

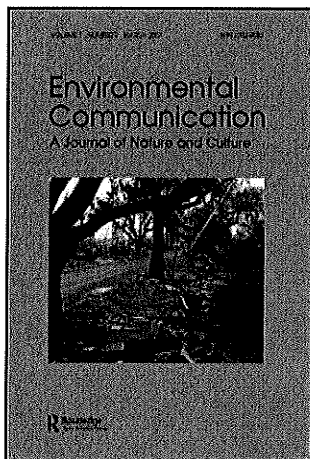
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Publisher Routledge

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Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t770239508>

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2008

To cite this Article Endres, Danielle, Sprain, Leah and Peterson, Tarla Rai(2008)'The Imperative of Praxis-based Environmental Communication Research: Suggestions from the Step It Up 2007 National Research Project',Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture,2:2,237 — 245

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17524030802141794

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17524030802141794>

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PRAXIS

The Imperative of Praxis-based Environmental Communication Research: Suggestions from the Step It Up 2007 National Research Project

Danielle Endres, Leah Sprain and Tarla Rai Peterson

In this essay, we discuss our development and implementation of a national research project on the Step It Up 2007 campaign calling for political action to mitigate climate change. Specifically, we discuss this project as it relates to our goal to engage in praxis-based research that can be accessible to activists, publics, and practitioners. First, we discuss the practice of organizing a national praxis-oriented research project. We offer this project, with its benefits and challenges, as one model for engaged research on relevant environmental issues. Second, we discuss how our research findings can serve as a form of praxis when an effort is made to make the findings relevant to practitioners in environmental campaigns and movements. Reflecting on our process, we offer four suggestions for making connections between environmental communication research and environmental advocates. The essay concludes by discussing the imperative of engaging in praxis-based research about our contemporary environmental crisis.

Keywords: Praxis; Social Movements; Activism; Climate Change; Public Scholarship

On 8 January 2007, Bill McKibben (2007b) noted in a dispatch on the online publication *Grist* that public and political opinion about climate change were shifting: “we have . . . all the parts of a movement except the movement itself”. Intent

Danielle Endres is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. Leah Sprain is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication and holds the Research Professorship in Environmental Humanities at the University of Washington. Tarla Rai Peterson is the Boone & Crockett Chair and Professor in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at Texas A&M University and Professor of Environmental Communication at the Swedish Agricultural University. Correspondence to: Danielle Endres, Department of Communication, University of Utah, 255 S. Central Campus Dr., LNCO 2400, SLC, UT 84112, USA. Email: danielle.endres@utah.edu

on making a statement about global warming, he and a small group of students had walked across the state of Vermont, raising awareness along the way. As they walked, they wondered what it would take to organize a national effort on climate change. Step It Up 2007 (SIU 2007) emerged out of their question. McKibben offered it as a way to “do something” more than change light bulbs: be part of “the first nationwide do-it-yourself mass protest” (2007b, unpublished). Individuals and local groups were invited to sign up on a web site to host local actions on a “National Day of Climate Action” (14 April 2007) at iconic natural places, calling for political action on climate change. SIU 2007 was an effort to create a national movement for climate change action through more than 1,400 events that took place across all 50 states. Although the events varied in size, activities, and location, one message linked all the rallies: “Step it up, Congress! Enact immediate cuts in carbon emissions, and pledge an 80% reduction by 2050” (McKibben, 2007a, unpublished).

As environmental communication researchers, we saw SIU 2007 as an opportunity to explore the question of what it takes to build an environmental social movement in the twenty-first century. As scholars committed to environmentalism and scholarship that supports environmental advocacy, we saw engagement with SIU 2007 as a way to examine the do-it-yourself protest through a communication lens and offer findings that would be interesting, innovative, and accessible to activists, students, the public, and future movement builders. As citizens who care about the global climate crisis, we saw SIU 2007 as a way to get involved in action aimed at mitigating further global climate changes from greenhouse gas emissions. These impulses led us to develop a collaborative national research project on SIU 2007. We wanted our project to use communication theories to illuminate the strategies and functions of SIU 2007, and offer suggestions for future movement builders. Praxis-based research was our goal.

We decided to engage in praxis-based research through participant-observation of local SIU 2007 events. We adhere to Friere’s (1970) notion of praxis: “Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it” (p. 106). Praxis-based research draws on our strengths and expertise as researchers and communication theorists. We are not experts in event organizing, but we can offer theoretical illumination of the SIU 2007 campaign by linking our reflections with local and national organizers. Further, we realize that engaging in research as a form of praxis requires actually getting our work outside the academy to the people involved in organizing campaigns and events. Praxis-based research requires a commitment to conversations with practitioners, which poses challenges and requires strategies that we discuss below.

In this essay, we discuss our development and implementation of a national research project on the SIU 2007 campaign as it relates to praxis. First, we describe the nuts and bolts, or praxis defined as practice, of organizing a national praxis-oriented research project. Then, we explain how our research findings can serve as a form of praxis. We conclude the essay by suggesting the role of praxis-based research for environmental communication as a crisis discipline.

A Coordinated National Research Project

To observe this movement and answer our main question about movement-building necessitated coordinating a national team of researchers who share our goal of conducting research designed to engage in the public conversation about climate change. Praxis-based research is different from traditional academic research because it is explicitly designed to communicate with non-academic audiences and contribute to the process of seeking solutions or making improvements.

In order to produce research that could achieve these goals, we decided it would not be enough to engage in intensive research of one SIU 2007 site. Part of the point of SIU 2007 was to create a national movement built of many local actions. In order to speak to this campaign, we needed to involve researchers from across the country, not only to increase our number of cases but also to understand coordinated actions in distinct regions of the United States. We also decided to encourage researchers to form teams rather than act as individual researchers because of the richness and volume of the potential data and the value of collaborative work.

Before the SIU 2007 National Day of Climate Action, members from research teams in nine states participated in several conference calls to discuss how to best research SIU 2007. These discussions resulted in shared interview questions, a basic research protocol that included attending at least one local SIU 2007 event, and an agreement that each research team would gather additional data that fit individual research interests. In total, eight research teams attended 21 SIU 2007 actions in eight states. In June 2007, research team members presented initial findings from their local events on a panel at the Conference on Communication and the Environment. After the presentations, team members met to discuss the research project as a whole and how to move forward to an edited book for a broad audience of environmental activists and practitioners, teachers, publics, and scholars. The book is designed to draw on shared interests and materials while also including diverse approaches. Each contribution to the book can stand on its own, but the chapters will work together to advance a central argument.

Our research approach enabled cross-site collaborative writing that benefited the project and the researchers. Although our book will include some case studies that thickly describe the events in a particular locale, the majority of our chapters will pursue analytic themes—such as web-based organizing, environmental justice, and defining social movement success—that emerged out of our conference calls and meetings. These cross-site collaborations are important to our praxis-based goals because they allow the authors to develop general themes across the national SIU 2007 campaign, make empirically and theoretically grounded suggestions, and offer general findings to answer our question of what it takes to build an environmental movement in the twenty-first century. Moreover, our written reports also benefited from the collaborative process of scholars from different research traditions adding perspectives and challenging co-authors to defend particular conventions. In addition to the benefits for our research, our model also allowed collaborations between graduate students, junior scholars, and senior scholars at different universities, many

of whom did not know each other prior to the project. This form of collaboration can help graduate students and junior faculty by providing research opportunities outside the classroom, mentorship, and a sense of community among environmental communication scholars.

Although we observed the campaign from many vantage points, including media coverage and internet-based organizing, we decided a crucial requirement would be for each team to attend at least one SIU 2007 event as participant observers. Rhetorical criticism of social movements typically examines after-the-fact texts from social movements that people chose to archive, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, archives of the American Indian Movement, or mediated representations of the Seattle WTO protests (e.g., Alvarez, 1988; Brick, 1998; Bruner & Oelshlaeger, 1998; DeLuca, 1999a, 1999b; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Lake 1983; Peeples, 2005). While this research is incredibly valuable, social movement studies in the field of rhetoric are lacking in analysis of protests, rallies, and events in real time. The SIU 2007 research team uniquely studied SIU 2007 as it happened through material presence at the events where artifacts are first performed. This aspect of our project is consistent with a small number of studies that use ethnographic or performance studies approaches to examine contemporary environmental movements as they occur (e.g., Pezzullo, 2001, 2003, 2007).

Studying a movement *in situ* has significant benefits for understanding ongoing social movements. It allows collection of a more diverse set of materials for analysis, including using participant observations, recorded speeches, photographs, and interviews as texts, including those that would not otherwise be archived or presented in the media. The experience of being present as a participant-observer at an event combined with the access to more texts allows for a more rich understanding of the particular event as it fits into the larger social movement than through studying past events through preserved artifacts. Having access to the primary texts of a social movement rally *and* being there facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the communicative dynamics of the events. Moreover, multi-sited participant observation allows researchers to engage in important comparative research that examines the social movement events in relation to the subsequent mediated coverage and texts produced. This can lead to insight about what aspects of the actual events are included and excluded from news coverage, for example. Conducting interviews of participants at the gathering provides glimpses of the participants' meaning-making. These perspectives traditionally have not been included in rhetorical analysis of social movements, but they provide important member checks on the critic's interpretation of the event. Studying a movement as it happens and watching events first hand allows researchers to gain greater insight into how social movements and campaigns attempt to persuade their immediate audiences.

This approach also can facilitate the production of research that may be a useful tool for members of the movement outside academia (both appreciative and critical findings). Given our expertise in research and communication theory, this means assisting agents promoting changes in environmental policy by using theory to

illuminate current practices and offering empirically grounded recommendations for future campaigns, movements, and actions. Although research essays and a book manuscript can take years to complete, research teams can engage in continued conversation with event organizers well before publication of research. For example, several of the research teams had conversations with event organizers soon after the SIU 2007 actions to discuss their initial reactions to the rhetorical dynamics of the events. We designed the project to facilitate practical application of our research, and attempted to build relationships with movement participants in order to encourage more immediate and timely application and refinement of critical insights the research may produce, such as sharing our immediate critical reflections with local organizers.

Yet, this approach also has challenges. Despite our intent to build relationships and create timely applications for our work outside academia, implementation has been difficult for busy academics and activists. Although some research teams were able to maintain contact with SIU 2007 event organizers and use their contacts with local environmental organizations to engage in conversations about the research, others were constrained by location (e.g., those who attended rallies in different cities) and lack of trust or time to build relationships.

Moreover, our requirement that research teams attend at least one SIU 2007 action was dependent on the local action actually taking place. In one instance, a research team was unable to continue to participate in the project because the event they planned to attend did not happen. Other teams encountered last-minute cancellations and switched to different locations.

Unlike many ethnographic projects that rely on extended time in the field, this project relied on short-term participation at events that lasted anywhere from one to ten hours. In order to gather a thick set of data from the events, research teams had to carefully coordinate with team members about what information to collect and how to divide our attention at the events. Our pre-event conference calls resulted in an agreement that all research teams would collect interviews (based on four agreed-upon questions), record speeches, take photographs, and write fieldnotes. Individual research teams decided what additional data they might want to collect to address their particular research questions. For example, because the Salt Lake City group was interested in the notions of place/space, they added an additional interview question about place, each reflected on the space/place in their fieldnotes, and they specifically took photos of the layout of the events. Research teams also took a variety of approaches to collecting data at the events.

We had only one chance to collect our data. Although many of us had training in participant observation, ethnography, and/or rhetorical criticism, research team coordinators had to provide training or coaching for team members who were engaging in approaches new to them. For example, faced with a Seattle event where neighborhood groups were encouraged to gather and travel together to a central rally downtown, the Seattle research team recruited interested graduate and undergraduate research assistants to help cover more events. In an attempt to systematize data collection, all of the research assistants participated in a training workshop and

worked with research notebooks that included sensitizing questions and an interview protocol. The Salt Lake team collectively attended three events, splitting to attend two concurrent morning events and joining together to attend a large afternoon downtown event. Team members all took fieldnotes, conducted interviews, and collected short questionnaires based on a research protocol and training before the events. Because of the size and length of the downtown event, the research team leader divided the event into one hour segments and assigned one person to focus on one type of data collection (i.e., fieldnotes or interviews) for that hour, allowing for research team members to focus on one type of data collection at a time but ensuring that all forms of data collection occurred in each hour. The team had meetings every hour to discuss data collection and assign tasks for the next hour.

For environmental communication scholars concerned with national and international environmental problems, movements and campaigns, we posit our project as one model for engaged praxis-based research. Through trial, error, and collaborative discussion, we developed a national research project that benefited from four priorities: (1) match the research approach (project structure and methods) to the phenomenon; (2) explore new forms of and possibilities for collaborative work as researchers; (3) consider movements in action, examining the process of movement creation and movement building; and (4) observe and participate in local events *in situ* as participant observers.

Research Findings as Praxis

Because of our commitments to address climate change and produce research that reaches audiences outside the academy, we have made the choice to write and otherwise frame our project in ways that will speak to practitioners and members of the public. This is a calculated rhetorical choice with a set of implications. Public scholarship is not merely a matter of expanding the readership of our disciplinary journals and university library-bound books. Public scholarship must be rhetorically constructed to reach different audiences than those to whom we are accustomed to writing. In the SIU 2007 project, we are primarily interested in providing research findings that have practical, yet theoretically informed, implications for environmental advocates and organizers. As scholars explicitly committed to using our scholarship to shift climate change policy, our research project is designed to support practitioners who are attempting to challenge the status quo (as opposed to practitioners hired to make the status quo look good).

Viewing our research findings as a form of praxis requires that we make explicit efforts to appeal to activists and the public, open dialogue with practitioners, and promote our research as useful for environmental activists, campaign organizers, and people involved in climate change work. Toward this end, we developed a set of strategies for reaching practitioners.

First, *write, revise, and edit for a diverse audience of activists, publics, and practitioners*. Despite the perception that writing designed for the public will be diluted or lack theoretical sophistication, we believe it is possible to simultaneously

develop theory in a way that is interesting to academics and their students, and accessible to non-academics. However, this artful writing does not come easily. In our case, it rarely came first. Instead, we had to consciously edit for multiple audiences, adding accessible examples and deleting dense source citations that did not illuminate SIU 2007. Our team members suffered from the curse of professional researchers, often hesitant to make definitive statements. We had to consciously avoid the typical mechanisms of retreating into the inherent complexity of our topic or perpetual deference to other researchers we saw as more authoritative than ourselves. In our project, we repeatedly discussed the need to write for an audience that included activists, concerned citizens, and academics outside of communication. We also provided encouragement and editorial commentary on how to write for a public audience, and modeled the style of writing we hoped for. One important aspect of this strategy is the requirement that all chapters conclude with a set of grounded suggestions for practitioners.

Second, *establish relationships and open communication with key organizers*. We have had several discussions, interviews, and conference calls with the national SIU 2007 organizing team. When we discussed our project with McKibben, he recognized its potential utility, and agreed to contribute the Foreword to the book. We have remained in contact with the SIU 2007 organizers and have set the stage to share our findings with them. This contact is of crucial importance not only because our discussions with the SIU 2007 team have enhanced our research, but also because our interactions have opened the door for reaching climate leaders with our findings. We hope the organizers will find our findings useful as the SIU 2007 team continues to organize new events through their new international campaign called 350.org and becomes part of 1Sky, a national coalition on climate change.

Third, *learn from local organizers and leaders*. In addition to connecting with the national SIU 2007 organizers, we created connections with our local SIU 2007 groups. For example, in Salt Lake City, San Antonio, and Austin, research team members interviewed event organizers, shared information about the project, and offered to share our findings with organizers and other SIU 2007 participants. In Seattle, the research team attended organizing meetings and post-event actions. These connections are important not only for raising awareness of our research and book but are also crucial for creating future dialogue. Building from initial connections with Seattle groups, we plan to meet with local SIU 2007 organizers and representatives from other climate change non-profits to discuss our findings with them this May *before* final publication of the book. This session is designed to solicit input from local activists to ensure that our book best supports advocacy efforts.

Fourth, *partner with trusted environmental news sources*. We developed a relationship with Grist.com through which we had access to their archives about SIU 2007, and we agreed to share our findings with them. This connection can be very important for helping our research reach activists and non-academic audiences. We carefully chose potential publishers that are interested in marketing academic books to multiple audiences and see our relationship with Grist.com as one potential venue for marketing the book outside academia.

It is yet to be seen if our research will have an impact on climate change activism. Even though the project has facilitated some pre-publication conversations with practitioners, our finished product is planned for publication in 2009, two years after the SIU 2007 actions. The publication time lag is a challenge to praxis-based research. We have responded to this challenge by designing our project to speak not only to SIU 2007, but also to the broader climate change campaign, as well as to other social movements and campaigns in the twenty-first century. SIU 2007 acts as a case study for analysis and lessons learned that can speak more generally to social movements. As scholars concerned with climate change and public engagement, we desire to produce research that is useful for activists and practitioners. Building relationships with activists and environmental organizations is essential because they may catalyze dialogue *even if we fail* to produce a book that is of interest to activists. These networks offer new pathways for developing working relationships between environmental communication scholars and organizers/activists. They also provide scholars a sense of the questions and problems with which practitioners struggle.

Although we offer this as one model for public scholarship, it is important to note that we also appreciate other models of public scholarship, such as participant action research (PAR) (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2006; Whyte, 1991). PAR is a model in which activists, publics, and “studied” groups collaboratively develop research questions and goals that are mutually beneficial. The SIU 2007 research project does not follow the PAR model, but it has the potential to open doors for collaborations with activists and environmental organizations that may effect change from the status quo.

Conclusion

In the first issue of this journal, Robert Cox characterized environmental communication as a crisis discipline (2007). If environmental communication is a crisis discipline, at the very least we must find ways to engage in praxis and produce research that reaches beyond the academy. In their response to Cox (2007), Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson (2007) argued that the “institutional imperative [of environmental communication] is to knit the diverse interpretations of diverse subjects together and represent them in a way that is relevant to every orientation that may be embodied within the land community” (p. 84). Although this imperative does not come with an instruction manual, it does suggest that talking to ourselves severely limits our potential as environmental communicators. Peterson *et al.* advocated that we “become permeability makers, as opposed to myth makers. Our job is to poke holes in the community’s borders, contributing to a porous and (potentially) broader community that grows increasingly robust and resilient” (p. 84). To accomplish this goal, some research methods are especially helpful, including participant observation, national and international coordinated research projects, and PAR. Our project illustrates a direct response to the first normative tenet Cox (2007) suggested: “enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the well-being of both human civilization and natural biological systems” (p. 15). Given the challenges posed by the global climate

crisis, we believe nothing short of re-imagining our roles as scholars and activists is required.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank everyone who is involved in the SIU 2007 research project for their commitment to their vision, hard work, and critical insight.

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