PREFACE

The study of activism in many ways fits into the long view of humanity presented by "big history" scholars such as David Christian (2004) and Cynthia Brown (2007). Both have presented a vision of history that is marked by transitions across levels of complexity; this includes the big history of the entire universe, as well as the history of humanity. For instance, in the beginning of the universe, there were only scattered subatomic particles with little in the way of complexity. These particles eventually formed into simple hydrogen and helium atoms, and after three hundred million years the first stars were ignited. In this view, aspects of the universe were becoming increasingly complex. According to Christian (2004, 252), the same holds true for human civilization:

> Transitions to new levels of complexity often depend on positive feedback mechanisms—cycles in which one change encourages another, which stimulates a third, which magnifies the first, and so on around the circle. One of these causal chains played a fundamental role in the transition to larger and more complex social structures. It links population growth, collective learning, and technological innovation. Increasing the size and density of human communities stimulated the processes of collective learning by increasing the size and variety of the networks within which information and goods could be exchanged. The intellectual synergies possible within these larger networks encouraged the development of new and more intensive technologies, which made it possible to support even larger human communities.

In the previous excerpt, Christian refers to the transitions from tribal communities to organized states. The same claims can also be applied to historical changes to activism over the course of human history: increase in the numbers of activists leads to greater knowledge, which can be intensified by technologies. As all of these things increase and intertwine, structures of activism become more complex.

Research by nineteenth-century scholars described activism as a contagious mob mentality (see chapter 1); according to this view, activists were overly emotional people engaged in collective behavior. Although there were significant problems with such early works, these conceptualizations were not entirely wrong. Activism, as observed by these nineteenth-century scholars, did not involve the tools available to activists in the 1960s, let alone today. Early forms of activism witnessed during this time entailed small numbers of people, crude communication technologies, and rudimentary tactics for protest. It is not surprising, then, that observers would find such activist endeavors to be brutish or hysterical. This is not to diminish the causes or endeavors of those earlier activists, but a reminder that much has changed over the past century and a half. The observations of early scholars should not be dismissed as elitist snobbery; their observations provide insight into activism that was less complex than it is today. Over the years, as the number of activists grew across different movements, more sophisticated organizations emerged. As activists developed and employed technologies for communication, they were able to build and link networks. As the tools for the publication of alternative media became more readily available, activism continued to change. Large-scale activist communities have emerged that have constructed alternative visions of the world; the activists in those communities have built structures of knowledge that shape their interactions with the world. These communities are the product of overlapping, networked activists and activist organizations that are engaged in various events and have taken part in the production of mediated texts. Activism has become incredibly complex over the years, to say the least. This increased complexity has given rise to the need for smart approaches to the study of social activism. In an article concerning the connections between activism and dialogue, Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller (2012) demonstrate that scholars have often conceptualized activism as tactics, activity, or principles; they note, "across perspectives and disciplines, however, one finds an emphasis, on contestation as a core aspect of activist communication, and key concepts such as advocacy, conflict, and transgression to be central to activism" (69). For the purpose of this book, activism, in a general sense, is defined as collaborations by people in order to advocate for a position, nurture conflicts in society, or violate or transgress laws or norms in society.

My own experiences demonstrate the need for developed approaches in such academic endeavors. I remember the first time I conducted qualitative research on social activism. I was a graduate student at the University of Missouri and had enrolled in a qualitative methods course in the Department of Communication. One of our research assignments was supposed to include data from at least eight interviews. Based on my interest in activism and social movements, I chose to focus on an activist community in Columbia, Missouri. Initially, I did not think that it would be very hard, as I had written papers for other classes on the subject of activism and alternative media that were well received. For example, I had written a paper for my quantitative methods course on the effects of activist messages in alternative media by conducting surveys of students enrolled in the basic public speaking course; that particular paper garnered a top paper distinction at a conference. I had also written a paper for a (quantitative) content analysis course that explored how highly visible protest activities were often followed by significant changes to terminology used in alternative media content; that paper was later published in an edited volume. As I embarked on this new qualitative enterprise in 2002, I felt confident about my abilities as a researcher. I couldn't have been more wrong. I had to gain access to the activist community, and that was no small task. The chief organizer of one of the central groups within the community would not grant me an interview, and several of the other members of the organization seemed to take his lead and turn down my invitations to participate in the research. As I looked to other activists in the larger community, I learned quickly that many of the more radical activists did not trust outsiders and preferred to not get involved in such academic pursuits; they did not feel as if they could entrust a researcher with sensitive details about their militant activist tactics. Finally, one of my fellow graduate students introduced me to a few of his activist friends, and this, in turn, led to a significant breakthrough for recruiting participants. Those initial contacts snowballed into the eight participants I needed to complete the project; they also served as initial contacts for future research.

To be sure, the difficulties discussed here only scratch the surface of all of the problems that I faced within that initial project. These problems, however, demonstrate the need for a well-developed agenda and approach to the research. My early endeavors were really akin to groping in the dark. I only focused on my interests and blindly sought out participants for interviews. Without a disciplined approach, I was left floundering. Despite these trials and tribulations, I became firmly entrenched in qualitative research methods for my future pursuits concerning social activism. Essentially, qualitative methods enabled me to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of activists as they engaged in actions and campaigns to effect social change; such information was

integral for answering the research questions that I found to be important in my own corner of academia. That first project, however, was not the end to my learning process and growth as a qualitative researcher of social activism. In subsequent projects I struggled with moral dilemmas, difficulties with transcriptions, participant hostility and misinformation, shifts in technology, and the basic human needs for food and sleep. Even today I struggle at times with very crucial problems in the process of conducting research concerning this complex issue. As recently as 2011, I conducted research with conservative Tea Party activists and ran into the same problem of gaining access to organizations and the overarching activist community. This time, however, there was no evident fix to the problem, as boundary maintenance and the adherence to thematic purity among the activists in the community were significant obstacles to my research. In the end, I abandoned my plans for interviews and focus groups with Tea Party activists in favor of a qualitative content analysis of the dominant alternative media they produced and used. Ultimately, I have learned that qualitative research concerning this complex topic is a lifelong process. The longer that I engage in such research, the more I need to work on my methods and approaches to the different sites where activism can be found. Qualitative research is often systematic, but it is also malleable enough so that it can conform to a variety of contexts and situations; qualitative research methods are rarely, if ever, so general that they fit into all research sites. Because of such flexibility associated with these methods, as well as the variety and complexity of sites in which activism takes place, I must constantly work to adjust and hone my own approaches to the study of this important topic.

With my experiences and knowledge about the complexity of activism in mind, I found it quite surprising that no one had written a book that made some attempt to cover or demonstrate qualitative methods in the study of social activism. Such a book would be invaluable to students and veteran researchers who strive to employ various qualitative methods across increasingly complex research sites. Given my experience and background, I decided to take the initiative and write *Journey into Social Activism*. I began by reviewing articles published over the past ten years in communication, media, and journalism journals so as to get a sense of the number of projects that used qualitative methods. A review of articles in the Communication and Mass Media database of Ebscohost revealed two things: First, the vast majority of those articles focused on Western-based activism or were written by Western academics, a fact that is reflected in this book. Second, I found that most of the articles published over the past ten years had employed qualitative methods of some sort (e.g., interviews, ethnography, or qualitative content analysis). Essentially, over 55 percent of the communication, journalism, and media journal sources citing *activism* in that database were qualitative in nature, while the

rest were split between quantitative approaches and articles devoted to theoretical discussions. Apparently, qualitative methods are the dominant tool for communication and media research concerning activism, protest, and alternative media. For my book project, I created an inventory of these articles, as well as numerous books and monographs, and began to comb through each source to identify the methods used by the authors. My goal was to explore not only the methods that were used but also the specific processes by which those methods were utilized. I set out to explore the ways in which the authors applied their methods to their research sites and catalog good qualitative approaches to the examination of organizations, networks, events, and alternative media.

Although I managed to accomplish my task, my efforts were met with a huge problem: many of the articles, I found, had little (if any) description of the qualitative methods used by the researchers. In many cases, the researchers did not even note the method that they used to collect data; they merely stated that qualitative methods were the primary source of data. Although some monographs, such as Nick Couldry's (2000) monograph on media pilgrimages and activism, do a fine job explicating the qualitative methods used, most provide only scant information. At best, discussions concerning qualitative methods in the study of social activism are sporadic and often lack detail or depth. A case in point is an analysis of videos posted to interactive media platforms. In the article, the researchers note that they made use of a "qualitative tool" to aid them in their analysis. "Excellent!" I thought. This was exactly the kind of information I was looking for. The article, however, only included a note that stated that information regarding the tool could be found in a previous article by the researchers. Undeterred, I searched until I found the older article, only to discover a reference that information regarding the tool could be found in yet another cited source. "Fine," I thought, "I will simply follow the breadcrumbs until I find this tool." Sadly, I was defeated at this point, as the reference section of the article showed that the source was a conference presentation; I could find no record of this presentation anywhere else. The point is that many researchers did not provide much in the way of documentation about their methods in the articles and manuscripts that I examined, which made writing this book difficult at times. Nevertheless, my examination of these articles enabled me to find nuggets of information and practice that became the basis for the qualitative approaches to the study of social activism featured here. Using these nuggets and my own experiences, I summarized a series of qualitative approaches associated with different research sites that can be used in the study of social activism. For the most part, these approaches have been used in studies of organized activism oriented toward global or national issues, such as civil rights or war; studies of

that type constitute the vast majority of articles and monographs published over the years. This means that formally bounded examples of activism, such as organizations and prepared protests, are the primary focus of these approaches. Decentralized or less bounded forms of activism, such as lifestyle activism or subcultures, are not dealt with in great detail here. Such forms of activism are important and definitely worthy of study, but wind up conceptualized within the major research sites that are the foundation for this book. Ultimately, *Journey into Social Activism* provides scholars and students with exceptional insight into the use of methods within formally bounded sites of activism, with less discernment concerning those that are more decentralized. Intrepid scholars will hopefully remedy such a limitation through future works with greater awareness of those important sites.

The book is split up into two parts. Part I deals with the philosophical foundations in activist research; part II describes approaches to the study of social activism that have emerged from research conducted by qualitative scholars. As social activism becomes increasingly complex, it is important that researchers engage in their use of qualitative methods in thoughtful ways. *Journey into Social Activism* provides researchers with ideas on how to refine their research approaches and methodologies, if not blueprints for building their own research projects. Given that qualitative methods are flexible and malleable, I have no intention of presenting these approaches as one size fits all. What I present here are ways to think about dealing with the complex topic of social activism: How does a researcher formulate research questions? How are interviews conducted? Who should the researcher interview? How are texts collected for qualitative content analysis? How are qualitative content analyses conducted? *Journey into Social Activism* can help scholars to find answers to these questions, or it can provide tips for developing altogether different questions. How the book is used is entirely up to the reader.