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Why Did the Scholar Cross the Road? Community Action Research and the Citizen-Scholar

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Most academic departments divide up the study of communication research into interpersonal, organizational, and mass media communication courses. But many of the authors included in this book take a variety of other approaches to understanding human communication processes, as dictated by the particular problems and circumstances they are studying. In this piece Lana Rakow describes her experience with community-based research and explains the challenges she and her students encountered studying the dynamics of their own local community after its devastation by a natural disaster—the 1997 flooding of Grand Forks, North Dakota, by the waters of the Red River.

Rakow and her graduate students initially found that most communication theory provided little assistance for designing such a study, and she also discovered that her qualitative approach did not generate lists of interview questions that were specific enough to satisfy her university's Institutional Review Board (IRB)[1] for human subjects. In response, instead of using interviews as originally planned, they redesigned their project to rely more heavily on analysis of public discourse—something Rakow now regards as a happy accident.

In order to complete this project, Rakow was forced to step outside of the traditional scholar's role of "objective observer" who is indifferent to the events being studied. Because she herself was a member of the community under study and had an undeniable stake in the outcomes of the community's decision making, she was at once a researcher and someone who cared about and might influence the events being researched. She reflects on this experience at length in this chapter.

ACCORDING TO THE TIMEWORN JOKE, the chicken crossed the road to get to the other side. So why did the scholar cross the road? To do research on the other side, presumably. Why do scholars go elsewhere to do research, like the proverbial wandering chicken, instead of staying right where we are? Is there nothing of significance in our own communities that is worthy of study? Is there no role for our research in the daily struggles of local citizens to create healthy and just communities? Is a scholar also a citizen?

This is a story about one scholar, myself, who didn't cross the road but stayed put to conduct community research. In the title of this chapter, I have used the cliché question to emphasize the need for us to be citizen-scholars in our own communities. I want to share with you why this scholar didn't cross the road and what difference I think it makes—to me and to my community.

To tell you why I chose to stay on my own side of the road, I need to explain that this is a story about a story. The story I am telling here recounts the telling of another story about my own community, the result of a research project I conducted with graduate students at the University of North Dakota. That research resulted in a story I have told to the community in several venues— through the news media and a public lecture—and now have published in *Southern Communication Journal* (2003). With its publication comes another opportunity to share the story with the community to elicit more discussion and possible action, and more occasions to do research that feeds into the life of the community.

Consequently, this chapter is only one piece of a larger life history of the intersection of this community and me as a citizen-scholar. This part of the story will recap why we need scholarly attention to communities, why this research project was undertaken, how the project was conducted, and its results. I'll be telling you about the uncertainties, decisions, and political realities we encountered along the way. Finally, I'll end by advocating for the ongoing, thoughtful engagement of other scholars in their own communities, despite the complexities and ethical dilemmas resulting from our dual role as citizen-scholars.

Research *of* and *for* Communities

The lack of sustained attention to community by communication scholars has been both disappointing and troubling to me for some time. It is disappointing because as a field we have tended to overlook one of the most significant features of human communication. Consequently, our understanding of communication and our theories accounting for it are underdeveloped at best, inaccurate at worst. Our lack of attention is troubling because the consequences for neglecting community go beyond our field. Communities are the worse for our neglect because public understanding of the problems and possibilities of communities is deficient. It is interesting to note that, unlike discussions of community, discussions about interpersonal communication, organizational communication, political communication, and news and entertainment media can readily be found in public discourse and on best-seller lists. Popularized discussions of communication issues, while often troublingly simplistic, at least raise levels of awareness. Why aren't the communication issues of communities and their citizens subject to the same scholarly and popular attention?

Unfortunately, gaining a foothold for community in communication studies has been difficult, despite fine work by individual scholars, because current specialty areas of communication have reified the omission of community studies. The omission has resulted from the field's overemphasis on the individual at the expense of understanding the collective, a feature of the dominant positivistic approach to studying communication in the U.S. This approach has been concerned with preserving the social order (reconciling individuals to existing social processes by improving individual, organizational, or political communication competence), forgetting that what lies between the individual and society is community, not simply a layer of opinion leaders and institutions. Cultural studies scholars, on the other hand, have roots in community studies dating to the early part of the twentieth century and share an interest in understanding social meaning making. Yet their current interests have focused on media and social groups (characterized by gender, race, class, and sexual identities and identification) far more than on communities. Cultural studies scholars have been concerned with a critique of society at the expense of developing solutions. Between the two major approaches to communication, the study of communities has fallen through the cracks of our institutionalized boundaries of study.

I have proposed elsewhere that scholars not only have the opportunity to make a difference by attending to communities, but also have a responsibility to do so (Rakow 2002, 151). Putting communities at the center of new models for understanding human association, models designed around principles of inclusion, participation, and voice for citizens, is the kind of intellectual leadership we should be providing as a field. While we need to reconsider how we have defined and described communities and the histories we have made for them, I urge us to attend to geographic communities, the places where people live, where their physical needs must be attended to, and where their participation in social and political purposes is most likely to occur—in other words, where public and private spheres intersect.

Box 1.1: Research Paradigms

Ethnographic research was developed primarily within cultural anthropology in order to discover and document the "insider" point of view characteristic of members of a particular group or culture. In other words, it tries to answer the question, "How does the world seem to them?" rather than understanding the people being studied only in terms defined by the researcher's own sociocultural perspective. Traditionally, ethnography has relied on qualitative research techniques such as depth interviews and participant observation to support these goals.

Depth interviews generally use interview "guides" or "schedules"—lists of general questions to be covered rather than rigidly prespecified lists of questions to be asked verbatim. The goal is to let the person being interviewed take the lead in determining the themes of the interview conversation, and to leave the researcher free to pursue these themes with follow-up questions (or "probes") as they arise. The interviewee is sometimes referred to as an "informant" because his or her role is often that of a guide to the researcher working in an unfamiliar culture. Participant observation refers to the researcher's direct personal participation in the social life of those being studied in an attempt to grasp the deeper significance of their everyday activities. The result of an ethnographic study is sometimes referred to as "thick" description. It is a descriptive account but one that takes into account the complex cultural nuances of even ordinary social practices.

In this account Rakow reports that she and her student collaborators relied primarily on textual analysis of public discourse, meaning they studied what was said in public communication contexts (such as public meetings, official documents, and media reports) to produce a similar kind of end result.

Ethnographers and other qualitative researchers are generally concerned with how our perceptions of the world around us are built up or "constructed" in our interactions with others, whether current or historical, person-to-person, or mass mediated. Rather than take our ordinary understandings of the world as given, they want to investigate where these perceptions come from.

Researchers using the ethnographic paradigm sometimes argue that quantitative methods such as survey research or formal experiments can "reify" the way people respond to their social surroundings, tending to take it for granted that the social world is something much more solid and immutable than it actually is and that intellectual constructs such as "attitudes" and "beliefs" fully explain this world. (To "reify" something literally means to treat it as though it were real.) They may reject the "positivist" assumption that human societies are best studied by methods that are as "scientific" as possible, rather than through exploratory and interpretive approaches. And they are willing to sacrifice the arguably greater reliability of numerical measurement for what they see as the greater validity of descriptive approaches.

I have believed in the importance of studying community for some time, but I had been a scholar crossing the road for my own research. Most notable in this regard was my ethnographic study of women and the telephone in a small rural community in the Midwest, the subject of my dissertation and a subsequent book (Rakow 1992). In that study, I confronted the dilemma of being an outsider who brings a new interpretation to the construction of gender in a community. What responsibilities did I have to the participants I interviewed? How could I honor their interpretations while offering my own? I have also been an advocate of being a public scholar who puts her expertise at the service of communities. Another research project (Rakow 1995a, 1995b, 1995c) took me to a very small community in North Dakota where I was affiliated with the newspaper for a week, conducting a communication audit of the community and reporting on the results in a series of columns.

I became involved in my own community of Grand Forks, North Dakota, after moving back to my home state in 1994, following seventeen years of living elsewhere. My first project involved working with local groups on an electronic community conversation. That experience convinced me that we needed scholars "at the table" of community decision making, both to bring our expertise into the community and also to make a place for citizen participation in public matters (Rakow 1999). With these projects as a prelude, a major physical disaster in Grand Forks took my work to another level of involvement in the community, opening up for me a new understanding of my rights and responsibilities as a citizen-scholar and of the potential for research at the service of the public.

Our Story of the Flood

Grand Forks, North Dakota, is a community of about 50,000 residents on the border between North Dakota and Minnesota, a border created by the Red River. In April of 1997, Grand Forks succumbed to the worst disaster in its history and among the worst per capita in the United States at the time. After record snowfalls that winter, the melting snow filled the Red River, which spilled over its banks across the flat land on both sides of the river, resulting in the evacuation of 90 percent of the population of Grand Forks and shutting down electrical service, telephones, the water supply and sanitary system, city and county government offices, the police station, the hospital and the local newspaper, and most businesses. As water boiled into the city and over the rooftops in some neighborhoods and to several feet in the rest of the city, a fire broke out in the flooded and deserted downtown, resulting in the loss of much of the downtown before it was contained.

Most residents were allowed to return to their homes a week after the evacuation, but electrical and water service took several weeks to restore, even months in some parts of the city. Many homes in neighborhoods closest to the river sustained damage to the first floors or rooftops. Most of the rest of the homes in the city sustained at least flooded basements in a part of the country where basements are used for bedrooms, family rooms, storage, furnaces, water heaters, and electrical service. Consequently, most people sustained considerable financial loss of possessions and repair and replacement costs. Over 700 homes were earmarked for a federally funded city buyout program because the city determined the homes were too damaged to be repaired. Another 300 homes were marked for buyouts to make way for a proposed—and controversial—permanent dike.

Thus began a long and painful period of community turmoil that seven years later still lies beneath the surface of its "recovery." The city has lasting physical, economic, and social scars, despite a massive infusion of federal and private money, expensive building and relocation projects, and official proclamations about the success of its recovery. And thus began my deep involvement as a citizen-scholar in my own community. No longer was I a scholarly observer who hoped to increase citizen participation in the community. I became a participant observer in the unfolding drama of the flood and its aftermath. I and my family of a husband and two children lived in one of the neighborhoods closest to the river and hardest hit by the flood. My home took in over eight feet of water, to the ceiling of the walkout level of our home—half of our home, altogether. We escaped first-floor damage by a few inches, which put us on one side of the line that divided those who could repair their homes and those who could not, but it also put us in the group close to the river subject to a buyout program of homes to make way for the proposed dike. Like many others, we felt we had been plunged into a nightmare that had only begun the night we were evicted from our house at 2:00 a.m. by the sound of bullhorns from police cars ordering us to leave.

While the University of North Dakota was closed in April that year by the flood and the semester was declared ended, it was open again in the fall. Despite the havoc in our lives caused by damaged homes and altered routines, I was in the classroom with a small group of graduate students in a communication theory class. The students all had been affected by the flood, mostly by having been evacuated from apartments and disrupted from jobs and classes. They, too, were involved in discussions in the community about decisions being made to remove entire neighborhoods, to rebuild the downtown with the federal money that came to the city, and to build a permanent, massive dike, further altering the physical and social landscape of the community. With the city full of evidence of the disaster and with public and bitter disagreements being expressed about city decisions, it was impossible to ignore what was around us and affected us.

Yet the communication theories that I was introducing to students seemed irrelevant in the face of such social upheaval that demanded explanation and resolution. Why was communication theory so beside the point or absent, at least not without digging for it and stretching it to fit what surely is neither an isolated event nor an insignificant one for understanding conditions experienced by so many? I proposed to the students that rather than ignore what we saw around us, we take it on as a project. What communication theories would be helpful for our task? How is communication theory constructed and by whom, to explain what? Could we do our own study that would modify or create theories about communities and disasters?

Conducting community research of the type we wanted proved to be a challenge in both design and execution. We had no simple formula to apply. Our approach can best be described as emergent, as we immersed ourselves in the communication processes of the community, looking for clues to themes that structured the debates over the flood and recovery and struggling with how to study the phenomenon of which we were a part. Over the few months of that fall semester, the students did reviews of relevant literature, and we discussed what we were seeing and hearing. Since none of them were homeowners in Grand Forks, they were on the periphery of the struggles of those most affected by the decisions of the mayor and city council. I introduced them to homeowners from the hardest-hit and working-class neighborhood. Some were resisting the city's efforts to force them from their homes without a declaration of eminent domain, which gives homeowners rights under the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policy Act of 1970. We noted the discrepancies between the official versions of the city's decision making and recovery with expressions of anger and frustration by citizens. What was happening to this community?

Clearly, communication was at the core of the issues of power and voice we saw playing out in front of us. For me, the issues were even closer to home than they were for the students, as I attended city council meetings and public hearings, navigated the bureaucracy of disaster assistance and paperwork, and faced our own showdown with the city over the seizure of our home for the dike project. Feeling disaffected and voiceless in the face of contradictory official information and decisions without recourse and, it seemed, without accountability, I was a citizen in the community experiencing what others with even less voice, less access to resources, and fewer avenues for redress had available to them. Even the extensive coverage of the flood and its anniversary a year later by outside national news organizations succeeded in silencing dissent in order to tell the story of the plucky little community that overcame adversity. As a citizen, I felt the need to act. As a scholar, I had the means to do so.

Unlike research designed from outside the phenomena, our project, conducted by insiders, had its own special challenges. From the outset, I planned the research to be qualitative, allowing issues and insights to arise from participants in the drama and from the public discourse that framed it. I wanted a systematic "thick description" of what was unfolding. While I knew there were conflicts in the community, I lacked a sophisticated vocabulary and an analysis of how and why the conflict was occurring. There was no platform available for the insights I did have, nor was there a venue for citizens to discuss their concerns. I thought we should do interviews with a variety of city officials and homeowners affected by their decisions as a way to examine the conflict flaring in the community, as well as examine the public discourse found in official documents, meetings, and news media.

As luck would have it, our Institutional Review Board (IRB), inspired by more stringent federal oversight of human subjects research and ill prepared to deal with qualitative research methodologies, asked us to resubmit our application for approval, insisting that we provide the list of questions we planned to ask informants. Since we had intended the interviews to be sufficiently open-ended to allow the emergence of themes, we felt providing the questions in advance was impossible and a subversion of the project. Consequently, we decided to eliminate interviews and focus on a textual analysis of public discourse, tested against our own knowledge as participant observers in the lifeworld of the community. I say "as luck would have it" that we were dissuaded from conducting interviews because I am glad we did not include them in the research. As I look back on the uses to which I have been able to put the research, interviews, while they would have provided more concrete evidence and permitted a sharpened analysis, would have placed me, as a continuing member of the community, in a politically awkward situation. Since the community is small and the major players known to all, we either could not have guaranteed informants confidentiality or we could not have freely used what we were told. The research would have been shaped and tamed in directions that would have constrained the analysis and our political efficacy.

Another confounding problem was the unfolding nature of events. A disaster does not begin and end in a discrete period of time; we found ourselves in the middle of a flowing stream of change with no known outcome or ending point and no final analysis to be neatly drawn. We ultimately decided to draw our own boundaries on our study by focusing on the one-year period after the flood. Despite the usefulness of a cutoff point, even the events of that period shifted and required reinterpretation as context and historical perspective continued to change. For example, even as I was putting the last changes to the manuscript published in *Southern Communication Journal*, new information was coming forward about the events of that first year. The Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA) demanded a refund from the city government over money the city had claimed for sewer damage from the flood, which FEMA now claimed was not flood-related. We have learned to resist the temptation to declare our analysis final and complete, a caveat that all scholars might remember even if they do not stay around to see events unfold after their research is done.

Another complication that interfered with conducting and completing the project was the extraordinary personal toll the disaster and its aftermath took on me and my family, as it did on so many in Grand Forks. It began when we lived in a small travel camper for months while we hauled our ruined furniture and possessions to the curb (like every other homeowner in the city) and stripped and disinfected about 1500 square feet of house. Like others, we waited for weeks and months for contractors to restore our electrical service, install a water heater and a new furnace and ductwork, install drywall and carpet, and replace plumbing and bathroom fixtures. We did paperwork for insurance companies, FEMA, our mortgage company, and the city. We attended meetings to find out what the city planned for our neighborhood and made our own protests about the dike that was proposed for our neighborhood, planned to run through our house that was under repair. In the end, the city did not declare eminent domain until 2000, after we and nearly every homeowner on the city's list already had been forced to sell our homes.

What difference did it make to our research that I shared this experience with other residents? It certainly gave me access to a standpoint and to the knowledge of those residents that I might never have known had existed had I been an outsider. I was aware of alternative definitions and explanations that countered official ones. Perhaps most significantly, it spurred me to want to document and narrate a different story about the community than the official versions that justified and lauded the actions of city leaders.

The Analysis and Its Uses

As we gathered and attended to the public communication from that one-year period, we discussed the patterns that emerged from the public discourse. We began by thinking about the nature of communities as the product of communication, created by the ongoing routines of people and institutions embedded into the landscape of a social and geographic location. We considered the nature of disasters, called into being by those with authority to declare them to be so outside the realm of the expected and so disruptive of the normal order of things as to require a bracketing and a special handling. With that theoretical understanding, we were left to find a point of view and a voice to speak about

what had transpired in our community, which was difficult given the personal nature of our own experiences. Of all the stories that could have been told about what happened, we decided to tell the story that stood out the most to us, the one that brought the conflicts into the sharpest relief. That choice meant we were not ourselves at the center of the story but put ourselves in the position of speaking for and about others, a role not without its theoretical and ethical problems. It was a story about the conflict between two groups that we dubbed "Movers" and "Shakers." The Movers were city officials and self-appointed business and professional leaders. The Shakers were a group of homeowners from the hardest-hit and lowest-income neighborhood who fought back by (among other avenues) filing a class action lawsuit against the city to force it to declare eminent domain. After considering other names, we were pleased to find a pair that we thought gave the "underdog" group equal status with the elite group. We liked that our names subverted the usual use of the label given to an elite group in a community whose members supposedly get things done. While I had traveled between the two groups, as a member of organizations to which Movers belonged and as a friend of people from the resistance group, I did not count myself as a member of either. Therefore we found a point of view that looked at both but clearly was sympathetic to the Shakers, a position we felt was justified from our evidence of how they had been treated.

Briefly, from our analysis we concluded that the conflict between the two had a class origin that positioned members of each group in different social *and* physical locations in the community. They differed on the basis of defining the events (Movers defined the flood as a natural disaster, Shakers defined the "recovery" as a disaster); political ideology (Movers advocated progress by "moving on," while Shakers argued for justice); and control over material and symbolic resources (Movers had access to the primary means for voice in the community, enabling them to make their vision of the community material reality, while Shakers were frustrated in their attempts to be heard and to keep control over the small amount of material resources they owned). We concluded that by Movers "winning" in the short term, the community continued to suffer from unresolved class conflicts and unresolved issues of justice produced by decisions after the flood. Conflicts continue to simmer in the community, surfacing when major community decisions are to be made. Until these differences are acknowledged and steps taken to include citizens in decision making in a meaningful way, we concluded, the city could not "move on" in the way some imagined it already had.

Conducting the research and the analysis and writing a manuscript for submission to a journal is one thing; figuring out how to put results to good use are another. As for other scholarly work, various venues for presenting the work were available. I discussed the research at a talk given at the University of Illinois. The paper was accepted for presentation at the annual convention of the

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. The manuscript was accepted for publication in the *Southern Communication Journal* special issue on community. In other words, the research took its place in standard ways in our fields. But what of the community? What responsibility did we have to the Shakers, whom we felt deserved a hearing? What were the political risks of "going public" with the research results? What was our responsibility as scholars to a community we felt needed to address serious communication issues? How could we address these issues and more in the community?

I got the opportunity to raise them in a very public manner in the fall of 2003. I was asked to give the first lecture in the annual University of North Dakota Faculty Lecture Series, an honor to be invited, a privilege to have the floor for whatever research I wanted to present. While other research projects would have been easier to present and less risky to make public, I chose to base my presentation on this community research project. Coincidentally, the community was in the middle of a major controversy over spending tax money on a large water park to replace neighborhood swimming pools. Callers to a local talk radio program articulated the same feelings of disenfranchisement that we had found characterized conflicts in the community after the flood. I was invited to be on the show twice, the second time with a city council member in the studio with me and another on the telephone line, talking about conflicts in the city and the need for citizen voice and participation. My lecture brought members of the community to the audience, including members of the city council, generating public discussion about the flood and communication problems. Since then, I have been approached by the mayor's office (a new mayor since the flood) about working together on improving communication in the community.

Clearly, the work has just begun. We succeeded in getting some attention to the situation of the group called Shakers and some attention to the communication issues that threaten the community. With the published research now in our hands, we are in a position to extend the reach of our analysis. I am aware, however, that we will be in for criticism and contradiction when the full research record is made available. Public scholarship is not for sissies or for those who aspire to be a member of the club of Movers in whatever city or institution they reside. Yet few others in a community are in the position to raise issues as scholars are. We can be dismissed, but not as easily as others with less material and symbolic capital to leverage.

Which Side of the Road Are We On?

This story about one researcher's road to acquiring the identity of citizen-scholar raises questions and concerns, I understand. Were we too close to the

subject matter to be "objective"? Did my own experience in the community mean I had an "axe to grind" that led to the research project and its analysis? Did we let our political affinity for the group called Shakers influence what we studied and what we found? Have we misrepresented or mischaracterized communication issues in the community to justify our interpretation?

It certainly is possible to accuse us of any of these. However, I remain convinced that engaging with our communities and even *taking sides* on the issues citizens confront there is part of our right as citizens and our responsibility as scholars. Had we aligned ourselves with city leaders and their official courses of action, helping citizens "understand" and accept decisions, we would have fulfilled a traditional role for applied communication scholars. We need to be clear that standing with the centers of power in a community is no less a political activity than community action research that seeks social change and the empowerment of citizens.

Although our research did not fit the usual definition of community action research, in which community members are active participants in the design and implementation of the project, our study was an important step toward their inclusion in future projects. Our communicative vision for geographic communities is one described by Lewis A. Friedland as the "communicatively integrated community" (Friedland 2001), whereby deliberative democracy is carried out in the lifeworld of communities. To create such communities requires that researchers link their expertise to communities. Transformative change requires our participation, according to one university group committed to such collaborative work: "One of the clear needs in community change efforts is to bring together expert knowledge with local knowledge about neighborhood life and people" (Maher et al. 2003, 62). Integration of the knowledge of the academy with the knowledge of the community is best carried out by the integration of our identities as citizens and as scholars. While not all of our research needs to be carried out in and with our own communities and not all of the research carried out in a community needs to be conducted by its scholarly citizens, we should continue to remind ourselves why we thought we should cross the road in the first place.

Questions for Reflection

What is meant by the distinction between "insider" and "outsider" points of view in this article?

What is gained, and what might some argue could be lost, when communication researchers step out of their stance as "objective observers" and become advocates within their communities? Do you believe the gains outweighed the losses in this case?

What were the advantages and disadvantages of the decision made by Rakow and her students to substitute discourse analysis for an interview methodology in this study?

Rakow criticizes communication theory for not providing enough guidance for a study like this, yet in the end her analysis makes extensive use of theory. How did theory help her, after all?

Do you agree or disagree with Rakow's argument that applied communication research typically serves to maintain social order by fixing small problems (improving communication competency and effectiveness) within an existing system?

Note

1. Further discussion of IRB issues takes place in Part V.

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