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Action Research and New Media

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Foreword

Douglas Schuler

For over 20 years I've been working at the junction of activism, research, and community work in the field of new media and communication networks, a region that although rich in research issues and urgent social needs, is to a large degree, still *terra incognito.* Unfortunately working where these three realms meet is to work on the margins of each. The book you're holding should help mitigate that problem. It's the book that I needed at the beginning of those 20 years.

Action research is simultaneously a set of methodologies, a philosophical orientation, and a research culture. Action research is, of course, *timeless* in itself; the need for research that is *engaged* was needed yesterday and will be needed tomorrow. Nevertheless, as the authors of this book make clear, new media and the advent of the internet, and increasingly ubiquitous digital networking adds a degree of urgency to this endeavour.

This urgency shows up in a "perfect storm" of opportunities and challenges:

- New possibilities for connecting people across boundaries, with more information at their disposal, for use in new venues
- An increase in collaborative, transnational research/action projects that provide real meaning and connect to the lives of real people
- Evolving technologies, institutions, and policies of new information and communication systems
- A backdrop of globalisation, surveillance, poverty, militarism, and ecocide

Research that is totally "objective" or "disengaged" is a myth, yet, like all myths, it has a reality in the sense that it guides and orients our thinking and, hence, our actions, in ways that are often implicit. The fact that

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action research and other participatory approaches still meet resistance is a testament to institutional inertia, the enduring force that polices intellectual enquiry and thereby constrains both thought and action. This book is part of a gathering force to describe and define participatory and collaborative approaches to new media research that are both rigourous and meaningful in a *real* way; that is to say in a way that moves research forward (thus satisfying the critical objectives of the academy) while providing ideas and actions of significance beyond the academy, to the world where people live.

Action research should not be championed solely because of the good effects that it could have on the world, although if that were all it accomplished, it would be enough to warrant a lot more of it. Action research is also key to high-quality scholarship. The insistence on *social engagement* (that action research is built upon) is indispensable for any intellectual enquiry. For one thing, it helps keep the research *honest*. Statistics and other quantitative data don't (of course!) tell the whole story. (This helps explain the tragedy of economics.) For another thing, this type of research helps keep the *researcher* honest—not just in the narrow sense of "not lying" but in the broader sense of being true to the realities (and possibilities!) of conditions and systems of influence and interrelationships.

As this book makes clear, a pragmatic approach to action research that is underpinned by principles such as methodological pluralism, and a takes a critical yet inclusive approach to social problems, is absolutely critical for both the validity of the social sciences and the future of the planet. It's also critical that the work that it describes becomes vastly more prominent within the social sciences (perhaps renamed social *enquiries*?).

In the past few years I've been working on new theoretical models and structures that would more actively bridge the worlds of research, activism, and community work. These include a participatory project to develop a complex theory of social change—the "Liberating Voices" pattern language (Schuler, 2007)—and a boundary-blurring concept of civic intelligence (Schuler, 2001), which focuses on the idea of collective intelligence for addressing major problems that are shared around the world.

So although I didn't have a copy of this book 20 years ago, it's presumably not too late for me to take advantage of it now. In fact, I'm anticipating the involvement of the nascent community of action researchers in the evaluation of Liberating Voices pattern language and in the definition, development, cultivation, and evaluation of civic intelligence in society. The most important thing now, however, is that the next generation of researchers/activists will be able to consult this book and use it to simultaneously improve their work—*and the world*.

References

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Schuler, D. (2007). *Liberating voices: A pattern language for communication revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Abbreviations

AAL	anticipatory action learning
AAR	anticipatory action research
CD	compact disc
CLA	causal layered analysis
CLC	community learning centre
CMC	computer-mediated communication
CSCW	computer supported cooperative work
DfID	Department for International Development (Britain)
DVD	digital versatile disc
EAR	ethnographic action research
EU	European Union
ICT	information and communication technology
ictPR	ICT for Poverty Reduction
IT	information technology
KCRIP	Kothmale Community Radio and Internet Project
LEARNERS	Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New Technologies, Empowerment and Rural Sustainability
MMS	multimedia messaging service
NGO	nongovernment organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAR	participatory action research

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PM&E	participatory monitoring and evaluation
QUT	Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia)
SHG	self help group
SLQ	State Library of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia)
SMS	short message service
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
YIRN	Youth Internet Radio Network

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This book represents the culmination of many years of work applying action research to new media by all of the authors. Although the book was a team effort and all chapters benefit from input from the team as a whole, each chapter has its own pedigree. Formal acknowledgements for each chapter follow.

Chapters 1 and 2: Some parts of these chapters are used with permission from: G. Hearn & M. Foth (2005). Action research in the design of new media and ICT systems. In K. Kwansah-Aidoo (Ed.), *Current Issues in Communications and Media Research* (pp. 79–94). New York: Nova Science.

Chapters 3 and 5: Some sections in these chapters were adapted from the *Ethnographic Action Research Handbook* by Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn (2003). Ethnographic action research was developed initially through funding from the UK Department for International Development in 2002, applied and refined through the UNESCO funded ictPR project (Slater & Tacchi, 2004), and is being developed further through the Australian Research Council (ARC), UNESCO, and UNDP funded *Finding a Voice* research project (see below for project details). Jo Tacchi and colleagues in the *Finding a Voice* project are currently preparing an updated CD ROM version of the handbook (UNESCO, 2007).

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Chapter 4: The section on tools and systems in this chapter was adapted with the permission of Sage Publications from: M. Foth (2006). Network action research. *Action Research*, *4*(2), 205–226.

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Chapter 7: The key idea for this chapter "anticipatory action research" began its life in *Anticipating Social and Policy Implications of Intelligent Networks: Complexity, Choice and Participation* (Hearn et al., 1995).

Chapter 8: This chapter draws on the ictPR research project which was funded by UNESCO and led by Jo Tacchi (whilst she was employed as a Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford), in collaboration with Don Slater of the London School of Economics (see Slater & Tacchi, 2004). The research depended on a network of nine local EAR researchers and Ian Pringle and Savithri Subramanian who were based, at the time, in UNESCO's Delhi office. It also draws on *Finding a Voice: Making Technological Change Socially Effective and Culturally Empowering*, an ARC Linkage Project (project number LP0561848, 2006-2009). This is a collaboration between the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the University of Adelaide, UNESCO (South Asia), and UNDP (Indonesia). In addition there are numerous local partner organisations involved through 15 ICT initiatives. This research project depends on the contribution of three Australian researchers—Emma Baulch, Joann Fildes, and Kirsty Martin—who support and coordinate the contributions of a network of 12 local EAR researchers. Support is also provided by Kiran MS in Delhi and Karma Tshering in Nepal. Seema Nair provides project support from UNESCO's Delhi office. Chief Investigators are Jo Tacchi, Stuart Cunningham, and Hitendra Pillay from QUT, and Andrew Skuse from the University of Adelaide. Full details of the partner organisations and personnel can be found at www.findingavoice.org.

Chapter 9: This chapter draws on content creation activities in the *Finding a Voice* project. A series of workshops have been conducted in Nepal, Indonesia, and India by Jerry Watkins of QUT. Jerry's contribution to thinking about the potential for participatory content creation in this and other research projects has been invaluable. An early workshop in digital storytelling was conducted in India by Tanya Notley and Ben Grubb, also

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Chapter 10: The research reported in this chapter was supported under the ARC's Discovery funding scheme (project number DP0663854). The project also received support from the Queensland Government's Department of Housing. Figure 10.1 is courtesy of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village project. Figure 10.2 is reproduced with permission from: M. Foth & G. Hearn (2007). Networked individualism of urban residents: Discovering the communicative ecology in inner-city apartment complexes. *Information, Communication & Society, 10*(5) (available at http://informaworld.com).

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