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Media Action Research Group: toward an antiauthoritarian *profeminist* media research methodology

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ABSTRACT

The Media Action Research Group (MARG) is an antiauthoritarian, profeminist (antiracist, anticolonial, queer, trans and anti-capitalist) group of activist-researchers both inside and outside the university, studying autonomous social movement media activism in Canada and beyond. In this article we map a taxonomy of activist-research, illustrating how MARG brings together five specific methodologies—activist-led issue-based research, militant participatory ethnography, feminist community research, prefigurative antiauthoritarian feminist participatory action research (PAFPAR), and autonomous media research—to study how women, people of colour, queer and trans people, and Indigenous people in antiauthoritarian or anarchist-leaning social movements are using grassroots media to support and report on these movements. We find that although MARG set out to create an antiauthoritarian research-activist collective, we are restricted in some ways by the intensification of neoliberalism in the university institution. Nonetheless we are able to conduct transgressive research at the intersection between antiauthoritarian activism and the academy, producing three direct and immediate impacts: within social movements, within media activism, and within the university.

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Introduction

Activist media research has a long history, both in the university and at a grassroots level. Activist-researchers have noted myriad challenges in conducting research in the university. First, there are contradictory political cultures between hierarchical neoliberal universities and horizontal grassroots activist practices (Jeff Ferrell 2009; Uri Gordon 2012; Sandra Jeppesen et al. 2014a; Jeffrey Juris 2007; David Graeber 2004). Second, feminist activist-researchers have problematized research methods that make claims of objectivity but that are often dominated by Western, patriarchal, heteronormative assumptions (Daphne Patai 1991; Michelle Fine 2006; Sandra Harding 1991). Third, while alternative media researchers have noted the domination of media activist groups by those with straight white male privilege (Sasha Costanza-Chock 2012), alternative media research typically does not consider subjectivity. Finally, activist-research acknowledges that neoliberalization of the

university favours a capitalist market logic over strictly academic commitments (Henry A. Giroux 2009; Sandra Jeppesen and Holly Nazar 2012; Sandra Smeltzer and Alison Hearn 2014).

Addressing these concerns, the Media Action Research Group (MARG) is a group of *pro-feminist* antiauthoritarian activist-researchers (terms that will be clarified in this article) who research media activism in our social movement networks. Our methodology incorporates several activist-research practices, with the explicit goal of integrating a better feminist analysis and practice into autonomous media activism research. We align ourselves with social movement studies that have addressed horizontal organizing strategies in anarchist and antiauthoritarian movements (Juris 2007; Gordon 2012), and precarious workers' movements (Massimiliano Andretta and Donatella della Porta 2015). Further, we consider intersectional antiracist, anticolonial, queer, trans, and feminist contributions (Émilie Breton et al. 2012a, 2012b; C. B. Daring et al. 2012; Shirene Eslami and Robyn Maynard 2013; Jamie Heckert and Richard Cleminson 2011) as well as feminist community research (Fine 2006; Patai 1991; Alison Jaggar 2014; Caitlin Cahill 2007; Sarah Lucia Hoagland 1988). Additionally, we follow the many communication scholars who have researched non-hierarchical structures in social movement media, including Indymedia (Bob Hanke 2005; Victor Pickard 2006a, 2006b; Jenny Pickerill 2007; Sara Platon and Mark Deuze 2003), Occupy (Sasha Costanza-Chock 2012; Jesse Goldstein 2012), the 2012 Quebec student strike (Elise Thorburn 2013), anti-austerity protests in Europe (Donatella della Porta 2015), the Arab Spring (Miriya Aouragh and Anne Alexander 2011), the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) or landless movement in Brazil (Paola Sartoretto 2016), community radio (Stefania Milan 2008, 2013), social media (Enda Brophy and Greig de Peuter 2007; Camilo Cristancho 2015; James Curran, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman 2012; Christian Fuchs 2013), and hacktivism (Stefania Milan 2015; Kate Milberry 2012). Integrating these social movement, communications and feminist research approaches, MARG is a horizontal collective organized according to the antiauthoritarian *profeminist* activist practices we study.

We argue that by extending activist practices into university research, we can better support media activist knowledge production with social justice objectives. We first describe MARG's composition and history, critically analyzing how we engage aspects of five specific activist-research methodologies. We then explore some of our successes and challenges, drawing tentative conclusions about the contributions of our research to the movements with whom we research.

Conceptual framework

Several conceptual frames from activism and research inform our approach. We use the term "activist-researcher" to include social movement activists engaged in research and academics engaged in grassroots activism. MARG activist-researchers may be academic faculty, post-doctoral researchers, graduate and undergraduate students, and/or media activists. We work in relationships with community partners that extend beyond the research itself. We privilege the knowledge and research skills of grassroots activists, noting that not all researchers are employed at universities, as activists also conduct research and produce "sophisticated knowledge" (Aziz Choudry 2015, 9). Activist-researchers use activist practices in conducting, archiving, and disseminating research useful to social movements, including: producing zines, community radio, and podcasts; writing for alternative publications; producing online

media; putting up posters, graffiti, and murals; and facilitating community workshops. Activist-researchers employed in universities are also active in campaigns, bringing scarce resources to social movements, including capacities, time, dissemination platforms, and employment opportunities. The boundary between research and activism blurs.

Also key in our research is the term “antiauthoritarian” which describes groups and individuals who struggle against all forms of authority, domination, and oppression, including but not limited to the state (e.g., the military, police), capitalism (e.g., neoliberalism, corporations), racism (e.g., anti-immigrant, anti-Black), sexism, heteronormativity,¹ cis-sexism,² colonialism (e.g., neo-colonial exploitation, anti-Indigenous), and ableism³ (Breton et al. 2012a, 2012b). Because we share the same political commitments, we use antiauthoritarian theories and practices in our research method to explore how media activists use antiauthoritarian media practices. We organize in a horizontal collective defining our collective politics according to five pillars: anti-capitalism, antiracism, anticolonialism, feminism, and queer and trans liberation.

These pillars are not considered silos, however, but intersecting axes of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality is the notion that multiple systemic oppressions, such as racism, sexism, or heterosexism, take place in structural ways in society that have mutual effects and can therefore be considered as intersecting axes of oppression. Intersectionality theory (bell hooks 1981; Kimberle Crenshaw 1991; Sirma Bilge and Ann Denis 2010; Ann Phoenix et al. 2006; Chela Sandoval 2000; Breton et al. 2012a) provides a feminist theoretical framework to interrogate how a range of interlocking identity markers such as race, gender, and sexuality can be experienced by a single individual by exploring points of tension, analyzing systemic (rather than individual) structures. It integrates the work of queer and trans, anti-racist, and anticolonial activists and theorists into feminist thought and praxis. As such, theories and practices engaged by MARG include: antiracist organizing and critical race theory; Indigenous activism and decolonizing or postcolonial theories; radical queer, gender, and trans activism and theories; and anti-capitalist organizing and political economy theory. Building on intersectionality theory to expand our conception of feminism, we use the term *profeminist* (in italics) to indicate groups and individuals who prioritize intersectional feminism as an analytical lens and axis of social struggle; however, this is not determined by nor does it determine their/our identities, as they/we may identify as women, men, queer, trans, gender queer, cis, Black, Indigenous, of colour, and/or white. We follow *Collectif de recherche sur l'autonomie collective* (CRAC) as such:

(*pro*)feminists organize in identity-based affinity groups around issues directly related to their realities, but they are also active in other kinds of antiauthoritarian groups, based on other types of affinity... [and] cross-pollination among groups in the development of analysis and actions. (Breton et al. 2012b, 163–164)

In other words, *profeminism* is based not just on identities, but also on shared intersecting or cross-pollinating political commitments and analysis.

MARG: origins and evolution

MARG was founded by four activist-researchers in 2013 upon receiving a five-year Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The co-founders were two professors and two doctoral candidates; we soon added a long-time community media activist and antiracist organizer, and one of the professors dropped out.

MARG has grown and changed over the years, with the current collective comprised of the original professor and community media activist, a postdoctoral researcher, and two fourth-year Media Studies students. In terms of identities, we are four white cis-women and one cis-woman of colour, aged in our 20s–50s, who identify as queer or heterosexual and share *profeminist* politics. We have created community media partnerships that prioritize building relationships with marginalized activists. As MARG members have a range of intersectional identities, we use “we” or “they” at different points in this article to signify our belonging in the movements we research with, and at the same time to acknowledge that MARG members do not claim to represent all of our participants’ identities and social locations.

We founded MARG to document, support, and analyze antiauthoritarian *profeminist* media activism in Canada, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. A second objective is to develop a research methodology consistent with our activism by creating a university-situated horizontal collective rooted within social movements. A third objective is to develop community partnerships by engaging in co-research with media activists.

Our methodology began with outreach across Canada to build relationships with media activists. From 2014–2015, we held six Radical Media Mixers across Canada (in Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Halifax) with approximately 90 participants. The objective was to develop research questions from the perspective of media activists, acknowledging the limits of academic knowledge as a starting point for social movement research. Through semi-structured group interviews, using participatory activist practices of go-arounds and break-out groups, we asked participants four open-ended questions: (1) to reflect on their media activism, (2) to address current challenges, (3) to brainstorm a vision for the future of media activism, and (4) to suggest how MARG might contribute to such efforts. Participants were offered food, an honorarium, bus or subway tickets, and childcare costs.

We transcribed the audio recordings and coded them in NVivo, with nine themes emerging. To validate preliminary results, we used a participatory two-step process. Step one was internal collective validation. We divided the task of analysis of these themes among the five MARG members, wrote up the findings in working documents, and discussed them in collective meetings to extend and deepen our analysis. Step two was external validation. The working documents were consolidated into one longer document and shared with research participants, inviting them to reflect on, extend, and deepen the analysis. Emerging out of these findings, we developed interview questions for semi-structured interviews with select media activist projects. These interviews are being analyzed using the two-step validation process.

In addition, we currently have two co-research partnerships with media activists. One activist, with the Montreal Media Co-op, has produced blog posts about media activism from a feminist antiracist perspective (<http://www.mediaactionresearch.org/reflections-on-social-media-and-political-work/>). Another, in Halifax, has produced bilingual Mi'kmaq/English podcasts, on topics such as the Sixties Scoop⁴ (<https://pjilasimikmaki.word-press.com/>). The co-research partnerships, radical media mixers, and two-step validation process are the key components of our research methodology.

MARG: toward an antiauthoritarian *profeminist* media activist-research methodology

MARG integrates five specific activist-research methodologies into our work: activist-led issue-based research, militant participatory ethnography, feminist community research,

Table 1. Toward a taxonomy of activist-research methodologies.

Approach	Researchers	Researched	Goals, objectives, effects
Activist-led issue-based research	Activists producing situated knowledge on social issues	Corporations, the state, policy, laws	Advocacy, influence government policy, shape activist strategies for social movements
Militant ethnography	Militant activist-researchers engaged in direct-action social movements	Radical direct-action social movements	Document, reflect, and strategize on social movement organizing
Feminist community research	Feminists	Women in marginalized social locations	Empowerment of marginalized women through co-research
CRAC: <i>PAFPAR</i> within social movements	Antiauthoritarian <i>profeminist</i> militant activists in horizontal research collectives	<i>Profeminist</i> practices in radical direct-action social movements	Collectively self-document, reflect, and strategize role as <i>profeminists</i> in direct-action movements
Autonomous media research	Media and communications researchers	Autonomous media texts and practices in social movements	Analyze radical media content, discourses, practices, and economies
MARG: <i>PAFPAR</i> within autonomous media activism	Antiauthoritarian <i>profeminist</i> militant activists in horizontal research collectives	<i>Profeminist</i> autonomous media activist practices	Collectively self-document, analyze, and support autonomous media practices of <i>profeminists</i> through community-led co-research

prefigurative antiauthoritarian feminist participatory action research (PAFPAR), and autonomous media research, as shown in Table 1.

Activist-led issue-based research

Aziz Choudry and Devlin Kuyek (2012) argue that activist-led research happens when grassroots activists outside the university engage in social issue-based research to glean information for campaigns. Activist-researchers in universities work with grassroots researchers to support their knowledge needs (26). Relationship building is a key component of activist-led issue-based research, and situated activist knowledge must be considered legitimate by academics (26). Their work draws on experiences in the anti-globalization movement, during which they analyzed government and trade documents alongside grassroots activists in New Zealand and Canada who used this research to contest proposed policies, laws, and trade agreements (28–32).

This approach informs MARG's research, as we work with grassroots media activists, offering a platform for sharing challenges and best practices at our radical media mixers. We value the situated knowledge of social movement media activists, by engaging them as research participants, hiring them as research assistants, and creating co-research partnerships. Issues-based research does not focus on the social movement itself, but on the issues being contested.

Militant ethnography

To research the process of activism, militant participatory ethnography may be used (Juris 2007, 164). Juris describes the commitment of academics to direct-action activism where the divisions between activist and academic are blurred, basing his observations on his own activist experience in a group called Movement for Global Resistance. He argues that an activist-researcher can best understand the "logic of activist practice" (165) not as an

interpreter of actions from an objective distance, but rather as an actively engaged social movement participant, “helping to organize actions and workshops, facilitating meetings, weighing in during strategic and tactical debates, staking out political positions, and putting one’s body on the line during mass direct action” (165). The activist-researcher must “become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking” (165). Building on this participatory emphasis, Uri Gordon (2012) advocates that we “meaningfully involve other members of the anarchist community in the generation of research questions, outputs and analyses” (86). The activist-researcher must both engage deeply in movements and also involve activists in research.

In MARG, most of us have gained social movement knowledge through experience, bringing this knowledge into our research, and also bringing grassroots activist practices into our research. These practices include rotating facilitation and note-taking during meetings, consensus decision-making, anti-oppression politics, and a relational ethics of care, to be described later.

In addition to internal processes, based on research participant input, we organized a three-day Media Activism Research Conference (MARC) in May 2016 featuring skill shares, workshops, panels, and a pop-up media arts exhibition. The “pay what you can” conference included food throughout, honoraria for presenters, and reimbursement of travel expenses. This is a two-way street—MARG employment positions and partnerships are both research and media activism; we use research processes to co-create knowledge with media activists, to share this knowledge with broader communities, and to build capacity and skills for media activists. We disseminate our results through community activist networks more than academic conferences. For example, we have facilitated workshops at media activist conferences such as the National Community Radio Conference in June 2014 (Victoria) and the Allied Media Conference in 2014 (Detroit); anarchist research-activist conferences such as the North American Anarchist Studies Network in 2014 (Vancouver) and the Anarchist Studies Network in 2016 (Loughborough, UK); antiracist research-activist conferences such as Incite: the Color of Violence in 2014 (Chicago) and Facing Race in 2016 (Atlanta); and student activist workshops such as Scholar-Activism in 2016 (St. Catharines) and Organizing Equality 2016 (London, ON). We also participated in organizing and facilitating the People’s Media Assembly at the People’s Social Forum in August 2015 (Ottawa). In these types of activities and conferences we see the border between academic and activist blurring. Moreover, through these actions we have developed relationships of trust and legitimacy with other media activists who have come to see that participation in our research does not mean their work will be used merely for academic gain. Instead they see how academic resources (such as MARG’s contribution of work hours to these organizations, discussions generated in our radical media mixers, community co-research projects, the Media Activism Research Conference, and dissemination of ideas about their/our work in activist conferences) can be used to co-create new knowledge and develop reciprocal relationships beneficial to media activist communities and research growth. Thus our militant ethnography situates us within movements, and brings movements into research, with mutual benefits.

One shortcoming of militant ethnography, however, is that there is an underlying presumption of the universal subject (often presumed to be cis, straight, white, male, and able-bodied). This vagueness risks rendering women, Black people, Indigenous people, people of colour, queer and trans people, and/or other marginalized groups invisible. MARG therefore profoundly engages with key strategies from antiracist feminist and queer

community activism and research methods, including intersectionality, relational ethics, and anti-oppression practice.

Feminist community research, relational ethics, and anti-oppression politics

Feminist community research re-centers the subjective knowledge of gendered, racialized, queer, and Indigenous identities or experiences (M. Brinton Lykes and Alison Crosby 2014, 153), and can contribute key feminist approaches missing from militant ethnography. By calling the presumed universal subject position into question, it prioritizes questions regarding who gets to speak, who participates, and who exercises power. Feminist researchers have long “sought to create participatory processes that include and engage local knowledge systems in order to effect transformations in inequitable social relations and structures of power” (Lykes and Crosby 2014, 147). For MARG, we integrate two key practices from feminist research into our collective work: relational ethics of care and anti-oppression practice.

Challenging or extending traditional approaches such as procedural or situational ethics, feminist researchers have developed ethical approaches that integrate ethics into the day-to-day research practice. Accountability emerges through dialogues between researchers and participants, with participants considered co-researchers, building in mutual respect, trust, and care. While militant research relies on respect and trust, it risks neglecting the element of ethics of care. Rosemarie Tong (1995) examines the gendering of research ethics, which traditionally considers the source of ethics to be “autonomous man” (with a rational, intellectual, rights and rules emphasis). Challenging this, feminists have proposed the notion of “communal woman” whose ethical practices are based on relationships, cooperation, and responsibility to others. As antiauthoritarian feminists we refute the gendered assumption that females are nurturing while also embracing the practices of nurturance and extending these practices to be taken on by people of all genders. We deconstruct the binary autonomous man vs. communal women, integrating the autonomous with the communal in autonomous collectivity. Translating this into research practice, MARG has created an autonomous research collective that engages in practices of communal care and accountability.

Alison Jaggar (2014) calls this relational ethics—nurturing relationships within the research team as well as among researchers and participants. She argues that feminist research ethics are aimed at achieving social justice by working toward the elimination of oppression. Similarly, Sandra Harding (1991) argues that researchers should replace the presumed value-neutral stance of knowledge production with one that admits to its value-orientation, and can therefore be explicitly emancipatory. Fine (2006) argues that research can be a method of disrupting power relations of dominance, a central practice in *profeminist* antiauthoritarian methodologies. Thus there is a link between an ethics of care and dynamics of power.

In addressing power dynamics, MARG uses a second practice, anti-oppression politics (AOP), “a set of politicized practices that continually evolve to analyze and address constantly changing social conditions and challenges” (Donna Baines 2007, 20). Within AOP, two important concepts shape our practice—social location and intersectionality—clarifying mechanisms of systemic oppression, exploitation, and violence. An individual’s *social location* is comprised of multiple factors such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, sex, sexuality, socio-economic status, age, dis/ability, religion, etc. Each axis of identity carries the potential for privilege or oppression. Multiple *intersectional* privileges and/or oppressions can be experienced in one person’s

life, sometimes shifting across time, geographical location, employment, or life stage (73). Identities play out along “axes that intersect, whereby one form of oppression/privilege takes place in the context of others” (Breton et al. 2012a, 157). Therefore, in some feminist methodologies, including the feminist community research approach engaged by MARG, “anti-oppressive analysis is concerned with how these multiple and intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression interact with one another” (Baines 2007, 73). Moreover, while systems of privilege and oppression may appear to be maintained by institutions or people in powerful positions, in fact “individual everyday participation in these inequalities and injustices is a critical factor in maintaining them” (2007, 73). On a micro level, as Breton et al. (2012a) emphasize, “internal group dynamics are related to privilege and power” (155).

Using AOP, MARG recognizes the stratified composition of social movements, and challenges power dynamics within media activist groups and our own activist-research collective, acknowledging differences in experience among collective members and research participants, and attributing value to knowledge derived from media activist and grassroots organizing experience. This challenges the dominant expert model of knowledge production where degrees, publications, grants, and university positions consecrate the capacity for knowledge production (Leah Lievrouw 2011, 177–213).

In MARG we use AOP to share opportunities for data analysis and dissemination, valuing everyone’s input in meetings through the use of “go-arounds” where each person speaks in turn. We have check-ins and check-outs to start and finish our meetings, opening a space for collective members to share something personal. Each collective member expresses which projects and tasks they prefer to take on, conferences to attend, and the like. Rather than assuming we are all the same, we acknowledge that we can contribute different amounts of time, energy, and responsibility, that we have different interests, capacities, experiences, and knowledge, and that we may want to take on different roles and tasks. Specifically, we recognize that full-time academics, such as the professor and the postdoc, have greater responsibility, capacity, and access to institutional forms of power than research assistants who work 10 hours per week. These differences are taken into consideration and discussed explicitly when organizing our collaborative work. Aspiring to horizontalism, we can only achieve it through acknowledging pre-existing hierarchies and differences in our employment situations, challenging hierarchies as much as possible, and recognizing our own limits and capacities, thereby creating relationships that challenge oppression and develop ethical relations of care.

We also use AOP and an ethics of care in developing relationships with research participants, who are part of our communities and social movements. Media activism is predominantly unpaid or underpaid labour, and marginalized groups struggle economically to maintain successful media projects and personal economic well-being. To work with MARG members, who have paid employment and access to research funding, has led to long discussions of anti-oppression practices between academia and activism. We have developed strategies to attempt to share this privilege; for example, in our radical media mixers, we offered participants an honorarium, food, and funds for transportation and childcare. In our one-on-one interviews, we also offer participants an honorarium. We provided food, transportation, and honoraria for conference presenters at MARC. Further, we are developing paid co-research partnerships with media activists.

The Mi’kmaq podcast can be taken as a particularly salient case study of how autonomous media projects can produce community research in an attempt to disrupt unequal power

relations between the university and the community (Fine 2006). We teamed up with a member of the Elsipogtog First Nation and Halifax Media Co-op to support a podcast created by and for Mi'kmaq people,⁵ offering employment with MARG and providing support for training in podcast writing, recording, editing, and production, as well as website development. While there is an inherent power dynamic, because the university is part of a historically colonial education system implicated in the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples, and moreover MARG holds the research grant and employs the co-research partner, in using AOP and a relational ethics of care we attempt to mitigate these dynamics. The research is community-led, based on the leadership of a particular Indigenous activist and media maker. She proposed to create a podcast, outlining what supports she needed, and we worked together to provide them, taking care not to put any constraints on her project, and spending time getting to know her as a person (not an employee or research participant, as the university might label her). We act in solidarity as settler allies, supporting the Indigenous-led documentation process according to the activist's objectives, including the desire to work in her own language. The podcasts, of which eight have been produced thus far, have garnered attention in social media⁶ and Indigenous media⁷, and have thereby rendered Elsipogtog community activism and experiences, and the Mi'kmaq language itself, more visible. It is this visibility of marginalized voices and groups that is one of the key goals of our research partnerships, and we believe it is a successful example of decolonizing research methodologies (Linda Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). Patai suggests that for research to properly address power dynamics it must be "at all stages genuinely in the control of a community, with the community assuming the role of both researched and researcher" (1991, 147). It is this that we believe we have achieved through the podcast project. The research took place through interviews the media activist conducted with her community members, and the results are not mediated through academic interpretation, but rather broadcast directly over the Internet in the podcasts she created.

PAFPAR

As we have shown, MARG has combined aspects of activist-led issue-based research, militant ethnography, and feminist community research. We integrate these elements into a methodology called "prefigurative antiauthoritarian feminist participatory action research" (PAFPAR), developed by the Montreal-based research collective CRAC.⁸ By researching in and with antiauthoritarian *profeminist* social movements in a horizontal research collective, CRAC had the objective of prefiguring an antiauthoritarian *profeminist* future in the here and now. Prefigurative politics is the notion that we can enact an ideal form of political organizing (including an activist-research practice) by putting antiauthoritarian values into practice today, rather than demanding that institutions (e.g., the neoliberal university) make changes so that we can live (or research) differently (Breton et al. 2012a, 2012b). Taking social movements as the object of analysis, CRAC produced a case study on autonomous media uses by antiauthoritarian *profeminist* activists in Quebec (Sandra Jeppesen et al. 2014b). Building on this work, MARG adapts the PAFPAR methodology developed by CRAC, engaging feminist horizontalism and prefigurative politics in our research practices, among other practices described earlier, to research with social movement media activists.

MARG: autonomous media research using PAFPAR

MARG then adapts and extends the CRAC PAFPAR methodology to further study autonomous media beyond Quebec, in the global context. Autonomous media is a specific antiauthoritarian form of independent or alternative media that is explicitly anti-capitalist (John Downing 2004; Sandra Jeppesen 2012; Andrea Langlois and Frédéric Dubois 2005). Sandra Jeppesen (2016) defines autonomous media as follows:

First, they are part of broader *grassroots* antiauthoritarian, militant or autonomous social movements. Second, they are *anti-capitalist* not just in content but also in funding models, which are both anti-corporate and not for profit. This anti-capitalism is often linked to an anarchist, left libertarian, Marxist or socialist political perspective. And third, they exercise *collective autonomy* in their political, cultural and decision-making models, structures and practices, which are prefigurative, directly democratic, horizontal and rooted in anti-oppression politics on issues of race and colonialism, class, gender, sexuality and disability. (385)

Autonomous media research critically analyzes both the products and practices of autonomous media and their social movement uses (Chris Atton 1999; Downing 2004; Stephen Duncombe 1997; Juris 2005; Pickard 2006a, 2006b; Scott Uzelman 2005).

Very little autonomous media research, however, has focused on the contributions and challenges of queer, trans, women, Black people, Indigenous people, and/or people of colour engaged in autonomous media activism. But there is a need for this, as Costanza-Chock has found that the openness of autonomous media can—contrary to expectation—sometimes work against inclusivity: “truly equitable participation in formally open processes is still always structured by race, class and gender inequality” (2012, 383). Referring to media production processes arising in the Occupy movement, he observes that:

Processes that are “open” are thus typically dominated by white straight males, by those with class, race and gender privilege, including access to free time, feeling empowered to speak in public and today, by increased access to digital literacies and ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies]. (383)

On the other hand, CRAC’s case studies found that feminist, queer, trans, anticolonial, and antiracist micro-cohorts are very active in the antiauthoritarian movement in Quebec, including media activism (Eslami and Maynard 2013; Sandra Jeppesen, Anna Kruzynski, and Coco Riot 2016; Jeppesen et al. 2014b). We need to be attentive to the ways in which oppression and privilege play out in the production processes of autonomous media, rather than assuming that, because it is autonomous and thus committed to antiauthoritarian horizontal prefigurative politics, those aims are a priori achieved. Rather these political objectives may be achieved by the micro-cohorts mentioned through specific media practices and processes that challenge the power dynamics identified by Costanza-Chock. This is the primary research question that MARG addresses, by integrating our other two objectives (community partner co-research, and methodological innovation) in the process.

MARG: between activism and the academy

We have shown how MARG seems to be rooted in two different worlds, working between activism and the academy. Table 2 illustrates how we attempt to deconstruct this binary, suggesting tentative resolutions for some of the challenges and tensions identified earlier. First, we note that the binary researcher/activist is not neutral; the term “researcher” is privileged, as it connotes a social location presumed to hold power, whereas an “activist” is

Table 2. MARG: between activism and the academy.

Issue	The academy	MARG	Activism
Who has expertise to research social issues	Academics and graduate students	Academics, graduate and undergraduate students, media activists	Community-based media activists
Who goes to conferences	Academics and graduate students	Academics, graduate students, media activists, undergraduate students	Community-based media activists
What kinds of conferences	Academic	Academic, media activism workshops, mass mobilizations, social forums, general assemblies, etc.	Media activism workshops, mobilizations, social forums, general
Who has decision-making power	Principal Investigator (PI) on the grant	MARG collective, media activists, community, PI on some administrative issues	Community-based media activist collectives
Organizational management	Top down: university hierarchy, employee code of conduct, human resources (HR), labour law, funding guidelines, etc.	Collective autonomy, consensus process, horizontalism, prefiguration; but also responsible to university hierarchy, HR, labour law, funders, etc.	Collective autonomy, consensus process, horizontalism, prefiguration

presumed to have less power, lower social status, and reduced economic capital. Second, as the research cited earlier suggests, we can reverse this binary, privileging the activist as a site of sophisticated knowledge production, an empowered researcher—an activist-researcher. Third, we see that the binary is not oppositional but complementary, in other words, the binary breaks down as such under close observation. Activist-researchers integrate practices from the academy and activism as they meet our objectives in producing research that supports activism. Indeed, research can be a form of activism, and activism can be a form of research. Therefore, we conclude that for activist-researchers there is in fact no gap between research and activism, as it is a false binary, and instead we see it not as a dualistic or hybrid subject-position but as a multiplicitous one whereby activist-researchers are activists, researchers, feminists, media producers, workshop facilitators, and more.

At the same time, we do share some self-reflective critiques of the tensions faced in this multiplicitous subjectivity of the activist-researcher, including challenges to our capacity to conduct horizontal activist-led research. We emphasize the development of relationships of care and trust between researchers and researched, attempting to deconstruct this false distinction; however, it is sometimes difficult to overcome the material conditions of existence inherent in structural power dynamics between university-based researchers, who typically have greater social, economic, and institutional power, and members of the communities we research with, who typically have comparatively less of these. While attempting to deconstruct these structural power dynamics through horizontalizing our research process, we acknowledge that our work is not perfectly antiauthoritarian, as we are still constrained by material conditions of inequality caused by the oppressive structures we struggle against.

MARG: direct impacts of research

In this article we have demonstrated that MARG's methodological approach attempts to fill gaps in research by integrating activist-led issues-based research, militant ethnography,

feminist community research, PAFPAR, and autonomous media research. We have argued that by bringing activist practices into university research (horizontalism, consensus decision-making, attentiveness to power dynamics, AOP) and bringing research approaches from marginalized communities into our collective work (e.g., the Mi'kmaq podcast project), we are better able to achieve positive social transformation through research.

We achieve social change directly through the projects and partnerships undertaken by MARG, which have immediate impacts in three different spheres. First, in the sphere of social movements, activist-researchers in MARG apply knowledge from research to social movement organizing, for example, working with the People's Social Forum, Incite, and Organizing Equality. Second, in the sphere of media activism, our research practices (radical media mixers, co-research projects, Media Activism Research Conference) generate direct impacts for media activists by opening spaces that support the transformation of media activist work and networks. Third, in the sphere of the university, the methodology directly creates prefigurative horizontal research practices, directly creating change in university research. These three impacts are direct and immediate: we are not making demands for future reforms or relying on publication of our results to create change; rather change comes as we research through engagements with social movements, media activists, and activist-researchers.

This research methodology is not without challenges. It requires more time than the efficiency-oriented research methods favored by the neoliberal university, such as single-author articles and books written with little to no community relationship building. In spending the time it takes to build and nurture relationships with media activists, developing research questions, and validating our findings in collaboration, MARG resists the speed imperative shaping neoliberal academic knowledge-production regimes (Kamilla Petrick 2015). Activist-research requires more time than neoliberal imperatives allow, so this temporal resistance constitutes a key component of our militant, antiauthoritarian politics. Time has a second impact, as our SSHRC funding expires after five years, leaving us wondering how we might sustain relationships developed thus far. While MARG may have made a contribution to autonomous media movements through supporting media activist projects and collectively documenting and analyzing their/our work, there is no clear way forward that does not depend on securing further funding. Moreover, even the resources we have secured are finite—we can only develop partnerships with a limited number of media activist projects, and we cannot expand the model as far as we might like, for example, to develop sustainable global research-activist relationships, or to offer permanent paid employment to media activists.

We also face limitations as a university-based collective, as many academic institutions are still dominated by whiteness (Marybeth Gasman 2016; Adia Harvey Wingfield 2016), which limits whom we might hire in the collective, as we have no control over whom the university accepts into their programs. Despite or perhaps because of this limitation, we use AOP in our partnerships to support capacity building among non-white media activists, and engage in antiracist and anticolonial media projects, workshops, conferences, and social movements.

This community-led research is all the more significant insofar as the intensification of neoliberalism in the university is possibly what creates the separation between some researchers and activists that our work attempts to deconstruct. Administrators and governments are pushing education toward intensified capitalist ends, building increasingly vertical structures that replicate social inequalities (e.g., through flexexploitation of sessional

instructors and postdocs, escalating student tuition, imperatives toward monetization of research, and higher salaries for top administrators). Even activist-researchers employed in the university are still workers who struggle not to be alienated from our labor in an increasingly neoliberal institution. Moreover, the neoliberal capitalist system creates clear divisions of labor that bar access to these institutions for community members from myriad social locations, as ingress is increasingly difficult for those with low social and economic capital, systemically restricted along racialized, gendered, ableist, heteronormative, colonial, and class lines. As such, there are clearly limitations in attempting to engage prefigurative horizontal politics within such hierarchical institutions. It is therefore not possible to free our research entirely from hierarchical structures if we wish to remain within the university system.

The question is: How far can we create institutional change by doing things differently within, and simultaneously against, the neoliberal university? MARG is providing well-paid jobs for grassroots media activist-researchers, radical students, and postdoctoral researchers, engaging in co-research with antiauthoritarian *profeminist* community media activists thereby supporting their work and sharing resources, and developing a complex media-activist-research methodology drawing on several research traditions and filling a gap in research that has radically transformed our research practice in the university, creating direct impacts for media activists in the process. As such we are well on the way to achieving our three research objectives—to document and critically analyze *profeminist* antiauthoritarian media activist projects, to develop an integrated, innovative, autonomous media research methodology consistent with and supportive of autonomous media practices, and to develop partnerships with grassroots autonomous media projects, individuals, groups, and networks in order to strengthen them through co-research. Whether these transgressive practices can live up to their potential for radical social transformation over the long term remains to be seen. Given our methodology, at the end of our five-year project we will engage in collaborative reflections with our research participants and partners to address this very question.

Notes

1. The systemic assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and heterosexuality is the presumed norm in society, which leads to discrimination against non-heterosexuals.
2. Discrimination or oppression targeting transgender and transsexual people, where cis-sex or cis-gender refers to a person who identifies with the sex or gender, respectively, assigned at birth.
3. Discrimination against people with disabilities, including the assumption that everyone is able-bodied, and that being able-bodied is the presumed norm in society.
4. The mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families to be placed in foster care or put up for adoption (Fournier, Crey, and Neel 1997); see <http://nbmediacoop.org/2015/06/09/pjilasi-mikmaki-surviving-the-sixties-scoop-audio/>
5. <https://pjilasimikmaki.wordpress.com/>
6. See Edmonton Heritage Council: <https://twitter.com/yegheritage/status/659067151618150400>; and St. George's Bay: <https://www.facebook.com/St-Georges-Bay-Mikmaq-Nujioqoniik-141054435980538/>
7. See <http://www.mmnn.ca/2015/06/new-bilingual-mikmaqenglish-podcast-series-launched/>
8. One of the co-authors of this article was a member of CRAC from 2008–2012, and although CRAC is no longer active, some collective members continue to work together on research and/or activism.

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