

## Introduction: Positioning Ourselves as Global Communicators

**Katherine Reilly**

School of Communication  
Simon Fraser University

This special issue of *Stream* focuses on positionality as an approach to researching issues in global communication. It is the result of an assignment that I crafted for a graduate course on Communication and Global Social Justice which is part of the School of Communication's Global Communication MA Double Degree program. I have given this assignment for many years, and it has generated all manner of essays, but this spring — perhaps because geopolitics is in the air? — five of the papers addressed positionality in direct relationship to spatial-temporal considerations. This emergent set of papers has been brought together here as an exploration of how positionality shapes researchers' engagements with translocal, transnational, geopolitical, networked or space-making processes.

Positionality considers the historical conditions that give rise to and sustain a person's location within social structures. It shares a close kinship with other critical approaches for understanding social location, such as standpoint theory and intersectionality, and like these other approaches, it can be used to analyze the subjectivity of the researcher in and through their relationship to knowledge production. In the assignment, researchers were asked to position themselves, *as communicators*, vis-à-vis their knowledge production activities. Thus, the assignment challenged the authors to reflect on their work as a communicative act that is both a product of relations of power and a form of engagement with the social world. It offered them the opportunity to reflect on how their projects are a product of their location within a field of epistemic power, and also a substantively ethical endeavour (Madison, 2005) that has implications for the representation of meaning.

While positionality originates in anthropology, and is used across the academy, I find it to be a particularly relevant approach for communications scholars for a number of reasons. As an engagement with epistemic acts, positionality demands that we think carefully about the communicative content of our work, and thus it shines a light on processes of academic content production, the voice and representational work of researchers, our communications channels, and how audiences receive the signals that we send forth. In other words, it presses communications scholars to think of their research as a form of communicational work. In addition, positionality addresses elements of both the social sciences and the humanities, which tend to overlap in the field of communications studies. This is because positionality embraces self-reflective engagement with culture as it pertains to the production of knowledge about our socially constructed world.

Finally, I value the critical element of positionality which encourages us to think carefully about the power of our representations and voice (Takacs, 2002). A favourite definition of communication is “being vulnerable to the humanity of others” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 26) and I believe that positionality gives us the tools to engage in communication in this way.

I also find that positionality is a particularly interesting starting point for research on issues in global communication. One of the central aspects of globalization is the ongoing reorganization of people, time and space, and that means that we find ourselves entering into contact with new and different people in new and different ways with greater frequency. We are often unsure about how power functions in these transactions, and must figure out where we stand – both culturally and materially - and how to express ourselves. Positionality offers us tools to reflect on how (and in what conditions) we enter into these new spaces and temporal relationships, and crucially for communications scholars, it helps us to reflect on how we can deploy the tools of representation within or about these spaces, and with what effects. In particular, globalization often challenges our given positionality and causes us to rethink how we will approach the problem of knowing the world around us, as well as how we can effectively mobilize knowledge to produce change.

We studied some specific frameworks for thinking about positionality in our course, and these can be divided into three moments: positioning one’s self, acknowledging our own agency, and producing engaged writing. Reinharz (2011) suggests that researchers think about three elements of their positionality as they pass through the research process: 1) the research self which examines the academic reasons behind our pursuit of a study, 2) the personal self or how our life histories enter into our research choices, and 3) the situated self which is how we experience the research process. Reinhardt argues that by positioning one’s self, a researcher can better understand how they enter into the research process and how that process in turn shapes them. These strategies are essential to acknowledging our own agency in constructing meaning, and more broadly, engaging with the social world. In this sense, researchers much do more than simply consider their own role in producing a study, but also, as Etherington (2005) argues, recognize that we can be intentional in how we produce that knowledge, and that we can produce knowledge with the intention of creating change in the world. Finally, Clark & Ivanič (1997) offer a way to think about how we convey voice through our writing. They recommend that authors contemplate how their writing reflects personal roots and commitments (autobiographical self), how their writing expresses a sense of authority, presence and responsibility (authorial self), and the positioned voice that we express through our writing (discursive self). These frameworks can be found throughout the five papers presented on continuation, but the papers also push us to think beyond the frameworks taught in the course.

## **Introducing the Papers**

In “A Venezuelan Position on the Bolivarian Revolution,” Douglas Amundaray reveals his experiences as a student and journalist during the political transformation to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism led by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. His paper struggles with the question of who gets to tell the story

of a nation, and which version can be considered 'objective.' He argues that his experiences offer him a unique perspective on the Bolivarian Revolution. They have made him "a Venezuelan citizen with a radical political stance vis-à-vis the current administration" and they have shaped his determination to "challenge power in Venezuela from my own personal standpoint." Amundaray now finds himself living abroad: "when your integrity and safety are somehow compromised, it may be necessary to evaluate your priorities." But though he is not currently living in Venezuela, he rejects the celebratory interpretations of 'outsiders' who write about the Bolivarian revolution without having to live it or suffer its consequences. In this way, Amundaray's paper raises questions about where 'truths' are written from, and how those 'truths' shape our understanding of national projects.

"Long Lost Lore of a 'Land' Called Home" by Gopa Biswas Caesar explores how she can encounter herself and also heal her nation through an analysis of the works of Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Kumar Ghatak. As the child of a bi-national marriage, she literally embodies the trauma of the 70-year-old partition process that separated Bangladesh from West Bengal, a Bengali province in India. And as a member of a religious minority that was created by this process, she has lived the trauma of partition throughout her life. Ghatak's works are the pinnacle of the 'partition film' genre in Bangladesh. These now neglected films offer Caesar a way to make sense of the Bengali collective trauma as well as her own life experiences and observations. As she concludes, "I want to move past a discussion of the technical aspects of film, and to engage in something more than the merely secular and liberal. So my challenge is to figure out how to read Ghatak's works in a way that does justice to my own positionality."

Jarieth Natalia Merced's piece "My Puerto Ricanness: Locating Sovereignty in *La Puerta Bandera*," explores her efforts to locate Puerto Rico's pride in the face of a 500-year history of colonization by Spain and the United States. Though Puerto Rico is a Free Associated State of the United States, Merced argues that, in practice, it remains firmly under colonial control. All the same, she does not see Puerto Rico as a *victim* of colonization: "we are all to blame because our claims of pride for our flag and country remained superficial and did not materialize into a concrete fight for a country of our own." She uses the case of a particularly significant political mural to explore Puerto Rico's expression of national pride during the island's recent debt crisis. The street art, called "La Puerta Bandera" (The Flag Port/Door), uses specific techniques to self-consciously locate itself in the history of muralism in Puerto Rico. It has been amended several times in ways that capture the shifting discourses of activists who fight for Puerto Rico's independence. Through studying the mural, Merced discovers that despite her physical location in the diaspora, "identity knows no boundaries. I have never felt more Puerto Rican than when living outside of the islands."

Sophia Han offers a novel theorization of the relationship between positionality and the construction of space in "The Near and the Related: Reflections on Positionality." She locates her positionality by way of two theoretical tools. The first, "Asia as Method," is a critique of Eurocentric frameworks of thinking about Asian culture and society, and a call for culturally-grounded explanations of Asian experiences. The second is Tobler's law of geography, which argues,

“Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things.” Han uses these two starting points to, as she says, construct the boundaries of her research, and positioning herself within them. You see, Han’s work explores the politics of ‘home’ in the context of Vancouver’s new foreign buyer tax. This new tax was approved in conjunction with racialized debates about “Asian foreign buyers.” Han herself is a Canadian citizen with a Malaysian-Chinese background. So, while she finds herself in proximity to her subject, it is not in the ways we might presuppose. She knows her subject as someone who, like herself, has “engaged in a specific negotiation with state-ascribed categories from the position of a minority” with implications for how they “work with, through or beyond [labels] as they locate the idea of home in their transnational experience.”

Finally, in “Positioning Myself Between West and East,” Xinnan Shi considers how her experience studying abroad, outside of China, has shaped her research about the impact of media technologies on education. Shi explains that her experience in the multicultural West has opened her eyes to the diversity of the Chinese diaspora. This has given her a new appreciation for the complex dynamics influencing the representation of political issues in her region. Her work—which examines representation in the English and Chinese Wikipedia entries on Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution—has become richer as a result. These protests are themselves an episode of geopolitical struggle, and that struggle is mirrored in debates between Wikipedia editors who come from different parts of the Chinese diaspora and beyond. Her experiences in Vancouver have caused her to wonder “how Chinese from different regions think about the Umbrella Movement” and “how they might express their views about these events online in different contexts.” These preoccupations have led her to focus on how knowledge is shaped through online negotiations, and what this means for the representation of geopolitical or historical events in education materials.

As these five papers reveal, it is a great pleasure and an honor to be involved in SFU’s Masters in Global Communication. I hope that they move you to consider your own positionality as a communicator, and that this brings you greater awareness of the world around you and your role in it. Certainly, the very provocative and creative intellectual efforts of the students in this program have done this for me!

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