Guest Editorial

Activism and Communication Scholarship in Canada

This special issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication addresses issues related to activism and communication scholarship in Canada. The articles, research in brief, and commentaries collected here stem from presentations given at a Toronto based workshop that we (Smeltzer and Shade) organized, held April 30, 2015. Funded by the Canadian Communication Association and through in-kind support from Mozilla, the workshop included 17 presenters and 26 audience participants, representing communication and media studies programs at 17 different academic institutions in the country. Our objective for the workshop was to physically bring together scholars at all levels of the tiered academic system to critically explore the ways in which they negotiate their roles as educators and researchers while being committed to various forms of activism within and beyond their respective campuses.

Our keynote speaker for the day, James L. Turk, distinguished visiting professor in the Faculty of Communication & Design’s School of Journalism at Ryerson University and former executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), described for us the “fundamental shift” that has taken place in higher education over the past few decades. While academic positions are becoming ever more precarious, universities are, as Turk writes in the foreword to this issue, “increasingly expected to be engines of growth, focusing on research that will ‘pay off’ economically and that will resolve practical problems identified by governments, corporate partners, or funders” (p. 6). We are witnessing the deleterious effects of this shift on the lives of our students, on ourselves and our fellow faculty, and on society writ large (see also Carragee & Frey, 2016; Côté & Allahar, 2011; Gerber, 2014; Giroux, Karmis, & Rouillard, 2015; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Smeltzer & Hearn 2015; Ylijoki, 2013).

As universities are bearing the brunt of such managerial corporatization, a commitment to activism can be difficult to sustain (e.g., Chatterton, Hodkinson, & Pickerill, 2010; Flood, Martin, & Dreher, 2013). Indeed, because scholars are expected to produce quantifiable and monetizable outputs in increasingly shortened time frames, we find ourselves caught in what Petrick (2015) calls a “pernicious productivity paradigm that plagues both activism and academia” (p. 71). We need activism more than ever, especially given the deterioration of the welfare state and concomitant geopolitical crises, yet we have less time and energy to engage in it (e.g., Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Rodino-Colocino, 2012). This balancing act is particularly fraught for scholars in tenuous labour circumstances as well as for those coping with myriad familial obligations, including elder care and child care, which have particularly acute gender implications (e.g,
Moreover, activism often requires skill sets that differ from “traditional” academic expertise and can be particularly time-consuming. Nevertheless, academics continue to engage in a wide range of activism, from direct policy interventions to NGO support, from involvement in university unions to the organization of activist-oriented pedagogical projects. Their commitment to activism signals a belief in our ability as academics to “make a difference” in our communities, and a belief that collectively we have the capacity to change the course of academia. As Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber contend in their recently published book *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, “[R]esistance is alive and well” in the university (2016, p. x; see also Risager & Thorup, 2016). Although some may see Berg and Seeber’s work as a bit optimistic, given the neoliberal climate in which we must operate, and others may feel that our field now focuses perhaps too much on the need to engage in activism, we too believe in our agency as academics to advance greater social justice.

**Canadian communication context**

In addition to the neoliberal trends described above, this special issue of *CJC* is timely given the rapid expansion of communication programs throughout the country, the growth of new media as potential outlets for public intellectualism, intensifying administrative expectations that scholars will demonstrate “public/community engagement,” and the growing number of communication scholars advancing critiques related to precarious academic labour.

Although communications as a field in Canada has a long history of being critical, policy-oriented, and interventionist (Babe, 2000; Hamilton, 2002, 2009), there is a notable dearth of literature that critically explores the scholar-activist dialectic from a communication perspective, especially in the Canadian context: Issues examined by some of the research to date include the challenges of academic advocacy in regulatory realms, tensions related to conducting research with community-based groups given the structural constraints of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), pedagogical interventions for media policy literacy with civil society organizations, and escalating restrictions on freedom of speech on campus.

At the 2015 workshop, and to varying degrees in the pieces included in this collection, contributors highlighted the importance of 1) exploring the benefits and challenges associated with engaging in activism as communication scholars; and 2) convening *in-person to discuss this topic with fellow colleagues*. Numerous attendees at the workshop commented that partaking in an embodied event made them feel that they were part of a larger community and that their chosen form(s) of on- or off-campus intervention was valued by their peers. This sense of strength in numbers was clearly important to their self-care as they struggled to manage myriad expectations that are part and parcel of securing and keeping an academic position.

Part of the workshop conversation also focused—albeit briefly—on the relationship between “activism” and “advocacy.” Although these two terms are often conflated in the literature and in general parlance, activism was viewed by many participants as more “political” and as adversarial to existing political and economic frameworks, whereas advocacy was considered to play more of a facilitative role, one that lobbied...
power structures both within and beyond the “ivory tower.” Clearly, use of these terms was considered to be context specific, which reflects Lee, Smith, and Henry’s contention that “At times policy advocacy and political activism may overlap, however distinct differences exist based on the level of confrontation, strategic orientation, and types of systemic engagement” (2013, p. 79). The unequivocal takeaway message from the workshop was that both forms of intervention should be valued and that a multi-pronged approach advances positive social change.

Additionally, workshop participants highlighted the importance of recognizing that the type and extent of one’s activism is influenced by one’s position in the academic system. In comparison to pre-tenure faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers, tenure affords faculty members with a greater degree of safety to engage in their chosen political pursuits (e.g., Christou, 2016; Smeltzer & Cantillon, 2015). Yet even for those in tenure-track or tenured positions, whether and to what extent activism is privileged or discouraged in terms of advancement and promotion is often contingent on the particular culture of one’s department, faculty, and university.

Overview of the collection

In our call for papers following the workshop, we encouraged contributors to engage in a theoretically driven but personal discussion of how they negotiate their scholarly and activist commitments. As Magda Lewis (2005) writes in regards to feminist critiques of the neoliberal university, these kinds of testimonials provide the raw data that give us insight into the struggles we face as scholars attempting to advance social justice. In order to include a wide diversity of testimonials, we decreased CJC’s maximum word count for each of the journal’s three categories—articles, research in brief, and commentaries.

The first two articles in the collection focus attention specifically on pedagogical issues. Patricia Elliott draws on her experience working in collaboration with external communities to offer a thoughtful and nuanced discussion of community-engaged communication scholarship in the context of the neoliberal university. Herbert Pimlott’s self-reflexive article provides readers with insight into how, as a critical communication scholar, he integrates a wide range of activist activities into his undergraduate and graduate classrooms with the goal of providing students with both critical theory and practical skills. With our focus still on-campus, the next article, written by Bob Hanke, examines the academic labour struggles of precarious faculty. Hanke’s discussion highlights the history and politics of CUPE Local 3903 at York University to argue the necessity of reforming faculty employment systems.

Ajit Pyati’s contribution charts new territory by bringing together the fields of contemplative education and communication studies to explore how inner meaning, purpose, and transformation can have activist pedagogical interventions, particularly in the Canadian context. In their article, Mary Elizabeth Luka and Catherine Middleton demonstrate the importance of communication-oriented policy research by examining how civic activism played out in the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission’s 2013–2015 Let’s Talk TV consultation process on the future of television in the country. In the final article, Karen Smith explores the opportunities and obstacles she experienced as a Mitacs postdoctoral fellow at Mozilla. Smith contends that her po-
sition promoting digital literacy in the Greater Toronto Area offers a useful example of how communication scholars can engage in activist work and research within an ostensibly corporate milieu.

These six articles are followed by a rich array of research in brief and commentaries that cover a wide range of topics. Derek Antoine’s research in brief calls on communication scholars to privilege Indigenous knowledges in their research and practices. In their research in brief, Trish Audette-Longo, Mariam Esseghaier, and Marie-Eve Lefebvre discuss the rewards and challenges associated with producing a pedagogical documentary about the Charter of Québec Values, while Errol Salamon’s research in brief describes Alan M. Thomas’ participatory television series experiment with the CBC as an example of two-way communication and learning that contributed to democratic processes. In the commentaries section, Monica Batac examines the difficulties she has experienced trying to promote and facilitate social justice-oriented pedagogical practices in the face of external demands for career-enhancing skills; Stéphane Couture offers insight into how he has navigated the blurry lines between being an activist and a researcher; and Miles Weafer chronicles the ActivateT.O. speaker series, a noteworthy initiative striving to combine academic and community-based activism.

This special issue also includes interviews that we, Smeltzer and Shade, conducted with two additional workshop presenters, Mark Lipton and Becky Lentz, who offer candid and critical insights into how they bring activism into their respective classrooms. The collection concludes with an overview (written by Jody Berland) of the Facebook site TAB: Take Academia Back! The site encourages members to document, share, and critique the onslaught of privatization and managerialism in Canadian universities (https://www.facebook.com/groups/622766154521199/). The image of tabbies we chose for the cover of this issue—with permission from the artists, David Hlynsky and Paul Mansell—is from the TAB site.

**Future directions**

We hope that this assemblage of writings from junior and senior Canadian communication scholars offers insight into a range of activist endeavours our colleagues have undertaken both within and outside the classroom. We also hope that the discussion inspires readers to support all forms of action (including their own) that are geared toward progressive social justice. Audette-Longo, Esseghaier, and Lefebvre’s contribution to this issue is feminist in its orientation, and we welcome future research on the relationship between activism and communication scholarship that focus specifically on feminist perspectives, as well as on gender, race, class, and other axes of marginalization. We also encourage additional in-person gatherings of communication scholars to facilitate greater personal and professional support for those in our community who are striving to navigate both academia and activism.

**Note**

1. For a non-Canadian perspective in our field, we recommend to readers the special section “Communication Activism Research: Engaged Communication Scholarship for Social Justice” recently published in the *International Journal of Communication* (vol. 10, 2016). This small collection of critical pieces examines how communication activism research (CAR) is an engaged form of scholarship conducted by academics who use “their communication knowledge to work with oppressed communities and activists to intervene into unjust conditions to make them more just” (Carragee & Frey, 2016,

References


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