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Communique 3.0: Working to “Change It”

Michelle Rodino-Colocino

Launching the *Democratic Communique* as an open-access, digital peer-reviewed journal renews UDC’s founding purpose as an organization that seeks to study and intervene in communication systems so that we may promote a more democratic, equal, socially just, and peaceful world. As the first two sentences of our preamble state,

The Union for Democratic Communications is an organization that seeks to promote progressive systems that advance the broadest collective participation in the decisions that affect our lives. It is only through such democratic communication structures that we can overcome cultural hegemony and contribute to building a world based on economic justice, equality, and peace.

Before explaining how moving to an open-access, online format enables our organization to “walk or talk” as outlined above, it is important to acknowledge that in some ways, the *Communique* has always been widely accessible.

As Aaron Heresco and Ron Bettig discuss in another piece in this special section, UDC was walking our talk of supporting democratic communication in the way we published and distributed the *Communique*. The nascent UDC founded the *Communique* as a newsletter in 1985 to stimulate dialogue among critical media scholars, activists, and artists.¹ It encouraged communication that was accessible (the newsletters were mailed) and free of jargon-heavy “theory wolf” academic prose for which some critical communication scholars have been lambasted (i.e., Hartnett’s [2010] critique of “postmodern critics,” p. 72, 73). When the *Communique* began operating as a formal blind-peer reviewed academic journal, publishing two issues per year in 2006, however, it functioned on the scholarly side of the scholar-activist divide that David Croteau (2005) discusses. Although it sacrificed a wider audience of non-academic activists and artists for a more scholarly one, the *Communique* maintained accessibility because editors archived past issues on UDC’s website.² Thus, in many ways, UDC had long produced a “free” and openly “accessible” academic journal when the Steering Committee voted to embrace an online, open-access format on June 17, 2011.

The Steering Committee’s intention was that moving online and converting to an open-access structure that provides content to readers free of cost would enable UDC members to walk our talk more vigorously than the *Communique*’s pay-for-print (and paying for the latest issue) allowed. First, the open-access, online format enables the journal to contribute

to the democratization of academic publishing by opening all issues, including the latest one to anyone with Internet access.³ The digital divide still excludes those without Internet access and skill, and we regret that class and geographical location may indeed impede access to the *Communique*. Our organization, however, has long used the Internet for association communication. Since the 1990s UDC has used emails and web postings to communicate about upcoming conferences, membership news and renewals, and calls for papers, including calls for the *Communique*.⁴ By eliminating the fee structure in what is already an Internet-dependent organization, however, we make the journal more accessible to low-income readers. The new *Communique*, then, works toward one of our founding goals by “challenging,” at least in some ways, “structures” that “support class-controlled communication.”

Second, embracing open access also renews the *Communique*'s commitment to maintaining independence from corporate sponsorship, to eschewing partnerships with publishing corporations that would run counter to our overarching agenda of promoting democracy, social justice and peace. The *Communique* has been published and distributed in association with its editors' university affiliations and thanks to the additional labor of individual members like Jim Tracy at Florida Atlantic University, Jeanne Hall and Ron Bettig at Penn State University, and Brian Murphy at Niagara University. Whereas FAU and Penn State partly funded the journals' mailing, Brian Murphy used his own money to send copies Canadian Post to Canadian UDC members. UDC picked up additional mailing fees not covered by universities and individual members.

Through this patchwork of individual and university funds and labor, the *Communique* avoided adding to the monopolistic reach of for-profit companies that work against UDC's goals of fostering democratic communication and peace. To give just one example of a journal conglomerate that works against UDC's goals, Reed Elsevier attempted to merge with another European publishing giant, Wolters Kluwer, in the late 1990s. The move would have given the company market share that would have enabled price-setting and other anti-competitive behavior. Additionally, Elsevier's event planning subsidiary organized an annual global arms trade exhibition until protests finally discouraged the company from doing so in 2007 (Striphas, 2010). The *Communique*'s move to an open access model, then, is less of a radical break with and more of an improvement on our ownership and distribution model. Eliminating fees for the latest issues jettisons our former “separate but unequal” price structure that “manufacture[d] scarcity out of a ‘nonrivalrous’ digital plentitude,” as Ted Striphas (2010) puts it in his political economic analysis of academic journal publishing (p. 17). The *Communique*'s former pricing structure may also have prevented low-income individuals (i.e., students and activists) and smaller colleges from accessing the most recent issues.

This last point is important because it demonstrates a third way in which launching the third iteration of the *Communique* may further renew our purpose as an organization that struggles for democratic communications. One of our founding goals was to interact with and support activism against exploitative, monopolistic, for-profit media. Two of the purposes outlined in our bylaws argue for the importance of supporting activism and working

as *activists* in the struggles we study as scholars who are critical of the wider political economy. As our bylaws state:

The purposes of this organization shall be:

...

To support critical communication research activities and to struggle for the creation and maintenance of alternative forms of popular communication and culture that are basic for political and economic democracy.

...

To join others around the world in applying critical theory and research to the struggles of oppressed peoples for cultural autonomy and democratic control of communication and information resources.

Making our research available free of charge eliminates one barrier –cost– to making our research readable by activist audiences. Embracing an open access format, however, cannot do all of the work that these founding purposes urge UDC members to undertake.

Moving to an online, open-access structure will prove more significant, I argue, if UDC members also approach the *Communique*'s third launch as an opportunity to renew our commitment as activists. If we are to fully “apply critical theory and research” to “struggles” that empower “oppressed peoples,” and to “support critical communication research activities” as well as “to struggle for the creation and maintenance of alternative forms” of communication that build democracy, as our bylaws insist we do, then we need to get involved as activists in this process. As UDC Steering Committee member, Steve Macek (2006), puts it in the conclusion to an anthology on Marxism and communication, despite the abundance of Marxist “critical” communication research, “much of that discursive output has willfully ignored one of Marxism’s cardinal insights: namely, the need for intellectuals to actively participate in and learn from real political struggles” (p. 218). Macek argues that when Marx famously said, “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx, 1983, p. 158), he meant to underscore the relationship between understanding material reality and acting to radically change it. Additionally, as founding UDC members Eileen Meehan, Vincent Mosco, and Janet Wasko argued nearly twenty years ago in a widely-cited issue of the *Journal of Communication* on the future of the field, crossing the divide between intervention and research is a fundamental component of political economy of communication scholarship. This component is best captured by the notion of “praxis.” As Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko (1993) argue, “political economy is committed to *praxis*, that is, it seeks to transcend the distinction between research and social intervention” (p. 108-109). Thus, instead of being stuck in the spectator mode of “theory” production, wherein academics keep their distance from the struggles they study (Carragee and Frey, 2007; Hartnett, 2010), political economists of communication embrace activism, understood as intervening in the problems we examine; such participation is integral to our work. “The goal” of political economists of communication, as Meehan et al. (1993) argue, “is therefore more than a simple reflection of social reality

but a self-reflexive process of questioning and acting on the object of analysis” (p. 109).

Thus, in the interest of “continuity of change” (Meehan et al., 1993) in political-economic studies of communication, for the sake of renewing our founding mission as an organization to “advance the broadest collective participation in the decisions that affect our lives,” and to “contribute to building a world based on economic justice, equality, and peace,” I call on UDC members to become active participants in at least one struggle for democracy related to their work as critical communication scholars. I have asked members to take this pledge as Steering Committee chair, but I want to repeat it here. I want to extend this invitation here as well—to readers of our new online issues and to those who read future pages of the *Communique*. The point of our work, after all, is to “change it,” to build a more equal, socially just, sustainable, livable, peaceful world.

Notes

1. See Bettig and Heresco’s piece in this issue on the history of UDC’s newsletters.
2. See Bettig and Heresco’s piece in this issue on the *Communique*’s early archive.
3. Previous to opening access, the latest issue of the *Communique* was only available to members and journal subscribers.
4. The exact genealogy of UDC’s listserv is unclear. Longtime UDC member Frederick Emrich places the list’s founding in the mid-late 1990s at the University of Arizona before Jennifer Proffitt began moderating it at Penn State in the early 2000s. Aimee Marie Dorsten, at Point Park University has served as listserv moderator since summer 2011.

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