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Practitioner Q & A

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Social Activist, Journalist, Professor

Biography

Chenjerai Kumanyika is an Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies in Rutgers' School of Communication and Information, where he focuses on the intersection of social justice and the creative and cultural industries. In addition, he is Co-Executive Producer and Co-Host of Gimlet Media's podcast *Uncivil*, which explores the Civil War and the historical and societal constructs of race in the United States. He has also contributed to *Transom*, *NPR Codeswitch*, *All Things Considered*, *Invisibilia*, *VICE*, as well as being a frequent contributor to Scene on Radio Podcast's *Seeing White* series.

Question: *How do you plan on creating lasting change as a way to promote a sense of sustainability for your cause or movement in an effort to prevent setbacks?*

Answer: I'm glad you raised this question of sustainability because I think this is really important during this particular political moment. Right now, I think engaged scholarship, participatory action research, and organizing efforts will exert the most

leverage when we engage in collective sustained campaigns that allow us to take back institutionalized power. It is also true that there's a multiplicity of modes of resistance. Responding to some urgent political developments means that some assemblages take a particular shape temporarily and then change form or even go away. But I think that can't or shouldn't be the main thing. Broadening out a little, with so many oppressive policies in areas

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**This article was transcribed from a recorded interview and has been published with the consent of the interviewee*

such as economics, foreign policy, ecology and science, immigration, public education, threatened reproductive rights, media access, criminal justice, LGBTQ rights, there's a real risk of becoming exhausted or only committing to sporadic forms of resistance. One problem of sustainability in this extremely dynamic media environment is the problem of producing a sustained and shared analysis of our most important social problems. Broadly, I try to use various forms of storytelling as a kind of public-facing pedagogy, as Henry Giroux¹ might put it. In my research and teaching in critical media studies, and in my journalism work, I've seen how radio storytelling and essay writing can help to build lasting communities through deepened education. Often this work is historical. I also try to point to and address ongoing local resistance struggles in a more sustained way than they are focused on in mainstream media.

Now this is not going to be a new idea, but things that are local are important. Something that focuses on the collective means that you can distribute the work. A lot of the images we see that focus on activism are groups of individuals going out and participating in protests, sometimes civil disobedience, and producing media individually. I applaud and support this. We need more of it. But if they're not organized, that quickly leads to people getting burned out or even being hurt in various ways without sufficient support. I experienced this myself with some of the initial activism I was doing when I was driving to a place and live streaming the event. Traveling to Ferguson, New York, and Ohio, and places kind of far from where I lived at the time,

there was a risk of being a kind of activist or media struggle "tourist" and that kind of life was less sustainable than actually working in my area. When you coordinate with other people, working as a collective, you can distribute responsibility. You can take into consideration people's work schedules and people's home lives—the different distributions of labor within the home—and figure out a way to get it done. So, keeping it collective with a relationship to your local area is important. The sad thing is, with the pervasiveness of police violence, and things like that, these issues are likely to come to wherever you are at some point and you will have this Black Lives Matter moment in your town no matter where it is. Even if the person isn't black. I've learned that almost everywhere there are people with progressive values trying to fight for a sustainable, equitable world. In some locations it might be a very small group of people which is all the more reason to support them. Philadelphia is different. There are many organizations that have found ways to work together on local problems. Three organizations that I'm excited about are 215 People's Alliance,² the Media Mobilizing Project, and the Philly SUN [Schools Unifying Neighborhoods].³ They're focused on things such as taking back control of schools and getting a local district attorney elected, the person who has power over police officers. There's a lot of good community folks involved and it's right in my neighborhood. Someone once told me that we want to try to be like a pilot light rather than a fire cracker.

To add something else, I also focus a lot on media and I put a lot of time and effort into two audio storytelling/journalism projects in particular. One of them being *Uncivil*,⁴ which to a large extent is an historical podcast and then also *Seeing White*,⁵ which has a lot of historical elements and some very publicly rendered theory. I think that audio storytelling is a long form of media, a word form, that takes a lot of writing. You have to sit down and pay attention to it—maybe slow down, get some tea or popcorn, and listen to the podcast. I hope that having these things out there and presenting them in a format that people don't actually have to pay for (though people have to pay for the platform and Internet access), those things can help to sustain political education and also movement building. I think historical work actually contributes to coalition building because it helps us understand how we got here and how we have been divided. I know that there have been groups who have been using *Seeing White* as a way to come together. It's almost like a book club, but it's a podcast club. I think that these podcasts are in some ways a more sustainable kind of activist media. I mean sustainable in the sense that they foster more sustained attention. I'm hoping the impact of an episode is longer, stronger, and deeper than a tweet or even a live stream. I think good old fashioned public radio is more sustainable in terms of production and absolutely essential.

Question: *What has been the greatest success associated with promoting your cause?*

Answer: I'll speak to two kinds of success. The first sort of building block to success has to do with the educational component of organizing. I do see it as a victory of sorts to have been able to produce and distribute these two deep-diving historical podcasts to more than 2 million people. It took a lot of time, energy, resources, thinking, and production to have this stuff out there. Just to get it out there on the scale that it is, that's a victory. I just found out that between both of those podcasts we have upwards of 2 million downloads. To think that 2 million people are listening to a half-hour podcast about something that is historical in this day and age; it has to be an accomplishment of some kind. It's a small part of the work, but I think it's important. With Scene on Radio's *Seeing White*, we have over 550,000 downloads. If you just think collectively about the impact of that, it's no small thing. Teachers can use these resources because they're out there now, people can interact with them in different ways.

The much more important component of success based on what I understand about organizing is that we have to deepen our sense of community and then we have to deepen our political power. The people who are talking about the issues I find important don't really control any state legislatures, don't control the supreme court, and certainly don't control the presidency or congress—although we are positioned for that to change soon. We do in some cases exert more control on city councils, school

boards, universities. Before I left Clemson University, we had done some powerful community building work around the issue of the travel ban and focusing on religious minorities in the area. We had some small victories and in some contexts the step toward victory is building a community that can advocate for those things—that's what victory looks like. Up here in Philly, we've had two victories that have been important. I can't take any responsibility for these, but Philly did elect someone who we will pressure to be one of the most progressive district attorneys in the country, Larry Krasner. He ran on a platform of ending cash bail, Black Lives Matter, and ending mass incarceration. I thought that was a victory mostly because of the coalition it represented. That coalition can now be mobilized for other things. In addition, the Philadelphia School Board was being run by the SRC [School Reform Commission], which is this reform commission that was governor appointed and was really a takeover, which meant the people of Philadelphia didn't have any control over their schools. Over time, this contributed to the shutting down of schools and attacks on public education. Through the campaigning of teachers and activists, we've recently gotten the board to agree to abolish itself and return control back to the city of Philadelphia. I think that that is a really important victory because schools are a tremendous part of having a healthy democratic, community and a healthy city.

There's also a group called the Media Mobilizing Project, which played an important role in both of those movements. That to me was an example of a group using

media in ways that led to victory. Let me also just say, media was a part of it, but I don't just want to say media was at the center of all of this. These and many, many others knocked on over 60,000 doors for the Krasner election. Media was important, but the physical presence of knocking on doors was what proved to be the most successful.

***Question:** What has been the greatest challenge associated with promoting your cause?*

Answer: The challenge I face personally as a scholar, journalist, and public intellectual is time management. My most important priority right now is my research on cultural and creative industries, my book, and my conference papers. It's where I contribute to the field and where I forge really important aspects of my analysis. Scholarly work has a nature that's distinct, sort of more internally facing scholarly work where you're just having conversations with other scholars is really important—I'm a consumer of that kind of work and I use it to teach and I use it in my own scholarly production. However, there's also public scholarly work. As I mentioned before, this is just one challenge I face. I have this podcast which has reached 2 million people [who] have interacted with these things in significant ways. It's being assigned in classrooms, but that doesn't really count toward my scholarly impact. Even when I'm doing work that's really impactful, I always have to make a choice and that's a challenge. Through my journalism, I try to have an impact on social justice issues, but I constantly have to make choices about what to do. Of course, you've always got to make

choices because you can't do everything, but this is one area that I think the academy needs to develop.

The battles I see myself facing now have to do with the nature of how we organize. It is really important and inspiring to have first-person accounts and campaigns where you have goals and things you're trying to figure out, what marks a victory, what we're going to do, and the type of systematic change we'd like to see. This kind of tactical organizing and campaign-based thinking is important and I feel like it's not present enough in many of the organizing spaces I've been in. In the movements that have emerged lately, there's this tremendous ability to mobilize and to get people to physically come out to the streets and in some cases, sustain it for pretty long. Ferguson, for example, went on for a really long time and there's still a force of people fighting there even though the cameras left. But that doesn't always happen and it's a challenge because if people aren't thinking about the organizational structures that are necessary for the sustainability of a movement, if people are out there without thinking about this, they get really excited when they're out there in the street [in the moment], but [if nothing has changed] two months later, where are we? I want to be clear that there is a lot of sustained organizing work. You can look at the dream coalition, fight for 15, ADAPT's work on disability.⁶ But the other kind of protest is more visible.

Question: *What is the most effective way to package your message so it reaches the most people and has the greatest impact?*

Answer: As someone who's pretty active on social media and makes a lot of Facebook posts, I find surprisingly it's the long public forms of communication that garner the most attention...or maybe I'm just not that good at tweeting. For me, when I've written a longer essay of 1,000 words for NPR⁷ or someone else, or even my podcasts, which take a tremendous amount of effort since they're 24- to 30-minute productions, those sustained productions generate the most interaction, the deepest interaction, and the most fruitful interaction. I think as organizers, one of the reasons these things are so successful is because those things are storytelling things. We live in a media environment where people figure out that if someone is saying something they want to hear, they listen, or they immediately diagnose that this is not what they want to hear and tune it out. Well told stories can get around that; they're one of the few things that can. A story is entertaining. If you hear a little bit and it catches your attention, you want to know how it's going to end. In the process of that, you go on a journey. Now, in the process of that journey, you can encode certain social justice lessons related to whatever your issue is: gender, race, identity, disability, ecology. Those things can happen in the context of a story. I think I've come to be persuaded by many of my colleagues in journalism that character-based storytelling is an extremely powerful way to package your issue. But, the danger with a lot of the character-focused stories you hear on a lot of podcasts and some

forms of journalism is that by individualizing and personalizing bigger social issues, you can risk depoliticizing them as well. It becomes so personal that it seems like it's only at the individual level and you lose sight of what systems are operating in the background. I think that's the battle right, to make it personal but in a way that makes people see the systems and how they work—how power works—and how all this transformative change works.

Question: *What is the best way to encourage people to get involved to create change?*

Answer: A really important intermediary step is community and relationship building. Having a correct and persuasive analysis of the social problem you're working on is important, but people deepen their political education and their level of involvement in the context of community and relationships. Relationships also can ensure that your work is actually serving your community. What's important to them? A lot of the people I organize with are people I have an ongoing relationship with. [One example, which illustrates the importance of relationships that comes to mind] is the situation in South Carolina.⁸ One thing we really needed to do was build our community up—we needed people who shared certain values and understandings of the political and social situation. In other words, a lot of the people who were in positions to raise critical questions about Trump's policies were often people who were isolated from one another on campus. They were in different disciplines and they are busy academics. The people who are supportive of Trump,

they're spending a lot of time together in church or at football games, or confederate flag rallies, and that's an advantage because that strengthens community and strengthens those bonds that they later translated into political power. The one thing that was needed in South Carolina when I was there was community building. A community that comes together and eats together, knows who everyone is, a group that can contact each other when they need to do something to support somebody. Relationships that are deep and authentic also always have a political dimension if you're willing to explore that. I've built relationships with healthcare workers that have helped me to understand what healthcare workers are dealing with. This becomes a way that you can understand those issues and have new potential allies. That progressive and even radical based community building is an intermediary step that's needed.

I also think it's important to have something concrete. Having a campaign enables you to understand what victory is. Sometimes we ask people to participate in boycotts and other things without really understanding what victory is going to look like so people can't even pace themselves. In a time when people are already overwhelmed and overworked, they're kind of like, "Well I'm not going to endlessly participate," especially for those getting involved for the first time. If you tell someone, "This is what this victory looks like" or "Here's this particular progression," then you put the people in a position to say, "I'm going to commit to that." I think that's the larger campaign approach, but then you have to have some concrete things that people can

do to contribute. Right now, I see people listing [phone] numbers—numbers for people to call their politicians and I think that’s important and it can be effective.

So, to summarize, relationships, building community, and campaigns where people can see what the end point is and understand why they’re doing what they’re doing, this can bring people together where they can have ideas and learn from one another, support one another. With campaigns, giving people concrete goals is important. All of those things I find are what actually get people involved. When you don’t have those things, there can be obstacles.

Question: *In your opinion, what is the major issue that divides academic research and practice?*

Answer: I actually think that a lot of people are doing various kinds of practical work who are inevitably relying on the work of academics. So, whether you’re doing social work or whether you’re doing activist work, you’re informed by critical academics in the humanities. I think that there’s a tendency to often paint the academy as being stuck in the “ivory tower,” and I want to push back against that by saying that’s not true at all. I think before we come to that conclusion, we have to first look at all the ways that people are “in the real world” as though the academy is not part of the “real world.” There are many scholars who are engaged in different ways. Now, to approach this the other way, I would say that, yes, it’s also true that the academy tends to incentivize work that is often focused on a very small community of people.

The truth of the matter is, I’ve gone on a journey shaping my identity as a scholar. I know that when I was shaping my career as a scholar, I wanted to be doing engaged scholarship—I knew that at times, I wanted to have a public or journalistic scholarly voice, and I knew that I wanted to be somebody who was on the front lines, whatever that meant. Now, the incentive structures I’ve been involved with in the academy cause me to feel—even though I did choose to do these things—like I was being irresponsible. So, I always felt I was making irresponsible choices that were kind of like career suicide in a way. But then I look at all the things I’ve done and in the end, they’ve all yielded really interesting things. The work I’ve done as a journalist has been some of the most insightful and practical work I’ve done. If I had been responsible, all of that stuff would have just been journal articles. The fact that people feel like they have to gamble or make a choice, or the people who say, “yes, you can do both,” [put pressure on individuals who do want to pursue avenues of public scholarship]. There are many scholars who can do both; I know a lot of prolific scholars who are able to do both, but I think that most people feel like they have to make a choice between those two things and this is an issue that we really need to evaluate. I don’t want to suggest that everyone just become a public scholar, let me be clear. When I look at the value of certain historical or theoretical works, I’m glad that person was kind of holed up and away—sort of untethered from the urgency of producing something every day. For certain deep thinking, that is important. But, at the same

time, there are other kinds of work that are also valuable. In the humanities, there's a lot of valuable work and then there's some work that I would argue is not the strongest. It's not stronger just because it's been peer reviewed. The truth of the matter is, if you raise critical questions about the replication crisis and what these statistical results even mean...if we were to actually restructure the academy with things we now know about studies that were not statistically replicable, there would be a lot of people without jobs. The social sciences take the biggest beating for this, but this is also a problem for sciences and engineering. There are challenges, but the replication crisis is largely the result of a process that incentivizes people to publish for these small audiences on these very narrow topics. If you're a scholar who's doing public work, you'll inevitably be made to feel irresponsible for doing public work, but the work that people are being incentivized to do is producing research that sometimes isn't even real. This is a thing we have to struggle with right now in the academy.

Question: *How do you use scholarly research to help inform your work?*

Answer: The full lineage of work on critical theory including the cultural industries and cultural studies has been extremely informative in shaping how I approach my scholarship. You have a lot of great thinkers in these areas and you have scholars who represent points where all these things come together. Someone like Stuart Hall⁹ is just extremely helpful in that regard.

As a journalist though, with the making of *Uncivil* for example, we rely a lot on books.

It's a podcast about the Civil War and we have a collective group account that's just filled with books that are written largely by professors. Sometimes, we also look at books by more organic historians/intellectuals because they have some powerful and important accounts as well so we include those. Our first episode [of *Uncivil*] is based on a book about the Combahee Raid,¹⁰ and as far as I know, it's the only book about the raid. The author's intervention, even though he's not a traditionally trained historian, the guy was a boat mechanic on the side or something, was based on the fact that he lived in that area. So, he could give you a grounded understanding that a lot of scholars missed. In *Uncivil*, we rely heavily on historians; in *Seeing White*, both the analysis and the key interviews that made the *Seeing White* series were informed by Nell Irvin Painter who wrote *A History of White People*¹¹ and Ibram Kendi who wrote *Stamped from the Beginning*.¹² So, those scholars really formed the main chunk and then we later interviewed Dorothy Roberts¹³ and others.

I'm now working for Gimlet media, which is funded by advertising and it may seem hypocritical for me in some ways to be doing this while being a scholar who focuses on critical political economy because that discipline has a lot to say about advertising and why it's ruining media. But, I would say it's given me critical tools that I can use while I try to navigate this industry, while I try do something in that industry that's also relevant. There's a lot I'm still learning because it's an unfolding business model with all this stuff that advertisers need us to do, but I try to come at it from a different

level of understanding than people in the industry because of my training in the academy. Reading work by Dallas Smythe¹⁴ and understanding his concept of the audience commodity has been helpful. I'm reading books by scholars on critical issues of surveillance and the digital [environment] and all these questions that we deal with in media. Questions like, "What does it mean to think about digital production and the way we assess audience metrics and capitalism?" I'm thinking about all of these things and having studied them, I'm confronting them now. I'm more literate and able to think about moments where I need to push back a little bit. I can even advise the company about things and hope that they listen. As a critical scholar, I have a way where I can predict many of the problems we will face as a company; I can share how we're going to become evil (*said while laughing*).

Question: *What are some of the issues you wish academic research would address in a more realistic or informed way?*

Answer: That's a tricky one because there's so much stuff that's out there that is good research. I don't want to beat up on the social sciences, but there is a tremendous amount of research that is incentivized by business. One way to simply say this is that we're facing a lot of battles in areas like ecology and the environment, areas like identity and economics, and I find that there are a tremendous number of scholars who focus on things that have very little to do with these issues. But, there are also a lot of scholars who are dealing with these things so it's difficult to say anything specific.

Even in public relations, I think depending on the kind of work you do, you may not come across some of the important critical discussions on the origins of this field that are really important. It really depends on what school you go to and I think that's a shame. Too many times in my classes, I find that when I start talking about political economy or when I start talking about the feminist tradition or radical ideas in general, the history of the labor movement and the relationship between PR and the labor movement, [so many people don't know what I'm referring to]. I remember being in a class on the history of consumer culture and almost no one had read Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness*.¹⁵ To me, I think critically oriented PR people get these issues, but there are people in the field who don't. It's so important to study this kind of material, especially the history of consumer culture. PR scholars who know the history of the field, and can weigh in, are invaluable. In general, we need to build a broader and deeper literacy with critical ideas.

¹ Henry Giroux is a cultural critic and scholar known for being one of the founders of critical pedagogy in the United States in addition to advocating for radical democracy. He has written countless books and articles on these subjects and others.

²² 215 Alliance is a Philadelphia based group focused on racial and economic equality. For more information visit its website at <http://215pa.com/>

³ The Media Mobilizing Project works with local movements to help “amplify the voices of communities fighting for justice, equality and human rights.” The group also offers training and services. For more information visit:

<https://mediamobilizing.org/>. The Philly SUN (Schools Unifying Neighborhoods) is a community of individuals closely aligned with the Media Mobilizing Project: <https://mediamobilizing.org/voices-philly-sun-network/>

⁴ Uncivil is a podcast from Gimlet Media. You can listen to Uncivil wherever you get your podcasts.

⁵ *Seeing White* is part of the *Scene on Radio* podcast produced and hosted by John Biewen. The podcast is a product of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. To download episodes, go to <http://podcast.cdsporch.org/episodes/>

⁶ The Dream Coalition advocates for the rights of Dreamers: <https://www.dreamcoalition.us/>. Fight for 15 is an organization dedicated to raising the minimum wage to \$15. For more information, visit <https://fightfor15.org/>. ADAPTS is a campaign that helps to produce evacuation slings for wheelchair users helping first responders to better aid the disability community in an emergency: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/adapts/adapts-a-disabled-passenger-transfer-sling>

⁷ An example of Kumanyika’s work for NPR, *Dispatch from Charleston: The Cost of White Comfort*, can be retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/06/24/417108714/dispatch-from-charleston-the-cost-of-white-comfort>

⁸ Before moving to the Philadelphia area and taking a position at Rutgers University, Kumanyika was a professor at Clemson University. While at Clemson,

Kumanyika was active promoting social justice causes in the area, getting ejected from a Trump rally after showing solidarity for a variety of minority focused causes:

<http://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2016/02/12/clemson-professor-ejected-trump-rally-wednesday/80271778/>

Kumanyika also organized a hunger strike at Clemson University to encourage the university’s president to come out against Trump’s travel ban: <http://www.thestate.com/news/local/article131117769.html>

⁹ Stuart Hall was a cultural theorist famous for being one of the founding members of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. He is most famous for his theory on encoding and decoding in media studies. Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972-79* (pp. 128-138). London, UK: Hutchinson.

¹⁰ The Combahee Raid took place during the American Civil War. For more information, listen to “The Raid,” *Uncivil’s* first episode, which focuses on Harriet Tubman’s role among other accounts of the event and its significance in our understanding of history.

¹¹ Painter, N. I. (2010). *The history of white people*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

¹² Kendi, I. X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America*. New York, NY: Nation Books.

¹³ Dorothy Roberts is an acclaimed scholar of race, gender, at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. See for example, Roberts, D. (1997). *Killing the black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

¹⁴ Dallas Smythe was an activist and political economy of communications scholar. His work was featured in the *Special Issue of the Journal of Communication: Ferments in the Field: The Past, Present and Futures of Communication Studies* (1983).

¹⁵ Ewen, S. (1976). *Captains of consciousness: Advertising and the social roots of the consumer culture*. New York, NY: Basic Books.