

Communication Activism: A Break from Tradition

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Abstract

This article serves several functions. On its surface, it is as a narrative of a semester of research in Communication Activism in East White Oak, the traditionally socioeconomically challenged neighborhood in Greensboro, NC. It explores our journey from activism based in service toward a communication movement built within a community. Most significantly, this is an introduction to proposed research to be performed over a period of at least one year.

Communication Activism: A Break from Tradition

What is communication activism and scholarship? Scholars argue theory, practice and legitimacy of their focus of research in seeking social justice. This debate over what standard of pedagogical practice is “more right” seems ridiculous and futile. In fact, when considering that only a fraction of the American population attain anything even close to the education of these “scholars” leads me to question whether their positions are indeed a secondary status quo. Critical theorists are charged with critiquing dominating ideology through “examination of social conditions for the hidden productive structures of marginalization” (McKinnon, 2009, para. 7). Can those armed with academic tools move beyond traditional communicative structures in order to meet those whom they most want to affect where they are?

Frey (1996) speaks of communication activism in terms of social justice, or “the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced” (p. 110). Critical analysis of rhetoric and organizational structures is one common format of research on power at work. Frey (1996) argues that communication activism should be a “tool for social action” (p. 117). In reality, we need both forms. Understanding the role of language in domination is a key component of dismantling the language of hegemony. Understanding how organizational structures communicate and dominate is vital to disrupting the status quo. And practical application of communicative tools to advocate for those underrepresented or underresourced is essential to progress. How do we best incorporate the foundational understandings of academia into practical applications that are responsive to those we hope to benefit?

On the Ground in East Greensboro

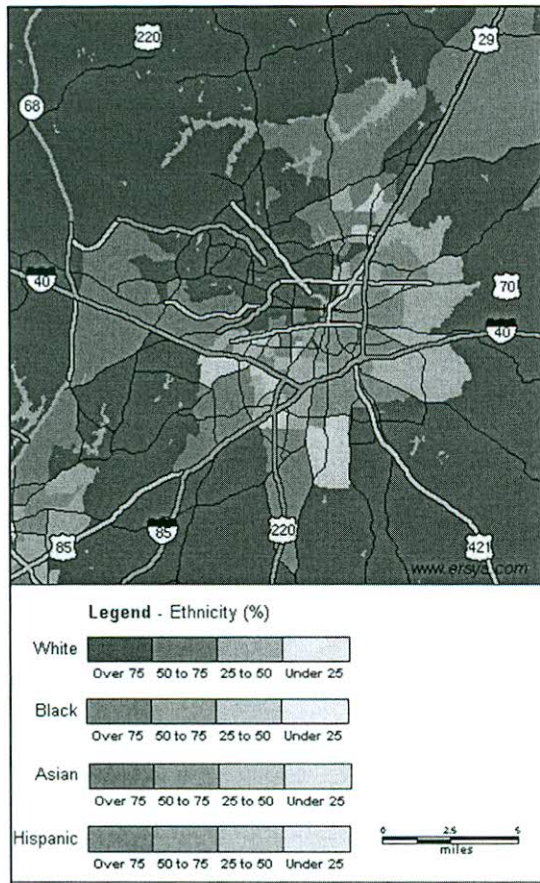


Figure 1: City of Greensboro, NC, Density by Ethnicity for the year 2000 (ERsys.org, 2002).

Greensboro is the third most populous city in North Carolina with nearly a quarter of million people (US Census, 2010). The city has a history built on the railroads whose tracks divide the city and the textile mills that flourished because of them. Unfortunately, these industries also permitted an institutionalized division between East Greensboro and the rest of city. This is typified by the most significant manufacturer in Greensboro, Cone Mills. The story of Cone Mills is not just a series of mills, but of the numerous “villages” built to be self-sufficient towns for workers of the mills. At their peak, thousands of workers were housed in five villages; Revolution, White Oak, East White Oak,

Proximity and Proximity Print Works (UNCG, 2009). The Cone Mill Village of East White Oak was built specifically to house African-American workers. The mill history presents a legacy of partitioning of African-Americans in Greensboro whose ramifications are still felt today. Recent geographic mapping along lines of ethnicity demonstrate the still present racial divisions along these inherited lines (See Figure 1). This demarcation also serves to keep the city separate in terms of education, crime, and poverty (Diversity.org, 2011).

As one enters the neighborhood traditionally named “East White Oak,” the long term consequences of demographic partitions are evident. Derelict homes and businesses are

disbursed along Phillips Avenue, the main street through the neighborhood. The Bessemer Shopping Center, the only shopping center within East White Oak, is a small strip mall where nearly all the doors and windows have been shuttered as the vendors have vacated. In the middle of the strip remains one lone vendor, a Dollar Store. Tucked within the parking lot of this nearly defunct center is the McGirt-Horton Library.

McGirt-Horton Library, a City-funded public library which opened in August of 2010, is in its appearance a stark contrast to its surroundings. The building blends modernity with the cultural history of both African Americans in Greensboro and of the library as a community center. To start, the building is one of the first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certified libraries in North Carolina” (Greensboro Engineering, n.d.). As many libraries, it houses a large meeting space and separate sections for Adults, Children and Teens. In addition, the library contains a “video lounge area, sound booth, and a multimedia lab” (GSO Libraries, n.d.). Accenting these features are numerous areas of visual appeal including a large mural by Ernest Watson which depicts the civil rights history of Greensboro including the creation of North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College, a traditionally African-American institution, the Woolworth sit-in movement, to the first African-American mayor of the City of Greensboro (Greensboro Library Commission, n.d.). In the children’s section, there is a quilt that had been created in 2005 entitled, “We Need Books, Too,” (GSO Libraries, n.d.). The quilt’s message reflects what one could consider the greatest need at the library: books. Many of the stacks shelves are barren; though a variety of other non-traditional resources are available such as magazines and movies. Though the lack of paper media may be alarming, one should also consider one of the primary uses for this library; internet access. The library has thirty computers which are consistently in use.

Speaking for a Change

For one semester, Williams, a student colleague and I have been operating within the model of communication activism “Speaking for a Change” at the McGirt-Horton Library through the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s Speaking Center. “Speaking for a Change” is grounded in using “communication competency as an activist tool” (Cuny et al, 2011, p. 11). Based in pedagogical principles, “Speaking for a Change” engages the community through workshops enhancing competency in public speaking situations. Having been employed with numerous citizen groups, it serves as a successful model of communication activism. The bulk of the outreach is focused on preparing community members to engage their respective governing bodies (Cuny et al, 2011).

Our Time at McGirt-Horton Library

With this heuristic in mind, we began bi-weekly sessions at the McGirt-Horton Library. And for weeks we sat and sat...and sat. Often, we don’t speak of our failures, however, I believe in the inherent value of such deviations. We could have viewed our hours at McGirt-Horton as time wasted; instead we chose to use the time as an opportunity to observe, learn and adapt. As we reflected on our journey, we realized that we were not being responsive to the circumstances in which we found ourselves.

Frey (1996) states communication activism should focus on the “language game” of disenfranchisement (p. 112). Though a noble cause, the difficulty lies in producing community investment in participating in their game. In this case, we entered a traditionally underresourced community armed with traditional forms of public speech to alter the status quo. Our first efforts focused on speaking to governing bodies which did not produce any interest. At the time of this writing, the Greensboro City Council has a perception of not being interested in the

communication of the people of East Greensboro. For example, Greensboro's City Council moved the portion of proceedings dedicated to public speakers to the end of session. In considering that Council meets every other Tuesday beginning at 5:30 in the evening, speakers to the floor generally do not get the opportunity to speak until much later in the evening. In addition, the Council is attempting to reopen a dump in the middle of an East Greensboro neighborhood and refuses to meet with the citizens of the area (M. Abuzuaiter, personal communication, June 23, 2011). Community disillusionment with the power structures in place not only inhibits the success of this tactic of activism, but to some extent results in the community defensive posture, "Why are you trying to fix me?" Interactions and feedback from the library staff reinforced our concerns about operating within this paradigm of research under these circumstances.

An aversion to traditional processes does not need to inhibit action. Instead of being encumbered with the notion of what tradition views as an effective communicative voice, we argue we should try to cultivate the community's voice. Frey (1996) notes that "people do not come to the moment of production of speech acts equally" (p.112). As activists, we must connect to the community on their terms, not ours. This echoes Frey (1996) insistence that we ask the question, "*Whose interests are being served by our research?*" (p. 111, emphasis added).

The import of public speaking skills cannot be underestimated, however, in terms of public communication, formal speeches are but one form. Speaking for a Change can be versatile as presentation of self and message on inherent in all communicative messages. The "moral imperative *to act as effectively as we can*" dictates that we modify our tactics in order to "do something about structurally sustained inequalities" (Frey, 1996, p.111, emphasis added). How do we most effectively incorporate the fundamentals of public speech into a viable format

for this community? In our exploration of the situation, we began to consider the non-traditional resources of the community and how best to blend them with our own in order to create something *with* the community. Chris Rabb (2010) calls these non-traditional resources “invisible capital” falling into three categories: human, social, and cultural. He argues that instead of working from a position of lack of traditional capital; juxtapose non-traditional capital as a foundation for opportunity (C. Rabb, personal communication, June 13, 2011).

Resources

Our first consideration was to discern how members of the community get information. Studies demonstrate that populations in similar socioeconomic status rely heavily on neighborhood communication far more than any other source of communication (Jeffres et al, 2002). In addition, people communicate political discussion more often with closer associates and people of the same social status (Straits, 1991). This means that in order to be effective, first we must move from terms of attempting to inform a community to terms of the community informing itself. This also means that in order to facilitate real action, any efforts must employ significant community “buy-in.”

In our observations at McGirt-Horton, we noted that nearly all of the visitors to the library were utilizing the computers. As internet access is a primary use for the library combined with the inherent value of the internet, employing it as a means of communication should be considered. In addition to internet use, digital skills may also be a viable human resource at McGirt-Horton. In addition to the media lab housed at McGirt-Horton, the library hosts training programs on media editing.

For our part, we bring a pedagogical and communication foundation blended with an activist orientation (Frey, 1996). Both of us have media backgrounds; Williams is majoring in

Media Studies and I am the Publisher of The Carolinian, the Student Newspaper of UNCG. In addition, I have a political background which permits access to individuals with credibility in the community. We began to consider how best to incorporate these resources into action that *attacks the dominant discourses and structures that produce injustice* in a way that best reflects the community (Frey, 1996, p. 111, emphasis added). Our synthesis of the combination of community ties, media skills, training, and public speaking is to propose the creation of an online digital media source for community news, created by the community for the community.

From a communication activism approach, it adheres to Frey's (1996) social justice sensibility as evidenced by the highlighted phrases throughout. The last qualifier not yet represented is solidarity and understanding that *a community of integrity cannot exist if some are excluded*' (p. 111, emphasis added). Dominant media messages do not reflect the experience of East White Oak and research demonstrates affording access to mass media channels is a powerful tool of "empowerment" (Schmidt et al, 1995). Another example of such community driven media is the YouTube channel of Jasiri X whose produces "hip hop" news from the perspective of inner city Pittsburgh, PA. His commentary's online presence beyond YouTube is diverse with mentions on news organizations, hip hop forums, and advocacy group websites. "I just kept looking for something in the news that represented me, that talked how I talked, and there wasn't any. So I made my own" (Jasiri X, personal communication, June 14 2011).

Our first semester of research is merely the genesis of a greater project. It is our intention to spend at least the next year working toward building on the lessons learned to advocate for a community through the expression of their own voice. In this initial stage, our time will be focused on collaborating with community leaders to cultivate initial interest in the project. Feedback thus far has been extremely positive and profitable, at least in terms of invisible

capital. We will be performing several informative presentations of citizen journalism to raise awareness in the community. We do not intend to dictate the plan of action for the community. Rather, we plan to coordinate with the community for the plan to develop through a cooperative process. As a resource, we will be researching adapting pedagogical principles to provide guidance for citizens to produce and publish effective communication on a mass media scale.

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