

Chapter 14

Making the Case for Academic and Social Impact in Organizational Communication Research

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ABSTRACT

Engaged scholarship begins with the premise that academic research cannot only be rigorous, but also have social impact by addressing important organizational and community issues. A tacit assumption in much of the literature on engaged organizational communication scholarship is that we have a clear understanding of what we mean by social impact. This chapter explores how various indicators and metrics constitute the meaning of academic and social impact. I argue that there is relatively little overlap in the indicators that are currently used to assess academic and social impact and that this poses important challenges for organizational communication scholars who wish to do engaged scholarship. Five practices are offered to facilitate organizational communication scholars determine the kind of impact they wish to make and manage the challenges posed by the competing demands of demonstrating academic and social impact: (1) connect with your scholarly passion, (2) practice triple translation, (3) develop emergent design skills, (4) go big, and (5) research on the go.

INTRODUCTION

To put it bluntly, I believe it is irresponsible for scholars to ignore or turn away from the entreaties of practitioners in South Central LA (where we often work), or in southern China (where we also often work), who are seeking counsel about the tumultuous times in which we live. Indeed, what a remarkable opportunity this is for an important field. If we are able to combine the rigor of traditional disciplines while remaining true to our interdisciplinary roots as we seek out new partnerships with practitioners seeking our guidance, we will certainly advance the rigor and relevance of communication as field. (Wilson, 2013)

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In a recent commentary published in *Inside Higher Ed*, Ernest Wilson, Dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, laments the fact that practitioners from governmental, private, and public sectors rarely seek out communication scholars for advice on important issues or use communication scholarship to inform their practice. One reason for this lack of engagement with practitioners is due to communication scholars' belief that participating in research partnerships and collaborations runs the risk of decreasing the rigor of their scholarship as it can become "dumbed down" and trivialized because they may lose their scholarly objectivity. Wilson contends that the exact opposite is true as scholars are often pressed by practitioners to become more precise, clear, and rigorous in their research studies because they directly influence the development of practice and have a significant impact on the lived experience of people.

There is a growing emphasis by organizational communication scholars to generate research that has social impact. A variety of approaches have been developed in higher education that reflect this concern with social impact including community engagement, engaged scholarship, community-based research, community outreach, and publicly engaged academic work (Barreno, Elliott, Madueke, & Sarny, 2013). Despite the diversity of terms that are used to describe the concern with research making a difference in organizations and communities, they share a common belief that research should address practical problems and make a significant contribution to various communities of practice. Organizational communication scholars have tended to use the language of engaged scholarship when describing the kind of research that centers on the practical problems that confront organizations and communities. The importance of publicly engaged academic work has emerged as an important focus for organizational communication scholars as reflected in a number of books, essays, and forums that argue for the importance of engaged scholarship (Lewis, 2012; Shockley-Zalabak, Barge, Lewis, & Simpson, in press; Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005), articulate different models for engaged scholarship (Putnam & Dempsey, 2015), and identify research practices that enhance the ability of organizational communication scholars to conduct engaged scholarship and serve as public intellectuals (Cheney, Wilhelmsson, & Zorn, 2002; Dempsey & Barge, 2014; Krone & Harter, 2007).

Relatively few organizational communication scholars would dispute the claim that our scholarship should respond to pressing problems that contemporary organizations face, carefully assess the conditions that facilitated the emergence of these problems, and generate opportunities for the development of new practices. One simply needs to look at the array of engaged organizational communication scholarship to see that our colleagues have and are continuing to produce scholarship that addresses important issues such as how nonprofit organizations manage multi-stakeholder relationships (Lewis, 2011), how nuclear power plants can establish safety cultures (Barbour & Gill, 2014), how community organizations can develop programs to empower girls (Way, 2013), how communication can be structured to respond to natural disasters such as fires (Ziegler, 2007), and how terrorist networks can be dissolved (Corman & Dooley, 2009). As Kidd and Parry-Giles (2013) observe, "communication scholars frequently work with communities of practice across an array of the human experience, boldly bringing with them insights, knowledge, and rigorous engagement that are at the center of modern intellectual life and purposeful action" (para 15).

However, a tacit assumption in much of the literature on engaged organizational communication scholarship is that we have a clear understanding of what we mean by social impact. It is assumed we have a clear understanding of the goals for engaged scholarship and have a well-defined set of indicators or metrics for assessing when we have met those goals. Understanding the various indicators and metrics that can be used to assess the social impact of one's work is crucial for organizational communication

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