Essay

Knowledge Democracy, Action Research, the Internet and the Epistemic Crisis

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This special issue highlights a global crisis rooted in what the editors call "one of the most fundamental ruptures the world has experienced to date." The remarkable proliferation of social media and its underlying conflicts regarding the nature and scope of knowledge has created a crisis in which people doubt the extent to which they share realities with others and feel an enormous strain in being confronted with multiple and rapid fire views of news, politics, cultural circumstances, planetary dangers, and economic and self-interests. Yet, these doubts and strains and confusions exist alongside the capacity of social media to strengthen global connectivity, build cross-cultural empathies, and facilitate building capacity for collaborative systems built on democratic participation that foster the identification of creative solutions to community, national and global problems.

Background/Context

Our essay provides a brief analysis of one action research network's efforts to come to terms with the global epistemic crisis in the context of nurturing the development of knowledge democracies through web-based initiatives. The Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) was established in 2012 through the efforts of a small group of colleagues involved with action research and participatory action research in the US, Canada, and Mexico (Shosh, Rowell, Riel, & Bruce, 2017). To guide the initial organizing, ARNA's leadership drafted a strategic plan which was then approved by the membership at an annual Conference (Shosh et al., p. 496). Beginning in the spring of 2019, ARNA embarked on a new strategic planning process for the period 2020-2025. ARNA's Executive Committee collaborated with a Scenario Planning Team (Chermack, 2011) from Colorado State University (CSU), and a day-long retreat and half-day follow-up were held in conjunction with ARNA's 2019 Conference in Montreal, Canada.

Participants included 10 current and past ARNA leaders, with the scenario planning experience led by a team of four CSU doctoral students. The team presented a report in August 2019, and ARNA Chair Joseph Shosh then facilitated a final phase of planning that built on the report. In September, ARNA's Executive Committee approved a set of four Strategic Priorities, 2020-2025, and four coordinators were chosen, one to chair each priority (J. Shosh, personal communication, September 29, 2019). ARNA's "Strategic Priority #1" calls for developing an ARNA Knowledge Democracy Initiative that incorporates action research-based knowledge mobilization. The first author of the present article (Rowell) is serving as chair of Strategic Priority #1 (Knowledge Democracy and Knowledge Mobilization) and the second author (Call-Cummings) is leading two of the specific initiatives included in this priority.

As an established scholar-activist in knowledge democracy and as a critical methodologist specializing in participatory inquiry, we share a deep commitment to imagining and creating spaces that can facilitate multimodal, democratic dialogue among people and across intersectional difference. As the co-leaders of this initiative, it is our central goal to disrupt and delegitimize dominant and hegemonic epistemologies and work toward a privileging of community-centered ones, through "a shared process of discovery" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 207).

In developing our approach to Strategic Priority #1, we have been working at the intersections of action research and participatory action research, knowledge democracies, internet-based communication technologies, and futures

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planning. This article examines our initial thinking about how best to approach the initiatives associated with the priority in the context of dialogic, internet-based work in contested spaces of epistemology and knowledge mobilization. Our guiding question in the essay is *how can a predominantly internet-based organization explicitly committed to knowledge democratization navigate the storm waters of the epistemic crisis?*

Knowledge Democracy

We see the global epistemic crisis which is the focus of this special issue through the dual lens of action research and knowledge democracy. Knowledge democratization and action research have been 'joined at the hip' for many decades (Rowell, 2019), with action research scholars and theoreticians asserting the importance of a "democratizing spirit of growth and change" (Rowell & Feldman, 2019, p. 1) that lies at the heart of action research (Kemmis, 2010). Yet this democratizing spirit has been shown to have its limits (Fals Borda & Moro-Osejo, 2003; Hall & Tandon, 2015). Important challenges have been raised to theory, practice and values in action research (Stern, 2019), including the sanitizing effects of neo-liberalism on core notions of participatory intent (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). The underlying epistemological assumptions and tendencies towards knowledge colonialization in the social sciences in general (Deloria, 1997; Santos, 2007) also have been critiqued. ARNA's Knowledge Democracy priority is thus situated in a complex context.

We respect critical issues of knowledge decolonization (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2018; Arco, 2017; Curaming, 2017) and simultaneously seek opportunities for intercultural cooperation (Del Pino & Ferrada, 2019). We wish to foster the development of creative solutions to practical problems that draw on multiple perspectives and reflect new shared mindsets that are "neither scientific nor subaltern" (Stern, 2019, p. 446) but are situated in dialogic and dynamic 'Third Spaces' (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006). Yet, in the face of the profound epistemic 'rupture' we all live and work within, how can such intentions be upheld? And given the immense presence and impact of the digital world, how can people with shared goals and initiatives forged through in-person collaborative interactions keep their focus and be productive in the face of repeated deluges of distracting chatter, explicit misinformation, defeatism and cynicism spread on the internet?

Fractures

The broader epistemic crisis has specific contours in varied domains of knowledge production and dissemination, with differing impacts within the varied domains. From printed press publishing to on-line communications and e-publishing, all dimensions of shared discourse and knowledge construction are impacted. We provide a historical glimpse into action research's engagements with issues of epistemological struggle, first without reference to the impact of the internet on these struggles.

For action research, the recognition of "other ways of knowing" has generated tensions in both theory and practice since its earliest days (Noffke, 1997). The dominant narrative regarding its history is that the phrase *action research* came from two "somewhat independent sources" (Corey, 1953, p. 7): namely Kurt Lewin and John Collier. Although both men called for a new kind of research grounded in the need for action to address varied issues of inequality and oppression (Hendricks, 2019), only one of them – Lewin – was a confirmed scholar-scientist-theoretician in the tradition of the dominant paradigm of western science. As such, there is little evidence that Lewin struggled with epistemological diversity. His struggle was with the application of scientific findings to practical actions to address social problems. According to Adelman (1993), "Lewin's ideas on democratic participation in the workplace did not Include any critique of the wider society" (p. 10). This certainly included a lack of critique of the epistemological framework of Western science. Lewin was, in Adelman's words, a "scientific pragmatist" (p. 12) and adopted "an interpretative (of many social perspectives) epistemology melded to a quasi-experimental orientation" (p. 12).

John Collier was a passionate reformer who, although sometimes referred to as "white of skin but Indian at heart" (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5059/.n.p.), cannot be said to have truly lived within Native American epistemology, ontology or cosmology. To this day, the narrative of many citizens within the Navajo Nation is that Collier was not a liberator but an oppressor.[1] This is quite an irony as Collier's work was based on a powerful condemnation of the treatment of indigenous peoples (Hendricks, 2019). Vine Deloria Jr. was a Native American

scholar-activist who blasted the paradigm of scientific neutrality in his 1997 book *Red Earth, White Lies* and thus highlighted the epistemological fracture. In this work, coming 28 years after his groundbreaking book *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), Deloria (1997) wrote of "Native Americans and the myth of scientific fact." He detailed how, through the formation of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society in 1992, a network was built that included "knowledgeable traditional people who brought together the beginnings of a body of information that sheds light on the pre-Columbian history of this hemisphere and perhaps even the history of our planet" (p. xiv). This action might reasonably be said to mark the beginning of formal knowledge democratization in North America.

In South America, the work of Orlando Fals Borda stands as one of the most significant bridges for understanding intersections of epistemological diversity. Rappaport (2017) describes Fals Borda's early work with participatory action research as "constructing alternative epistemologies through dialogic research practice" (p. 148). She calls a key component of Fals Borda's approach "the work of the imagination" (p. 148) and asserts that "the combination of academic and grassroots notions of research into a single process entails . . . the bridging of substantial methodological, conceptual, and epistemological disparities, involving a dialogue between distinct knowledge bases (*diálogo de saberes*) that encompasses not only their contents but also their form" (p. 148).

In the contexts presented above it is clear that issues of epistemological fracture are not new. The fractures discussed take us back more than 100 years. Overall, of course, evidence of conflict over worldviews is as old as the first encounters between humans who had settled in some river valley or on some mesa and those who were still wandering (Armstrong, 2006). What is perhaps new territory for we humans today is the speed at which dissimilar understandings are disseminated (i.e. the role of the internet) and the elevation of the intensity of fears and hostilities associated with encounters of difference. The impact of both these conditions on the undermining (Packer, 2013; Rodgers, 2011) of certainty regarding 'what is true and what is not', even among those in the Global North (supposedly entrenched behind comfortable walls of western worldview hegemony) is profound. The challenge for us now, as Rappaport (2017) examines in relation to the challenges faced in the founding moments of participatory action research 50 years ago, is to take advantage of the confrontations across often incompatible worldviews to produce knowledge (p. 148).

Yet, the fractures described above seem almost tame compared to the toxicity and dangers evident in the current epistemological divide, fueled as they are by the heated atmosphere in cyberspace. The toxicity can infect any efforts to address confrontations across incompatible worldviews. Three points stand out here. First, while the careful reasoning, verification, and replicability of human experience required to develop a scientific body of knowledge take considerable time, the spread of connectivity and the speed of information and misinformation sharing in cyberspace can challenge cognitive capacities to focus (Palladino, 2007). The potential for absorbing the meaning of findings from science as well as the motivation for contributions from citizen science may be harmed. People simply lose patience in an atmosphere of cyberspace frenzy. Likewise, information overload may impair *civic competence* (e.g. the work of Arthur Lupia) as people give up on making informed decisions in the face of competing viewpoints and simply adhere to their preexisting biases. There are now around 6,000 tweets per second sent out on Twitter[2], 23 billion text messages sent daily around the world[3], and equally staggering numbers of posts made to Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Weibo, Reddit and other social network platforms. In this context there is virtually no time for careful reflection, and the larger questions of clashing epistemologies are lost.

Second, today's tensions surrounding news and information are fed by the larger suspicions and efforts to discredit science. The anti-science orientation associated with right wing populism in various parts of the world, including the U.S., is rooted in suspicion and hostility directed towards educated elites, mainstream politics, media, and public institutions (Zakaria, 2016). This orientation seeks to replace evidence and thoughtful analysis with bile and the group hysteria of mass rallies and political propaganda. The current U.S. president has shown himself to be a determined devotee of propaganda principles[4], including the practice of creating the illusion of truth.[5] In this regard, Trump's reelection campaign intends to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on disinformation and propaganda in 2020.[6] In a cyberspace context of almost unimaginable volumes of tweets, posts, and disinformation entries, the whole Jeffersonian notion of informed citizens being the bulwark of democracy needs recalibration.

Third, much of the decolonization discourse regarding de Souza Santos's notion of "epistemicide" (2014) focuses on the crushing of indigenous epistemologies in the Global South by the hegemonic knowledge production practices of the Global North (e.g. Álvarez, & Coolsaet, 2018). Two components of this important discourse in advancing understanding of knowledge production are too often minimized, however. As Arco (2017) describes, "south-south de/postcolonial dialogues" point to the need for a more nuanced view of knowledge production dynamics across

geo-political global contexts. In addition, Hall and Tandon (2017) assert that because so much of the discussion of this component of the epistemic crisis takes place in academic circles, the knowledge being discussed "represents a very small proportion of the global treasury of knowledge" (p. 1). Ultimately, "The epistemologies of most peoples of the world, whether Indigenous, or excluded on the basis of race, gender or sexuality are missing" (p. 1). While there is great merit in these discussions, they seem to miss the dynamic unleashed when differing conceptualizations of knowledge democratization are subject to the power of global connectivity.

Taking Initiative

Against this backdrop of fractures, how might an action research network contribute to creating a global future based on respect for diverse epistemologies and a commitment to building knowledge democracies across varied domains of civic life? And do this from an internet-based platform? For ARNA, the Knowledge Democracy Initiative is a call for a "critical and humanizing pedagogy" (Wood & McAteer, 2017, p. 253) that calls for (P)AR scholars to demand "inclusion, democracy, and respect for local knowledge emanating from lived experience of the specific context and culture" (p. 252). We envision a future in which this inclusion, democracy, and respect is at the center of knowledge creation processes, rather than at the fringes, which is where we see it now.

To get to that future given the current climate of cyberspace toxicity and information overload requires a mix of determination and ongoing critical reflection. In this section we address how we currently see our starting point. Despite the risk of operating in a *narrowcast* context of a highly ideological media platform oriented towards a rather small, like-minded audience (Mooney, 2011), we choose to begin *at the fringes* for the time being for both practical and ideological reasons. Practically, we hope to engage those who have been pushed to the margins and are now surviving and thriving in an existence of structural and economic precarity (Fine, Torre, Frost, & Cabana, 2018; Frost, Fine, Torre, & Cabana, 2019). As Bell Hooks (1989) reminds us, "As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" (p. 15). This is a crucial choice, for "it shapes and determines…our capacity to envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts" (Hooks, 1989, p. 15).

As Visvanathan has written, "The coexistence and dialogue of different knowledges is essential for the survival of a plurality of cultures and the establishment of global democracy" (As cited in Stern, 2019, p. 438). To this end, we will be intentional in creating spaces that "[say] yes to the messiness" (Lather, 2006, p. 48) of epistemological diversity, "to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories." Our intention is to ground the dialogue of the initiative in the expertise gained through lived experience, what Tuck and Del Vecchio (2018) have termed "the complexity of a lived life, the sparks of agency grabbed and pocketed throughout a day, the subtle resistances and overflows, the planned forgetting and the planned unforgetting, the expertise gained in being at the bottom of hierarchies which rely on one's labour and erasure" (p. 81).

We also intend to engage with epistemologies of resistance (Larrabee, 2006; Medina, 2013), of rupture, and of rebirth. As we build spaces for these epistemological dialogues of reconciliation, we believe that the conceptualizations of truth will grow more "multipled, complex, and partial" (Dennis, 2018, p. 109). Again, emancipation from taken-for-granted assumptions often comes through challenges forged by/at the margins:

> One important way to find the contingent nature of a claim to truth is to see if it holds at the margins. Metatheoretically speaking, emancipation involves the critique of taken-for-granted assumptions of power, unity, and truth, with the margins serving as a source of critique and alternative perspective. The truth dialogue, so to speak, must be inclusive of counter-experiences and stories, meaning stories that do not fit and experiences on the edge of the status quo. (Dennis, 2009, p. 66)

While the initiative will seek to build hope through dialogue, we also recognize the importance of uncovering the ontological and epistemological "pain of the past" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2018, p. 2). In the present context, this requires owning the reality of violence attached to the epistemic crisis in order to move toward a more just and peaceful future, for "connecting past, present and future is crucial for groups and individuals to be able to move forward and towards better futures" (p. 4). Ultimately, it is crucial for us to recognize that "Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (Hooks, 1989, p. 19).

In our view, the direction we map out above will require a nimble presence on the internet. Working primarily on one platform (www.knowledgedemocracy.org) but with a strong interrelationship with ARNA's home platform (www.arnawebsite.org), the issues and themes we describe will be evidenced in reports, updates, blogs, and web-based projects that arise through the interactions of ARNA Knowledge Democracy Initiative team members and a larger community of global action researchers and PAR supporters.

Futures

It is too soon to say how the initiative we are launching will play out over the next five years. At present we have focused on four tasks: recruiting team members; articulating a vision for the initiative; reviewing ARNA's web presence associated with knowledge democracy; and launching a pilot project (i.e. the Social Solidarity Project, https://knowledgedemocracy.org/projects-and-events/arna-social-solidarity-project/). This latter item has allowed us to gain experience working together and being responsive to a critical global issue related to knowledge democratization, namely, the global Covid-19 pandemic.

There are many choices to consider in the months and years to come. Our orientation towards working in the margins and embracing the complexities of lived lives in all their messiness will guide our choices. One future project we are considering is based on Call-Cummings' (2015) web-based dissertation. As a doctoral student she realized that although the research she had been doing with a group of 52 'undocumented' Latinx High School Students in rural Idaho, USA was participatory, if she were to then turn her back and compose a five or six chapter monograph that hygienically documented the process and 'findings,' she would be working against the democratic epistemology she embraced. Seeking multiple levels of permission from her academic institution, she created a website[7] that opened up the possibilities for both dissemination and continued participatory knowledge creation with the students with whom she worked. Overall, the approach shows promise for engaging participants in knowledge work, co-constructing curricular opportunities for other groups to engage the findings from the research[8], and deeply documenting processes used for democratic participation, mobilization, and knowledge creation.

A second future project involves community-based and school-based social experiments in strengthening civic literacy and competency. The experiments may involve both web-based and in-person interactions building on the work of Arthur Lupia (see https://www.arthurlupia.com/civic-competence) and others. The efforts here will examine thinking and acting beyond the present "Disimagination Machine" (Giroux, 2014) of American civic life and rebuilding social capacity for imagining a better life. As Giroux puts it, we must reverse "the destruction of social protections and a massive shift toward a punitive state that criminalizes the behavior of those bearing the hardships imposed by a survival-of-the-fittest society that takes delight in the suffering of others" (2014, p. 186). Community-based initiatives are needed that address such a reversal. Here, a dual lens can be employed: a) the swift undercurrent of cyberspace cynicism and personalized attacks on those who seek to pull back the curtain on a society that "views critical thought as both a liability and a threat" (p. 25), and b) the psychology of preferences and preference change in highly charged and competitive political environments (Druckman & Lupia, 2016). How can youth and adults be encouraged to restore historical memory associated with civic competence while being in a sense inoculated against the virus of disbelief, cynicism and hatred? Such a project can be built on the recognition that efforts are needed to practice knowledge democratization in the context of small group relations and social innovation and experimentation rooted in the creation of dialogic spaces, both actual and virtual.

A likely third project involves climate change activism. Evidence of applications of action research to climate change and sustainability is growing (e.g. Lange, 2009; https://www.weadapt.org/subject/participatory-action-research), but much more work is needed. According to the most current research by the United Nations, the inhabitants of this planet have about 10 years to make the changes needed to reduce levels of toxic pollution and planetary endangerment. Climate change activism has grown dramatically, with strong youth involvement in leadership. Action research can contribute to this social movement through encouragement of a critical practice of climate change activism (Kincheloe, 2009). The importance of such a contribution lies in its potential to check "the hidden forms of positivism and dominant power" (p. 107) that may otherwise inscribe the "information work" (p. 107) associated with the movement.

These three projects, and others that begin to emerge, represent a future based on solidarity, hope, and belief in a future beyond dystopian visions. None of it will be easy to accomplish.

Conclusion

We have suggested that the path forward in addressing the epistemic crisis is one that embraces strengthening civic literacy rooted in values of democratic participation. The intensity of the Infowars will not subside in the foreseeable future, so all initiatives seeking to build on the benefits of social media to strengthen knowledge democratization will do so in the face of competing views supporting authoritarian, anti-democratic orientations. The energy of social breakdown, fear, and celebration of greed, corruption, and cynicism will feel overwhelming at times.

In the lead article of this special issue, Jose Ramos (current issue) utilizes four metaphors in examining possible scenarios for the global future. His analysis examines the epistemic crisis as a threat to the very idea of a shared sense of reality and truth. He seeks a way out of the crisis in relation to development of a new notion of a shared global commons, one that respects the diversity of epistemological orientations while also respecting the need for the sound scientific understanding critical to human survival (think climate science and pandemic science). His metaphor of the Permaculture Garden posits the conjunction of a pluralistic worldview and science in which diverse knowledge systems and their unique processes for maintaining rigour are acknowledged and valued.

In an earlier manuscript, Ramos (2017) articulated the important link he found between future studies and action research. While future studies deepened his understandings of many aspects of our futures, he also sought a way to link such understandings with action. Ramos examines the link he has been exploring over the past decade in relation to "situating foresight work in the action research tradition" (p. 827). In this context, what the authors of the present article have described is a kind of "Second-Person Futures Action Research" (p. 828). In its present state of underdevelopment in relation to the broader epistemic rupture at the heart of this special issue, Knowledge Democracy calls for a diverse proliferation of inquiries into possible futures in a process "that leads to actions/experiments that drive further learning and knowledge" (p. 828). The initiative we have discussed and are embarking on is a response to this call.

The broader notions Ramos develops have important implications for those working in the social spaces of action research and knowledge democracy. Embracing knowledge beliefs and practices of the Global South as a way of pushing back against Northern epistemological domination is not enough; attending cultural ceremonies and adopting tribal garb is not a substitute for the explicit recognition that both North and South are at-risk in the current dissolution of the notion of a public sphere. Given that the new commons, a global commons, must be based on respect for diverse epistemologies for it to hold steady in the face of phenomena such as public health pandemics or political viruses of calculated misinformation and hoaxes intended to destroy democratic political institutions (Maddow, 2019)[9], the uses of all technologies, including the internet, are challenged to serve a democratically-based public good suitable for planetary survival and a more equitable socio-political future.

Notes

1- Collier is seen this way not because of his belief in action research but because of the Native American policies he enacted as Commissioner of Indian Affairs based on results of action research analyses of the conditions faced by Native Americans. This point is based on a personal conversation with a member of the Navajo Nation. I cannot name the person, as it would be a violation of her tribal norms. She did not have permission from elders to discuss John Collier with me, a non-Native American.

2- Retrieved April 1, 2020 from www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics

3- Retrieved April 1, 2020 from https://techjury.net/stats-about/sms-marketing-statistics/

4- See, for example, https://whowhatwhy.org/2017/02/19/trump-uses-80-year-old-playbook-discredit-media/. Retrieved April 1, 2020.

5- See, for example, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth

6- Retrieved April 1, 2020 from https://www.npr.org/2020/02/11/804855328/the-2020-disinformation-war

7- www.researchforempowerment.com

8- See http://researchforempowerment.com/teacher-interviews/

9- Maddow's chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven document a chilling and detailed look into the disruption of the U.S. 2016 election by Russian military intelligence.

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