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SSRC Forum

Social Science is Police Science: Researching Grass-Roots Activism

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The processes by which knowledge is constructed, that is to say the research questions, the methods and the researcher's epistemological commitments, have an impact on the knowledge that is generated. The way the researcher approaches and relates to interviewees influences the type and quality of information that she or he gathers, and thus affects the research findings. This is particularly so in cases where a strong social, cultural and/or ideological gulf exists between the researcher and the interview partner, or when interviewees are skeptical toward academic research.

In this essay, we describe the obstacles we encountered in the course of a series of interviews with media activists and members of what we call "grass-roots tech groups."¹ We focus on the clash of organizational cultures (grass-roots activism vs. academia), and derive methodological implications for conducting "engaged" research with social actors who, like radical activists, usually remain outside the academic spotlight. This text is written from the perspective of former media activists who are passionate about social movement media and who try to select research questions that matter to those who are researched.

Anarchist and Underground: Grass-Roots Techies

We draw our examples from two separate strands of research on grass-roots tech groups conducted in the period 2006–2009. Grass-roots techies are activists skilled in software programming ("coding"), who set up and run communication infrastructures that represent an alternative to commercial services. They usually offer Web-based services, such as Web site hosting and blogging platforms, e-mail accounts and mailing lists, and other tools, such as anonymous remailers. They may develop specific tools, such as encryption programs to protect the privacy of other activists, or provide platforms for self-production of information (e.g., Indymedia). They operate on a voluntary basis and through collective organizing principles, with the aim of counteracting commercial as well as state pressures on information content, media access, and the privacy of media users. Examples include Riseup.net in the United States and Autistici/Inventati in Italy.

¹ These interviews served to explore the nature of their activities from a sociological point of view (Milan, 2009), and their views on Internet governance (Hintz & Milan, 2009).

A typical grass-roots tech group consists of half a dozen volunteers who collaborate and work mostly online. They may meet regularly for strategic discussions and decisions. Some operate a physical space, like a computer laboratory or an Internet cafe, or occasionally establish media centers at major protest events. But they mostly operate in cyberspace.

Groups differ, but we can identify some common elements. First, their activism is inspired by values of autonomy and emancipation: They develop self-organized alternative infrastructures in order to gain independence from government/commercial control. Secondly, they implement an alternative production mode ("direct action"), rejecting capitalist logic and government interventions. Their cultural and political backgrounds often include anarchist thought, do-it-yourself culture, and cyber-libertarianism. Thirdly, they are usually organized as collectives of equals rejecting any formal leadership and representation. Typically, nobody is entitled to speak publicly in the name of the group. In addition, they do not aim to influence institutional policy-making processes by lobbying, advocacy, or protest, but rather seek to bypass regulatory, technological, or political constraints.

This brief outline gives us a first hint at challenges in interactions between researchers and these groups: Grass-roots techies are critical of mainstream academia; they do not perceive a gain in advocating their concerns within academia or even speaking through a researcher's voice; and they generally do not like to be observed.

Challenges for Activist-Research Interactions

A closer look at activist-research interactions, based on our research in this field, reveals a set of divides that concern differences in organizational cultures and routines, in motivations and values, and in the gains and potential losses of the research for each side.

Research emphasis on "organized" civil society. Researchers usually focus on actors that are easily identifiable, structured according to known models, and acting according to known repertoires of action. Most of the scholarly work in civil society and social movement studies has focused on nongovernmental organizations that have a Web site and a public structure. These organizations usually are interested in discussing their issues with academics, hoping to receive visibility. Attention also has been paid to campaigns and advocacy networks with clear policy objectives, and to large protest events that represent the peak of civil society activity. The dominant preoccupation with formalized and institution-oriented civil society is sometimes defended (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005), sometimes criticized (Stammers & Eschle, 2005), but it generally means that some forms of activism receive less attention than others, or are even overlooked. Grass-roots tech groups, in particular, fall out of the known frameworks as they are informal groups, typically without legal status and rooted in the informal connections of online activism. They generally are not policy-oriented, operating instead "beyond" institutional processes.

Research on alternative, community and radical media occasionally has considered these groups but has shown more interest in the production of content, focusing on radio stations, newsletters, community TV stations, Web sites, and so forth, as content providers (Downing, 2001, Rodriguez, 2001,

Atton, 2002, Langlois & Dubois, 2005), showing little or no interest in underground developers of communication infrastructure.

Activists' focus on "practices." With a clear priority on building up infrastructure alternatives and an emphasis on everyday practices, grass-roots tech groups—as well as other civil society actors that do not directly address institutions—tend to obscure themselves from the spotlight of established civil society activity, and thus of academic research. They have no interest in being represented in mainstream public debate, and they do not seek a voice in policy arenas.²

"Police science." Because grass-roots tech groups assume an antagonistic position to state authorities, express strong concerns about privacy protection and surveillance, and have occasionally experienced state repression, they seek to avoid exposure and usually do not operate publicly as recognizable entities and/or individuals. Typically, members use pseudonyms rather than their real names. Research can violate this attempt to remain outside the public—and, particularly, government—spotlight. Published research results on, for example, group size, work practices, motivations, networks, and alliances, may play into the hands of those who want to shut alternative communication systems down. As one of our interview partners noted: "In the past, we did not participate in any surveys/interviews, et cetera. It was a decision based on the assumption that social science[s] are too often a police science, plus that it is never clear who is going to use this research." (Interview 1, 2008).

The power of definition. Suspicion toward academics is also grounded in the assumption—and often the experience—that they take advantage of activists merely to further their careers, whereas activists do not benefit from the research. In addition, collaboration between the sides often ends as soon as the researcher has sufficient material. Academic careers are based on reputation and thus on the "name" of the researcher, who, through research results and publications, will define the type of activism that he or she researches. The researcher may assume a position from which he or she speaks for this activism, and is recognized as an authority in the field, while those who actually create and conduct the actions remain obscure.

Different motivations and investments. The discrepancy in the results that each side gains from the research also concerns material aspects and different understandings of "labor." For each, the interview process requires an investment of time and sometimes resources, but whereas for one side this

² Rather than influencing institutional policy-making processes by lobbying, advocacy, or protest, and thus raising their voice to be heard in policy debate, they focus on practically developing alternative communication infrastructures in an effort to bypass regulatory, technological or political constraints. Like many other groups, grass-roots techies do not fit into the classic distinction between "insiders," those who participate in policy processes and thereby seek to trigger reform and incremental change, and "outsiders," those who put pressure on an institution through street protest and counter-mobilizations (Soule et al., 1999; Tarrow, 2005). They do not usually engage with institutional processes at all, and instead operate largely "beyond" the policy process. This distinction is further explored in Hintz and Milan, 2009, and Milan and Hintz, 2010.

is part of the day job and leads to material earnings, for the other side it is part of their leisure time and thus reduces the time that is available to gain income. This imbalance cannot easily be resolved (by payments to the activists, for example) as it is grounded in a deeper clash between different organizational cultures, work ethics, and motivations, that is, between those whose interest in an issue is part of the job and those who work voluntarily on an issue for social and political reasons.

Individualism versus collectivism. Whereas academia is an individualized endeavor, with the individual researcher typically working on their own research project and developing an individual reputation, activism in the form of grass-roots tech groups is based on a collective approach. Hence, the group, network, or movement is the relevant entity to be considered by researchers. This may have practical implications, for example, when responses to interview questions are discussed and formulated by the whole group over prolonged periods of time, but it also has implications for the broader nature of researcher-activist interaction and understanding. As one interview partner noted, grass-roots tech groups "are collective enterprises," and addressing individuals within the group means "breaking down the collective dimension." (Interview 3, 2007)

In summary, even though activist entities, such as grass-roots tech groups, play a significant role in media activism and in social movements, they often are obscured from the view of researchers and their perspectives rarely are considered. At the same time, they are skeptical toward the exposure provided by academic research, and there are strong perceived imbalances as to who gains from the research process. Finally, there are significant divides in organizational and social cultures. In the rest of this article, we would like to suggest ways of addressing these divisions and bridging some of the gaps.

Methodological Considerations

Building a relationship. Bridging the significant gulf between researchers and activist groups, such as grass-roots tech groups, requires a serious effort to build a research relationship based on clarity, reciprocal respect, and trust. As Kvale (1996) notes, an interview should be seen as "inter-view," that is, an "interchange of views between two people conversing on a theme of mutual interest." Considering that the Latin meaning of "conversation" is "wandering together with," creating an equal and comfortable "wandering" situation is essential. As interviews are unequal relations, with the interviewer creating and controlling an artificial situation and defining topics and questions, particular effort is needed by the researcher to mitigate this asymmetric relation.

Time frame: A prolonged dialogue. Building a trusted relationship means to allow for extended exchange before the actual interview starts. This exchange, often in the form of e-mail, can last for weeks or even months before data collection can begin. These exchanges are vital for researchers to establish themselves as trustworthy interlocutors. Participant observation at activist gatherings helps to create connections. As Ryan and Jeffreys acknowledge: "In settings in which communities have endured periodic research infestations with little ostensible gain, scholars may need to engage in prolonged dialogues and experiments with activist partners to clarify the value of scholarly research" (Ryan & Jeffreys, 2008, p. 16).

Designing research questions that matter. As “movement theorists often speak to themselves,” producing “work that is distant from, and irrelevant to, the very struggle it purports to examine,” thus creating “an artificial divide between the practice of social change and the study of such efforts” (Croteau et al., 2005, pp. xii-xiii), bridging divides to radical activists means that research questions should relate closely to the needs of the activists if they are to accept the research as legitimate and engage with it. This points to the practices of action research, which seeks to enact solutions to the problems brought forward by social actors through “co-generative inquiry” (Greenwood & Levin, 2005).

Situate the researcher in the daily environments of the research partners. The researcher has to adjust methodologies and ways of relating to research partners or “objects” (in this case, grass-roots tech groups) to the interviewees’ social practices. They have to enter the environment of their activism. For Internet activists who are familiar with and comfortable in technologically mediated environments, e-mail interviews may be the best method. On the other hand, for community radio practitioners, who are familiar with microphones and used to voicing their opinions and emotions, live interviews and focus groups are more useful.

Creating connections, situating oneself in the activists’ environments, and relating to their value systems can—and should—lead to adopting their communication practices in more detail. With Internet activists, this may imply that the researcher uses a nickname and an e-mail address from a radical/noncommercial provider, offers research partners an encrypted e-mail exchange, or publishes his or her research results in an open access journal or a Web site with an open source content management system. Certainly the researcher should show significant knowledge of the field and of issues that are relevant to the interview partners. In the case of radical techies, that would be privacy, surveillance, and intellectual property.

Respond to the collective nature of activist groups. When interviews are conducted, group interviews are preferable to individual interviews. This may take the form of online asynchronous interviews (Kivits, 2005) where the researcher sends one question per week, allowing the group to discuss it at its weekly meeting, leading to a collective answer.

Recognize material differences. A collaboration with activists typically implies an imbalance in both the investment in, and the material gains from, the project (see above). Researchers should develop strategies to address this problem. They should discuss possible gains and outcomes for each side with interview partners and reserve certain resources of a research project—such as funding, or time—for this purpose.

Reflect critically on your self as a researcher. Studying activism, and in particular radical activists, implies a process of redefinition of the self by the researcher. One’s identity, motivations, and standpoints are regularly challenged by activists who will continuously question the choice of a specific research problem, the aims of the inquiry, and the role and motivations of the researcher. The researcher has to accept this very personal exposure as a legitimate part of the conversation. Reflexivity, or “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher,” becomes a central dimension of the process: “It

is a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 210).

For the researcher, the difficulty is not just the need for self-reflection, which may at times be unpleasant or may even lead to serious crises, but more practically the need for consistent engagement in developing his or her identity, research objectives, and motivations in a way that is acceptable to the activists who are being researched.

Qualitative research. Despite the doubtless value of quantitative data, interaction with grass-roots activists calls for qualitative research that "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view" (Kvale, 1996). Qualitative research means to "study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Participant observation is a particularly useful addition to understand "how and to some extent why, movement participants act, think, and feel as they do" (Benford, 1987, p. 28). Overall, a combination (triangulation) of different qualitative methods, such as document analysis, semistructured interviews, and participant observation is the least likely to impose the researcher's concepts and assumptions.

Activist data. In response to concerns about state surveillance and social science being a "police science," it is essential to constantly question the amount and quality of data that is gathered about activists, and to publish it in order to reduce the potential harm for research partners. This means not only to anonymize individual and group names, but also to look critically at what connections between groups are exposed, what tactics are revealed, and to weigh the costs and benefits of both perspectives.

Conclusion

Divides between academia and activism concern a variety of cultural, social, political, and material differences. Researching activism, in our view, requires the development of relationships and an understanding of the research process as a collaboration. It involves both the need to learn about the cultural, social, and political setting of the activist, and to reflect critically on the self as a researcher. This also means—as banal as it may sound—to recognize that activism is "work." Activists are not waiting for an opportunity to talk with researchers, or the rest of the world, and they may have better things to do. This is highlighted particularly by grass-roots tech groups that do not depend on, and may not even be interested in, public recognition. These groups point us to an important section of civil society that is not about campaigning and advocacy; rather they are about the creation of infrastructure and the very direct construction of "another world." As such, they are challenging for researchers and for established academic routines and perceptions, but crucial for understanding our contemporary world.

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