

A Call for Scholar-Activism: A Response to Power and Technology
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RESPONSE to Jennifer Lee’s Feature “Power and Technology: Who gets to make the decisions?”

A Call for Scholar-Activism: A Response to Power and Technology

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Alvaro Huerta (2018) defines a “scholar-activist” as both a bridge and conduit between academic institutions and the communities in which they work, putting the resources and privilege of the former into service for the latter toward the ultimate object of advancing social, racial, and economic equity. This definition clarifies several things about what scholar-activism means. First, scholar-activists think of their institutions, research, and platforms as *resources* that can be directed. Second, scholar-activists intentionally direct these resources towards communities outside academia. Third, even as some career incentives in academia are at odds with this goal, scholar-activists commit to social justice. We three authors of this piece began working together under the name the “Critical Platform Studies Group” (CritPlat) in 2018. As a small research collective of early career scholars, we have been inspired by the scholar-activist mode of engagement over the past two years. In the present piece, we point to other research in computing that has inspired us, share what pursuing an activist mode has meant for us so far as a group, and report on what challenges we have faced along the way.

All academics dedicate time and energy to their work, putting something of themselves and their values into it. Even in computing, many scholars have done politically-charged work since the beginning of the profession, including the notable early work of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (Finn & DuPont 2020). Speaking to an ACM and design audience, then, what is at stake in aligning ourselves more explicitly to an activist politics?

For us, this orientation has meant that we begin our research with a theory of social change. We take as our starting point that while many projects in computing and data science to date have been oriented towards “social good” (Pal 2017), not all of these projects fit within Huerta’s conception of scholar-activism as a practice of channeling resources, building relationships, and addressing the social, racial, and economic structural disparities in our society head-on as such. An activist orientation requires us to see research as action, to build capacity, and to contribute to broader social movements.

Inspirations and aspirations

We take inspiration from researchers who set out to support and amplify activist objectives. For instance, Our Data Bodies is a research justice project that works with local communities to develop practical tools for data literacy, digital self-defense, and community resilience in the face of digital society. NoTechForICE, organized by the migrant rights organization Mijente, is a national grassroots student-led campaign for divestment from Palantir and other tech companies collaborating with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, combining direct action with bespoke research on university involvement with companies such as Palantir. We look to projects like Irani and Silberman’s Turkopticon as an exemplar of how to build a system to improve the labor conditions of precarious workers, while challenging the exploitative platform design of a major tech company. We also look to the empirical, conceptual, and methodological examples set by scholarship on algorithmic justice (Buolamwini 2018), data feminism (D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020), and design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

We similarly take inspiration from the thought and guidance of race and social justice activists. In her 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Detroit-based activist adrienne marie brown provides a set of conceptual tools for stronger and more sustainable social justice movements. A central theme is the charge of Detroit civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs to “transform yourself to transform the world,” a concept which brown encapsulates through the metaphor of the *fractal*. To say that social change is fractal is to underline how our personal interactions and daily lives interconnect to larger-scale stakes, such as our research choices, institutional context, and society. In this respect, scholar-activism is not just about what we decide to research but also how we show up with others. At an April 18, 2019 talk to the Seattle Public Library, brown asked:

“How many people would say again, ‘In my intimate relationships I am practicing transformative justice.’...How many of you right now would say there’s a functioning democratic process happening in your household... your block... your city?... Thinking fractal[ly] we [must practice] at the small scale something that we can actually bring up to a larger scale.”

As academics, our personal, departmental, and community-scale changes can be the staging ground for larger societal shifts. In these settings, scholar-activists can refer to pragmatic guidance set out by social justice groups, such as the Bay Area Solidarity Action Team Protocol & Principles for White People Working to Support the Black Liberation Movement (Figure 1). Some of the principles brown raises, however, highlight fundamental tensions for academics interested in doing this work. brown explains the importance of interdependence and decentralization for a healthy social movement. But academic career advancement depends on taking credit and centering yourself; nor can the organizing and campaigning of supporting social movements easily be reflected in a CV.

Protocol & principles for white people working to support the black liberation movement:

- Frontline Leadership
- Solidarity is a Verb
- Long Haul Relationships
- Centering Blackness
- Don’t Let Whiteness Get in the Way
- Stay Human, Stay Grounded
- Visionary and Confrontational Action
- Tactical Discipline
- Reflection ↔ Action cycle
- Sustainability

Figure 1: The Bay Area Solidarity Action Team (BASAT)’s protocols and principles, as excerpted by brown in *Emergent Strategy* (2017).

Our experiences to date

We turn again to Huerta’s conception of scholar-activism as creating bridges and connections between academic institutions and the communities in which they work, putting the resources and privilege of the former into service for the latter toward the ultimate object of advancing social, racial, and economic equity.

The first project we three authors completed together was inspired by an effort to think of our academic institutions and platforms as resources that can be directed. In early 2019, we met an activist from the Greenlining Institute in Oakland, California, Haleema Bharoocha, who was looking for partners willing to co-organize and host an event on racism and bias in machine learning. In gaining support for this effort

via funding set aside by the University of Washington Information School for a speaker series on computational social science, we were able to provide university space, awareness, and honoraria to an event held on campus in April 2019 to a local audience and by livestream. The panel event, "Racism and White Supremacy in Algorithmic Systems," featured local advocates, activists, community organizers, and educators. Bharoocha directed the steps we took to ensure the event was inclusive, such as ensuring the space was wheelchair accessible and scent-free; and that it would have sign language interpreters, space reserved for elders, and plus-sized seats. We learned the value of sharing a list of definitions for key terms on printouts for audience members, coordinating on content with panelists beforehand, and circulating press releases. Writing Bharoocha's prompts for the audience on the walls, we started audience conversations before and after the event with post-it notes and markers. The conversations between those present before, during, and after the event was one way to help foster relationships and build capacity.

Our second project was inspired by the idea that scholar-activists intentionally direct resources towards communities outside academia. Our Algorithmic Equity Toolkit project co-created a set of tools for community advocates to use in posing critical questions about government technologies. Following a participatory action research approach, we aimed to center and be accountable to the goals of our partners at ACLU of Washington (ACLU-WA) in what we made and how it evolved over time. Our partnership with ACLU-WA allowed us to connect with activists and community organizers in the Seattle Tech Fairness Coalition, a group of local civil rights organizations engaged in the fight for surveillance reform. As Jennifer Lee underlines in her piece "Technology and Power," we aimed to be respectful of time from these partners; in some cases we were able to pay community advocates for their expertise. However, a key challenge we encountered was in how to fund the work as a community-based project. At the time, the only readily available funding was from Big Tech. We ultimately decided to turn down a grant from Amazon in favor of maintaining partners' trust and the political commitments of the project. This gap in funding left each of us precarious in different ways, and much of our time on the project became in-kind. The privilege to freely dedicate work to unfunded projects is one that many people do not have, and was not without material and career impacts for us either.

A third project of ours aimed to intervene on the tensions between the incentives in advancing academic careers and our commitments to social justice. We were inspired in part by the #FundingMatters campaign, in which scholars in our field criticized the Privacy Law Scholars Conference and Amsterdam Privacy Conference for receiving funding from Palantir in solidarity with the immigrants' rights group Mijente. In response, in 2019 we organized a panel at the ACM Computer-Supported Collaborative Work conference that interrogated tech industry funding called "Patron or Poison? Industry Funding of HCI Research." In it, we asked how industry funding might impact the scope and content of the work we do. Our panel event featured both early career scholars and those more senior and central to the community; industry researchers and researchers based in universities. Immediately following the panel, we staged a guerilla tabling event with a spray-painted banner parodying that year's CSCW logo (Figure 2). We used our table to distribute zines and collect anonymous submissions about how industry funding had impacted respondents' work. This DIY action built on energy from that year's ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing (CHI), in which an attendee had defaced a poster listing the conference sponsors. We ask the community to continue building on this energy and by re-imagining conferences as sites of direct action, disruption, and joy, where we can intervene in our own community in an effort to foster new forms of discussion.



Figure 2: CritPlat disrupting the ACM Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW). The hand-painted sign hanging from our table replaces “Computer” with “Corporate”, reading “CSCW 2019: Corporate Supported Collaborative Work.”

Points of Direction

Even as we reflect on what in our work we want to deepen or rethink, we share the following directions to others on the same path as we are.

Use progressive stack. Progressive stack is the strategy of facilitating meetings and large discussion groups by eliciting contributions from people in marginalized groups before those from people who are not. It was popularized at the Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011. This strategy is used to remediate recognized inequities in who is most likely to speak and be heard in order to prevent majoritarian decision-making. It can inspire many aspects of scholar-activist practice, from adopting feminist citation practices (Guzmán & Amrute 2019), leading class discussions, panel invites, mentoring, hiring, and other ways voices are amplified in scholarship. We can also direct opportunities towards others; as Guzman and Amrute (2019) invite, “Ask yourself, for each topic you present, each yes or no you give to a request, where are the women of color? Who can I suggest who would be a better person than me to be the expert here? Who do I want to be in community with?”

Publish a funding integrity statement. Writing a funding integrity statement (and making it available in spaces we put our bio or CV) is the practice of disclosing the sources of funding we accept as scholars, under what conditions, and what criteria we use to make decisions about financial support to accept.

Channel resources. Resources, defined broadly, can include mentoring time, granting a platform, or amplifying on social media-- in addition to funding and job opportunities. Just as the Our Data Bodies project by Tawana Petty, Mariella Saba, Tamika Lewis, Seeta Peña Gangadharan, and Kim Reynolds works with community organizers, we can channel the resources available to us to those already doing the work in order and support their existing efforts.

Follow objectives of communities. Scholar-activists can begin their work by following a specific community or organization’s stated needs (cf., Constanza-Chock 2020). A robust tradition called participatory action research provides a clear methodology for such an approach. By working in concert with partners through an action-reflection cycle, researchers are more likely to produce knowledge or tools that can be put in service to current efforts and strategies.

Foster long-term relationships. Given the pressure to publish in academic institutions for career advancement, the timelines between academic and community objectives is likely to misalign. Fostering long-term relationships with communities, advocacy organizations, and activist groups can make our research more accountable to the people we work with, and more importantly makes us present for the organizing and advocacy needs to which we can put our own voices, time, power, and resources. Research that does not arise from genuine needs of community activists or that is not pursued on the basis of long-term trusting relationships will be extractive.

Direct action in conferences. We call for academic computing conferences to become places where speakers might be interrupted by a noisy protest from an organized group of students or other hubbub. Our scholarly communities are active conversations among colleagues and friends--- not idle literatures. What if dissenting views were presented with arts, banners, tabling, teach-ins, and performances? What if interventions into the field were literal and joyful?

Some people we have met have reservations about using the term “activist.” Some worry that as researchers, aligning ourselves to activists might compromise public trust in academic institutions. Others have a very different concern, which is that academic work does not rise to the ethos or standard of activism and should not seek to center itself in the struggle. In spite of these unresolved tensions, as academics adjacent to Big Tech firms in our collaborations and funding relationships, researchers choosing where to direct our time and energy, and educators for a new generation of technologists, we bring considerable power as scholars to this present moment. We can look for ways to turn this power toward existing efforts for social change.

Conclusion

We write this piece mid-stream in an unfinished process of learning how to do research, how to engage politically, and how to maintain relationships with partners over time. Here we have attempted to expose our process to this point. But our process is an evolving one and we hope to dedicate our careers to this end. In sharing the guideposts we have used along the way, we hope to have surfaced some conceptual tools and considerations that will be useful to others at our same juncture. In this fraught moment, this search for ways to turn the considerable time and attention dedicated to our work to broader purpose has made scholarship more rewarding. We will continue to look for ways to steer in this direction and look forward to connecting with others heading the same way.

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