it is because I do not have clear answers to these questions that I find separating these tracks easier, and am ambivalent about identifying as an “activist-researcher.”

Some proposals
There is a need to create spaces (both physical and online) for “activist-researchers” to meet and discuss with reflexivity the challenges inherent in their identities and practices. There are, of course, some think tanks and other non-academic, research-oriented organizations (e.g., the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [CCPA] in Ottawa or the Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques [IRIS] in Montréal); yet one benefits from having grounding in academia for these types of discussions, if only because of the resources that are (still) available within universities to support research and even collaboration with activists. The Activism and Communication Scholarship in Canada workshop that took place in April 2015, sponsored in part by the Canadian Communication Association, and which resulted in this special issue, is a good example of such spaces. We need more research collaborations and publications like this one in order to reflect on theories, methodologies, and challenges of activist research. This could be done within academic settings, but also within activist spaces, for instance by organizing workshops during activist conferences to discuss the challenges—ethical, methodological, but also epistemological—raised by the entanglements of activist and scholarly work. Although activist and scholarly collaborations are often productively creative and gratifying, we should be mindful of not erasing the differences between these postures and should make these distinctions an object of critical inquiry.

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Note
1. Although the terms “activist research” and “scholar activism” are often used interchangeably in the literature, the former seems to refer to activists within social movements who do research, while the latter refers to scholars within academia who conduct activist-oriented research. For my part, I use the term “activist-researcher” as this was the exact term used by my colleague when she asked me if I identified as such. More generally, I also tend to identify more as a researcher than as a scholar, since this latter term has no French counterpart, and since I also conduct research outside of academia.

References


