Parsing Out Intersections Between Activism and Academia with Alessandra Renzi

Interviewed by Sima Kokotovic

As a part of The Labour of Media Studies conference held at Concordia University in the Fall of 2018, Alessandra Renzi participated in the workshop titled *Ethnographic Research in Media Studies: Practice, Methodology, and Ethics for Fieldwork.* Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University, Alessandra investigates the linkages and relays between media, art and civic engagement through ethnographic studies and media projects. In her projects to date, she has investigated pirate television networks in Italy, the surveillance of social movements since 9/11, and social justice activism in Indonesia. As constitutive aspect of these projects, her research has unfolded mostly through collaborations with activist collectives. As she explains, this approach necessitated reconfiguring some of the basic paradigms of research itself, always been guided by a clear intent to find best possible ways to contribute to ongoing struggles of media activists. With her experience, Alessandra raised some great points during the workshop. This interview presents both a brief reiteration and a continuation of conversations that took place that afternoon at Concordia's Global Emergent Media Lab.

Sima Kokotovic: In your research you've been looking into activist media collectives invested in specific and clearly defined political projects. Could you speak more about the research questions and general concerns that guided you through your inquiries?

Alessandra Renzi: My work is mostly focused on activist media projects, while also paying attention to the surveillance, and the criminalization of social movements in general. I arrived at this kind of research through involvement with a pirate television network that emerged when Silvio Berlusconi became the prime minister and gained a monopoly on over 90 percent of the media in Italy. I joined this network called Telestreet, both as someone who was interested in contributing to the project, and as someone interested in studying it, since at the time I'd just been accepted in a PhD program at University of Toronto. Once I started interacting with these activists who had a rather heterogeneous background, a lot of analytical categories to study social movements that I was familiar with crumbled very fast. They were too restrictive as tools to describe the heterogeneity and complexity that are really a part of social movements.

One of the questions for me, from the outset, was how to contribute. How to shape my research in ways that would provide a contribution to the broader field of research, but would also be useful for the movement itself. So much of the research I'd been exposed to, even when it was in solidarity with the movement that was

the object of study, was still describing and often objectifying it. This approach did not allow me to answer the kind of questions I wanted to ask. Those were questions that had to do with what was happening in Telestreet beyond the fact that this is a movement that emerged when Berlusconi was controlling the media, and when overall media consolidation and media power were becoming increasingly evident. One of the things that was interesting for me was the micro-political transformations of the groups and the individuals involved in the different groups and the way technology itself mediated these interactions. So, I ended up rediscovering the tradition of militant research that is very alive in Italy, called *conricerca*. Through this, my questions changed and shifted, slowly over the years, focusing more and more on the latent practices of resistance that were not necessarily articulated discursively in the groups. These practices became much more evident when one was more involved in the interaction, but also when one was paying more attention to the process and transformation that was happening among the individuals, and among the individuals and technology, as opposed to focusing directly on the outcome of the interaction, the films, the videos, the documentary or even any attempts at shifting media policy.

Could you say more about the ways you were capable to discern and render legible these group interactions and forms of micro-politics that were not clearly articulated by the group members? What were the tools you used to incorporate these concerns into your project?

It was actually a rather painful and long process to assemble different tools that would allow me to crack these almost imperceptible transformations. *Conricerca* itself has a focus on processes of organization and subjectivation. Those are very important topics in conversations within Italian social movements, which often come from the autonomist Marxist tradition and bring together Marxism with a Foucauldian and Guattarian analysis. Within the movement I was involved in, this vocabulary was used daily. People were reading theory. The first Telestreet activist I met

at a national convention was reading *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). There was a certain way of harking back to already present traditions from the 1970s, but also departing from them in many ways. The ideas of subjectivity, subjectivation, of resistance that starts from the bottom, by changing the way people relate to each other and think about social reproduction, these ideas were always there.

However, translating this kind of work onto the page is a project in itself. After two years of fieldwork, the challenge was how to map out these processes and transformations. Thinking about the theories that helped me the most, well, starting from Deleuze and Guattari, I encountered Gilbert Simondon. His work has been key for me to think about the relationship between the individual and the collective, in a way that is nuanced and points to ongoing change and subjectivation—what he calls individuation. Simondon talks about serial transformations not only at the individual level, but also at the sub or pre-individual level, that is, at the level of affects and other psychosocial imperceptible stimuli. He theorizes these transformations as what is constantly producing and reproducing what we call an individual, the collective and society at large. This means that we don't have society as the container that produces and holds the individual and collective; the three are all complex structures that are entangled and emerge simultaneously. What I like about Simondon's work, and other theorists that extend these lines of inquiry, is that they allow me to work across what are usually considered bounded objects of study and to pay attention to the relations and relays among components of social and technical formations. I can also attend to moments of mediation, and not only among human subjects but also between the inorganic, the technical, the more-than-human. In particular, in the context of my work, it allowed me to think about the role of technical objects, which are very important at so many different levels of the structure. At the time, I was able to consider Telestreet as a complex assemblage that included a variety of different technologies, some of which were already existing, dominant technologies, some of which have been created by the hackers, by the

people in the movement. It allowed me to analyze how all of these technologies function in terms of relations between pirate and the mainstream television but also other technologies, activist groups and spaces. In this sense, much of the work of describing and mapping out these transformations, teasing out minute details of these relations has been done in the process of writing. With respect to how one talks about an ethnography of these kind of transformations, I think this framework works really well for writing about them. For me, as a media activist, as someone who was trying to create an activist intervention with the book (Renzi, forthcoming), it was also really important to think through storytelling as a process, and how to animate these relations through it. Also, through Simondon, I discovered a variety of other theorists who were also thinking about these practices, the role subjectivity, and how that can be animated and thought through both in terms of research and in terms of relaying the politics of organizing. Isabelle Stengers has been really important for me, as well as Autonomist Feminists that are thinking about social reproduction and antagonistic social reproduction, while paying attention to not only practices of subjectivation but also infrastructures allowing subjectivation.

On few occasions, when I was involved in a political action that is not related directly to the immediate material conditions of my existence, I found myself speculating what would happen if I am to bring the perspective that underlies this political action to the immediate environment of mine. What I want to ask you here is, have these critical tools, and the methodological apparatus you have developed, especially in the context of narrativizing the micro-political dynamics you encountered during the field work, have they made you reflect back on the conditions in which you are doing your work, and I mean here specifically about the environment of North American Academia?

Yes, absolutely, and this happens both in terms of self-reflexivity and feminist politics of locating yourself within the research. I find it important to stress that these two things are not the same, and it's probably worth addressing both. In terms of positionality, I have to say I am not a big fan of straight up, one to five paragraphs, where I will write "I'm a white CIS woman" and so on. Some people do that very well, and it is important and great that they do it. It just doesn't work well with the way I write, and the way I approach my identity and also my understanding of the role of identity politics today. This said, there are ways in which I constantly reflect on my position, the position of power and privilege during the process of research, first and foremost. I've talked above about the pirate television network, but since then, I have been involved with different projects where I had to shift my role between being an activist and being researcher, constantly blurring the boundaries between the two. This might actually be easy to do from one's own position but can be quite confusing for others. So, I do constantly reflect on what is my position, what kind of consequences it has for the people I'm working with and how it can be used to our advantages, mine and the people I am working with. This is both a tool and a problem to consider, from the perspective of ethics, of honesty, especially intellectual honesty. But also, creatively, it can become a way to adjust the lenses, to allow for the new insights into the research project. For example, on the one hand, I might be able to access certain spaces and institutions, and extract knowledge from those which could be useful for the group I am working with. On the other hand, in some cases, it might be better if I am not visible at all, and do not take up any space. In this sense, as a part of research, this self-reflexivity is a part of methodological repertoire that I have to think about.

In the context of writing, this doesn't always happen, but in certain cases it has been very useful for me to include myself into a narration and analysis. If one talks about individuation, and subjectivation, and one is part of that relation, it is important to address how you function as an apparatus, as a way to make meaning and to draw attention to certain things. In the context of the Telestreet project, apart from being honest, it was useful for me to insert myself because I was able to use myself as an example to describe and make assessible certain kinds of

transformations that were happening. Through me, as someone who has used camera, I was able to speak about the affect, the emotions, the sensations, and the fear or the pleasure involved in collaborative production. In the context of the work I've been doing in Indonesia, I found it more useful to insert myself in another kind of inquiry where I'm not necessarily writing and extracting too much knowledge from the groups I am working with. These groups are more vulnerable, especially in the country that is a democracy with residual traces of the former dictatorship. It is also connected to the fact that my position allows me to access institutional spaces where I can produce a different kind of analysis. Instead of just talking about the work that, for instance, one of the groups I work with, Urban Poor Consortium, does, I can talk to city officials and figure out what are their smart city policies that displace the poor. In this way I can write about the gentrification of the urban environment and then draw out the consequences that this kind of processes, usually described as positive forms of development, have on the erasure of people already inhabiting those spaces.

How did this research experience inform your understanding of militant research in the context of contemporary academia?

Think about the militant research on the level of methodology, there is the question of the way in which you produce knowledge, and whom you produce not only for but with. There is no longer an excuse to produce knowledge for or on behalf of people, if they want to be involved. This relationship has been changing significantly. Militant research is becoming more about holding space for the groups as opposed to speaking on their behalf. "Nothing about us without us." No researcher has an excuse, anymore, to say how this is not possible, because there are ways to do it. And this is the case for a range of fields. From race studies to disability studies, there are scholars doing this kind of work quite well. I am not saying there should be no research that does not pertain to one's own positionality, rather, in most cases, what is at stake is creating the space to cite and support those already doing work at the margins of academia, or to facilitate research

with those who are still kept out, for instance by training and funding. Another thing to have in mind would be to think about how to change the role of research. Shifting the role of research from representation to creation, which is a Deleuzian move, as well as a very feminist one. Then, the question is not any more whom has the right to speak about whom, but what does it mean to create knowledge with people? What does it meant to work with those people and then write about the process? At the moment I am trying an experiment to build a participatory video archive, to facilitate different forms of community engagement to media, with the collective in Naples, again. For me, this brings about a couple of questions. One is the question of ties, and how to retain them. What kind of relationship and trust-building process is involved in the context of research? This stands in opposition to a model of scholarship that goes from one project to another. What is at stake here is trying to be more and more immersed in the culture and the struggles of people, and the way they change. This creates the possibility to contribute and think collectively in ways that are useful, while still producing knowledge that is rigorous.

In addition to knowledge, what else can we produce? What infrastructures, what set of practices, what codes of ethics, what archives, what forms of memory? Lately, these are the questions guiding my thinking about militant research.

To end on these productive questions, let me thank you, Alessandra, for your time, energy and the lovely conversation.

References

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