



Intellectuals Searching for Publics

Who is Out There?

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At the age of 10, after Barcelona fell to General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, he wrote his first article about the looming threat of fascism.¹ In his mid-20s, as an MIT professor, he became a legend in the field of linguistics, creating the theory of generative grammar. In his mid-30s, he began to write and speak provocatively against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, earning a reputation as a rousing political activist, left-wing intellectual, and, in his own words, a “libertarian socialist.” In 2007, at age 79, he writes and travels around the world, giving lectures and interviews on a wide variety of topics: linguistics, philosophy, morality and ethics, international affairs, and U.S. foreign policy.

Meet Avram Noam Chomsky, public intellectual number one (Herman, 2005).

What does it mean to be a *public intellectual* in addition to being an intellectual who engages with the public? The Emersonian notion of an intellectual is one who represents the “world’s eye”; one who holds great ideas of the past, communicates them to the public, and, in the process, creates new ideas (Lightman, 2000). Edward Said (1996), a public intellectual in his own right, emphasized the intellectual’s responsibility to advance human freedom and knowledge and to disturb the status quo. In this sense, public intellectuals are more than just righteous in their stance; they embody and enact moral leadership. They are not afraid to speak out; rather, they thrive as “rabble-rousers” grounded in ethical pillars.

At first glance, an aura of elitism seems inescapable when framing the term *public intellectual*, but need it be? Presenting ideas that are intellectually grounded for public consumption does require a physical place—courtyards, public parks, classrooms, printed pages, Internet Web sites, and others. These places are directly “accessible” to people or can be “recreated”

in public and private conversations. When the intellectual speaks to a “public,” ideas are not just heard but debated, discussed, and passed on in recursive societal dialogue.

Many people can claim to be intellectuals by virtue of how they think, write, speak, and act. However, what makes a person a public intellectual is the ability, hunger, and motivation to communicate with the public in ways to influence thoughts and actions. However, to be an intellectual, one need not be a Chomsky, arguing against the war. In the early 1970s, Mother Teresa, for instance, refused to march in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in Washington, D.C., much to the chagrin of those who approached her. She explained, “If you have a march *against* the war, count me out. However, if you have a march *for* peace, I will lead.” So public intellectuals (and Mother Teresa certainly fits the bill) can influence people’s thinking and/or actions or reenergize and reorient a listener’s commitments to his or her own previously held ideas.

For this reason, public intellectuals are not always admired; they may be despised, at least by some (e.g., Chomsky regularly receives life threats and is often under police protection). What separates the actions of the public intellectual from others is the ability to connect. First, public intellectuals connect their ideas to many people by the venues they choose for their messages. Second, they connect to their audience by using language that is understandable. Third, they connect diverse ideas from many sources to create a uniquely personal message that reflects their views.

However, the process of connecting is much different in today’s media-rich, computer-mediated world. Unlike a Socrates or a John Dewey of an earlier era, a person located anywhere in the world today may instantaneously connect and share ideas with millions of others through the Internet. Substance aside, a public intellectual thus needs some degree of media savvy to disseminate his or her ideas, which may include directing traffic to certain blogs and Web sites. Interestingly, in the virtual world of computer-mediated interaction, a public intellectual may choose to be a faceless person with a blog that attracts the attention of many. The pebble that ripples water in the pond does not need a face to create waves. And the pebbles on the shore splashed by these waves may be faceless to the creator of the ripples.

So how do we, Arvind and Michael, connect to others? How do we share our intellectual groundings with various publics? We do so, primarily, through telling stories. When we write for the academy, our stories are generously laced with theories that emerge through our dialogue with people whose lives we study (e.g., the women members of the Grameen Bank).

The level of abstraction in explaining the theories is shaped by who the audience is, but stories are the key to connection. To illustrate, here are a few.

In the early 1990s, both of us (along with a Bangladeshi colleague, Mohammed Auwal) had an opportunity to visit Bangladesh to study the organizing aspects of the Grameen Bank (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997). We were fortunate to have an audience (on several occasions) with its founder, Professor Muhammad Yunus, the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Both of us remember the passion with which Professor Yunus spoke about a future world in which poverty could be seen only in museums. Professor Yunus inspired us (as he did many others) with his intellect, his moral position, and his principle-centered actions.

Michael became interested in applying some lessons from Grameen in Appalachian Ohio, where he lived for 13 years. In 1998, Michael met with Keith Wasserman, director of Good Works, a homeless shelter and social service provider in southeastern Ohio. Michael shared the stories of Grameen Bank members who had lifted themselves from poverty and gave Keith a copy of an article (written with Arvind) focusing on Grameen members' organizational identification, discipline, and empowerment. Keith and Michael then cocreated the Good Gifts subsidiary of Good Works to provide economic opportunities for poor and homeless people in Appalachian Ohio. Good Gifts sells hand-crafted products made by poor people in developing countries. It is unlikely that prior to their meeting Keith would have envisioned a business model to generate money for job training and income for the poor. The stories Michael carried with him from Bangladesh to Athens connected Keith to Yunus's ideas, launching a business that operates today.

Good Gifts is advertised on the Good Works Web site (<http://www.good-works.net>) to generate business and spur contributions. As Keith notes on the organization's Web site, when one buys a gift from Good Gifts, one is not just helping the poor artisans in developing countries to earn a living, but one is also helping poor citizens of our own Appalachian community. "Profits from Good Gifts go directly to create jobs locally. Think about it. When you buy a gift from us, you are changing the world. Really!" (Wasserman, 2007).

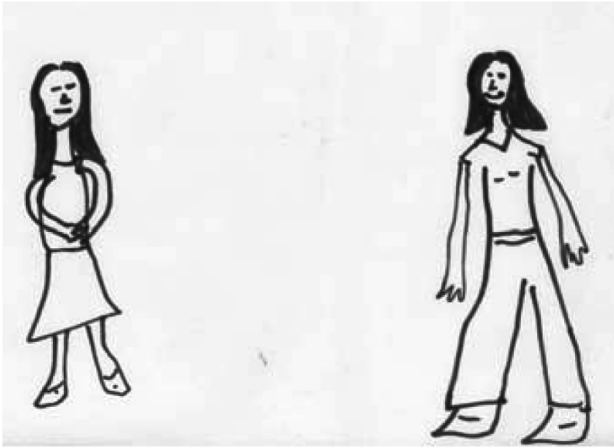
In 2002, Michael taught a graduate class in evaluation research methods at Michigan State University. In class, Michael shared stories of poor people in Bangladesh and India who had worked for, benefited from, and struggled within organizational systems to overcome oppression and poverty. One student, Greg Hoobler, subsequently became an intern at The Carter Center (TCC), working in the Conflict Resolution Program (CRP).

When Greg shared Michael's experiences as a program evaluator with an administrator at TCC, Michael began a 3-year assignment as a consultant to CRP. His specific duties involved documenting and evaluating the work of TCC in ending the violent conflict between Sudan and Uganda, culminating in the signing of the Nairobi Agreement in 1999. Michael met and interviewed the principal parties involved in the peace negotiations, including President Carter and President Museveni of Uganda. He also spent time with military leaders and village residents in Sudan and Uganda who were affected by the hostilities. His report for TCC, which documents in detail the process from prenegotiation meetings between ministerial staff to peace implementation activities on the ground, is intended to stimulate new thinking about peace initiatives. The report has generated reflexive discussions among CRP members and TCC administrators who are talking about the dynamics of peace initiatives and their improvisational features (Papa & Mapendere, 2005; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). The process of conducting the evaluation is also being described for potential donors to show how TCC is dedicated to a model of continual improvement.

So what paths does our scholarship carve? How does our work connect the stories of our disciplines with the stories of people's lives? How do these stories inspire, spurring dialogues about problems that people face? Consider the following story of how our scholarship on the entertainment–education communication strategy (which Arvind has been involved in since the mid-1980s) found its way to the jungles of the Peruvian Amazon and then morphed into participatory research initiatives in rural India, island communities of the Philippines, the refugee slums in Khartoum, Sudan, and communities in Kano, Nigeria.

In October 2002, when Arvind landed at Iquitos Airport in the Peruvian Amazon, he was met by Eliana Elias, founder of Minga Perú, a non-governmental organization working to promote gender equality and reproductive health in the region. While exchanging an *abrazo* (hug), Eliana pulled out a well-thumbed and highlighted copy of Arvind's 1999 book, *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*, and a 2002 special issue of *Communication Theory* on entertainment-education (also guest edited by Arvind) and exclaimed, "These are my bibles!" As Arvind signed the two volumes, Eliana, who is an Ashoka Foundation fellow,² talked about how the Minga Perú popular radio program, *Bienvenida Salud* (Welcome to Health), drew inspiration from the two "bibles" in dovetailing entertainment–education broadcasts with several community-based empowerment activities for local women. When Eliana asked Arvind if he would serve on Minga's board, he accepted. With the

Figure 1
A Self-Sketch by Emira of How Her Life Has Changed by
Participating in Minga Perú's Activities



connections in place, in subsequent years, Arvind arranged for two Ohio University students—Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty and Ami Sengupta—to intern and conduct doctoral dissertation research, respectively, in the Peruvian Amazon, coassessing Minga's interventions. In April 2005, as one part of these coassessments that used plain paper and colored markers, some 30 avid women listeners of *Bienvenida Salud* were asked to sketch out their perceptions of Minga Perú's contributions to reproductive health, gender equality, and social change (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). For instance, one of the questions posed was, "How has my life changed as a consequence of listening to *Bienvenida Salud* and participating in community-based activities of Minga Perú?" Participants were asked to draw two pictures—how their lives were some 5 years ago (i.e., *antes*, in the past) and how their lives are today (i.e., *ahora*, now).

The *antes* and *ahora* sketches of Emira, a 21-year-old, including her narrative, were highly revealing (see Figure 1).

Emira noted, "In my early life, I didn't know how worthy I was; I was ashamed, sad. Now my life has changed. . . . I don't feel ashamed any more, I don't have fear." Then, cupping her breasts, Emira emphasized,

I am proud of my body—my femininity. Before, I didn't want to cut my hair, but when I went to live in the city, I cut them. With trousers it was the same.

Now I feel capable to wear trousers; previously I wore loose clothes. Same with the shoes, now I wear high heels.

Emira's sketch and narrative, and the accompanying sketches and narratives of her 29 colleagues, suggested that this participatory sketching assessment activity inspired reflexivity and transformation in the lives of the avid listeners of *Bienvenida Salud*. Our participants provided insights into their lived experiences and were able to develop narratives that were previously marginalized, silenced, overlooked, or rejected. In several cases, the sketches and narratives (many of which dealt with domestic violence) called for wider community discussion, mobilization, and action.

When we reflect on our scholarship from these fascinating projects, we recognize that we purposefully write to directly share the lived experiences, feelings, and emotions of people struggling with overcoming oppression. Our readers gain insight into how the oppressed live their lives, experience change, and struggle on the path to empowerment. Our work recenters the focus of organizational communication to understand how *organizing through communicating* can serve the interests of the downtrodden. Also, when we identify the names of those struggling with poverty and oppression (with their approval and sometimes their insistence), they recognize that their lives matter, that their experiences may inspire others. Paraphrasing the words of many of our interviewees, "My life matters because you have come to talk to me. It matters because my name appears in print. I hope my struggle to overcome oppression encourages others to do the same."

When writing for different audiences, how do we move beyond the academy and connect the stories of our discipline with the stories of people's lives? In thinking about this question, we realized that our work is always embedded in and advances theory but also presents a human face. When we talk about our work, it is the humanized stories of people's lives that resonate most with our audiences (scholars, students, conference attendees, readers, and social change practitioners). Social change has a face. This change is revealed in the stories of Chandni, the 9-year-old girl in Bihar who pleads with her parents to celebrate her birthday with the same fanfare as her brother's; Sushila, the woman dairy farmer in Rajasthan who, in spite of injuries (acid splashing on her face), returned to work not to be chided by her husband; Yunus, the economics professor and Nobel Laureate who always created time to see us and who openly said that he learned more about poverty from "being with poor people than from the tomes on his shelves." The stories we tell of people's lives breathe life into the theories.

Social actors (whether change agents or the oppressed) are more likely to apply a theory if they understand how that theory works through the lived experience of another. The story need not be simple, however. There are always struggles and setbacks on the path to change. This realism resonates with those who recognize that social change and empowerment are not simple processes.

To move our ideas further along the path to meaningful application, we believe that organizational communication scholars need to theorize in ways that foster deliberative, participatory dialogues. Dialogue with the oppressed requires speaking with resonance and language connectivity. Speaking with resonance means theorizing that emerges from the subjective experiences of those who are oppressed. The detached objectivity of the traditional social scientist separates the researcher from those who are researched. That is a shame, in our opinion. When theories emerge from the ground up, supported by the lived experiences of the oppressed, they become real and applicable. Language connectivity means speaking in a language that is accessible to the oppressed. We recognize that the language of science is often accessible only to those with specialized backgrounds, so scholars must speak to be heard by using language that connects to the thoughts, experiences, and abilities of listeners. This is easy to say, but not so easy to do, as the following story reveals.

Arvind recalls being in a remote village in Nagaland, India, in March 2004 and being ushered by the village headman to see the local church. An audience of about 125, both men and women, sat quietly as Arvind was escorted to a makeshift stage and then introduced to the audience in the local language. He was presented with a bouquet, escorted to the podium, and then told that he could begin his 1-hour lecture.

Arvind froze. This was the first time he had heard about giving a lecture. On what topic? In what language? Who would translate? For 1 hour?

A local health official prodded that Arvind speak about HIV prevention, given that Arvind had authored two books on the topic (Singhal & Howard, 2003; Singhal & Rogers, 2003).

“Okay, no problem,” Arvind breathed a sigh of relief.

Then the village headman whispered in Arvind’s ear, “Professor, there are women in the audience. So, please do not use the word *condom*.”

“Hmmm . . . a lecture on HIV prevention, but no reference to prophylactics?”

It was a bitterly cold evening in Nagaland, and from the podium Arvind couldn’t help but notice the beautiful embroidered shawls that both men and women were wearing. Earlier in the day, he had learned about the

importance that Naga people accorded to shawls. The colors, patterns, and embroidery were specific identifiers of the various Naga tribes, and people wore them with pride. In fact, earlier that afternoon, Arvind was presented with a shawl that was to be worn by teachers only; “Only the wise can wear this,” he was told.

Riding this cue, for the next hour or so Arvind talked about Naga shawls, their importance to the Naga people, how they served various functions—protection from cold when wrapped around, as a blanket, and as a fabric that one could sit on—and highlighted the dignity and pride aspects of the shawl. The subtext of this lecture, as one would guess, was about how shawls (much like rubbers) protect, how important it was that passions be healthy, and how important it was that dignity and pride of the self and the community be upheld.

Arvind felt that he had somehow stumbled through the hour and breathed a sigh of relief when he closed the speech. What he was not ready for was the thunderous applause that followed. The audience was on their feet and clapped for several minutes. The health ministry official escorting Arvind said, “Professor that was a brilliant lecture. You spoke in a language that the audience members could understand.”

Arvind believes that the impromptu “connections” he made, on that blistering cold evening in Nagaland, speaks to the title of our essay: “Intellectuals Searching for Publics: Who is Out There?”

Our field experiences tell us that theory building should also be dialogic, emerging from dialogue between scholar and those studied. Then, once theories are refined through scholarly dialogue, they should be shared and discussed with those who are studied so that these theories may inform subsequent thinking and action.

As an illustration of how our theoretical thinking has been influenced by dialogue with the oppressed and social change practitioners, consider a set of observations we made in our book *Organizing for Social Change: A Dialectic Journey of Theory and Praxis* (Papa et al., 2006). When Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) referred to the banking model of education, he described how traditional educational practices turn students into “receptacles” to be “filled” by teachers, akin to making deposits at a bank. The teacher deposits, and students are the depositories. The role of the student is to receive, memorize, and repeat. Freire argues that the banking model tries to control thinking and action and inhibits our creative powers. Although we believe that Freire rightfully draws attention to the potentially manipulative aspects of formal educational systems, are there other possible framings of the banking model? We argue that Freire’s metaphor of

“making deposits” minimizes the value of expert information that can genuinely empower the oppressed. More specifically, we believe organizing for social change programs might be better served if Freire’s metaphor of “making deposits” (which has taken on a negative connotation) is reframed as the metaphor of “making investments.”

Consistent with this revised line of thinking, an expert in the specific problem confronting an oppressed group may have access to information that may be beneficial to members of that group. Importantly, this expert need not view the oppressed as passive entities but rather as active receivers of information. This socially conscious expert offers the information because he or she believes in the human potential of the oppressed group. This belief justifies the investment the expert makes in the hope of sparking meaningful social change. Like all investments, it is up to the person receiving the information to “work the capital.” In this process, the oppressed mold, reform, or otherwise make the information theirs.

Although the information that sparks the social change may not emerge through dialogue between the external expert and the oppressed group, dialogue may occur among the oppressed. Through this dialogue, they produce social change that they own because it is driven by their conversations and actions. The investment therefore produces a return that exceeds the initial principal. The excess capital (e.g., social capital) that is created could not occur without the efforts of the oppressed working with each other.

We hope we have given our readers a glimpse into the journey we have forged together as friends, colleagues, and coauthors who have intellectual thoughts that we share with various publics. One final observation that needs to be made, however, is the unique character of our partnership. Although there have been some gaps in our collaborative scholarship, we have worked together for 17 years. We believe this is relatively rare in academe, especially because we earned our PhDs in different institutions and, during the past 8 years, have served on different departmental and university faculties. During the 17 years, countless hours were spent in classrooms with chalkboards and flip charts developing rationales for projects, sketching out methodologies, interpreting interviews and observations, and framing theories. We have met in one another’s homes, at out-of-town conferences, in coffee shops, and in our offices. We have also spent many long hours on overseas flights. When we develop intellectual ideas, it has been through intensive and personal dialogue with each other. In fact, in sketching our ideas for this brief essay, we met in Bowling Green, Ohio (a halfway point between our homes), and talked for about 16 hours over 2 days. Relational reminiscence and talk of families was part of that time as well, but we managed to stay on task. Our

intellectual ideas have emerged through a focused conversation that has lasted 17 years and has required pushing one another to the limits of our abilities. To whatever extent our ideas are publicly recognized, we believe our pursuit of intellectual thought will continue.

Notes

1. This biographical information is gleaned from Chomsky's MIT Web page (<http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/biography/noambio.html>), accessed on January 10, 2007, and from Znet, which holds a large collection of Chomsky's writings, lectures, and interviews (<http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/index.cfm>; accessed on January 10, 2007).

2. The Ashoka Foundation recognizes individuals for their outstanding contributions as social entrepreneurship in their respective countries.

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