# Overcoming constraints of collective imagination: An inquiry into activist entrepreneuring, disruptive truth-telling and the creation of 'possible worlds'

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This article introduces 'activist entrepreneuring' to suggest a fresh understanding of entrepreneuring which foregrounds how constraints of imagination are removed through critical speech. Specifically, we link Michel Foucault's work on *parrhesia*, or courageous speech, and various literatures on (utopian) imagination to discuss 'disruptive truth-telling' as the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneuring whose transformative force resides in breaking free from existing limitations of collective imagination, or what we refer to as the 'orthodox social imaginary'. We use the activist group *Yes Men* to develop a process model which throws into sharper relief how disruptive truth-telling is employed, on the one hand, to expose and problematize the boundaries of collective imagination, and, on the other, to create 'possible worlds' that prefigure ways of doing business that are consistent with broader societal interest. The three interrelated objectives of this article are: first, to make creative use of the humanities to emphasize how disruptive truth-telling actualizes possibilities for imagining future realities that seem impossible from the standpoint of dominant imagination. Second, to make the case for seeing changes of collective imagination as a genuine entrepreneurial accomplishment. And third, to identify boundary conditions that help us strengthen the explanatory power of our theorizing on disruptive truth-telling.

… to speak a true word is to transform the world.

(Freire, 1996, p. 68)

## Executive summary

The idea of entrepreneurship as a social change activity (ESC) has gained traction in recent years (Calás et al., 2009). There is widespread agreement that entrepreneurial social change presupposes the ability to remove constraints which "can be of an intellectual, psychological, economic, social, institutional, or cultural nature" (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 479). What is absent in the ESC debate are considerations of constraints surrounding shared narratives and images which guide and restrict people's thinking and

acting (we call this the 'orthodox social imaginary'). This omission is problematic because many of today's grand challenges are rooted precisely in people's inability to envision reality outside of the realm of dominant imagination.

Against this backdrop, our aim in this article is to propose an alternative approach to theorizing ESC which considers the orthodox social imaginary a major constraint that closes down possibilities of imagination (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). Our theorizing is premised on the central assumption that social change-oriented enterprises tackle the constraints of collective imagination not through economic activity (Frank and Shockley, 2014; Hjorth, 2013), but through the entrepreneurial use of critical speech. We introduce two sensitizing concepts to elaborate this process. First, the composite term 'activist entrepreneuring' is used to envision an entrepreneurial endeavor that seeks to remove constraints pertaining to the orthodox social imaginary. Second, we propose 'disruptive truth-telling' as the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneuring, thus bringing into sharper focus how critical speech is employed to, on the one hand, take a stance against overly self-interested behaviors of powerful actors and, on the other, to envision (fictional) future realities that are in line with broader societal interests. Our empirical case, the activist group Yes Men, is used to expound and refine our theorizing by developing a process model (Cornelissen, 2017). This model describes the continuously unfolding dynamic of disruptive truth-telling. The Yes Men offer an evocative and nuanced exposition of how disruptive truth-telling is based on a general sequence of activities leading to the creation of 'possible worlds, i.e. desirable (if fictional) future realities that are progressively less distorted by oppressive, asymmetrical relations of power. The ability to produce possible worlds is not self-evident, but contingent on a number of conditions. We thus identify three specific boundary conditions – related to the activist entrepreneur, the dissemination of possible worlds and the actualization of possible worlds into actual realities – which help us strengthen the explanatory power of our process model.

What gives our theorizing its acute significance is how it creates a link between ESC and the orthodox social imaginary which limits what people can think and do. Moreover, a key insight of our theorizing is that one has to sometimes use theories which lie outside of the boundaries of canonical entrepreneurship research to be able to say something genuinely new about the entrepreneurial phenomenon under investigation (Steyaert et al., 2011). What makes our article practically expedient is that it draws attention to how ESC and activist dynamics might be more inextricably interlinked in practice than is generally assumed (Akemu et al., 2016). Further, our theorizing proposes that disruptive truth-telling might equally well be used by more 'classical' social change-oriented endeavors, such as social enterprises. A central concern for future theorizing should hence be to investigate how these latter enterprises use critical speech to voice their concerns, levering support for their pro-social mission and maximizing their ability to enhance the lives of people in largely beneficial ways.

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship research has witnessed a truly Copernican revolution as entrepreneurship is no longer seen exclusively as a form of organizing with purely economic finalities but also as a social change activity (Calás et al., 2009; Haugh and Talwar, 2016; Nicholls, 2006; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). This debate is diverse and heterogeneous, reflecting the multiplicity of concepts being put forward to sketch the pro-social ambitions and outcomes of entrepreneurship, such as public (Hjorth, 2013), sustainable (Shepherd and Patzelt, 2011), values-led (Tennant, 2015), for-benefit (Sabeti, 2011), transformative (Tobias et al., 2013) or community-based entrepreneurship (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006). Although we cannot do justice to this large and growing corpus, it is important to note that the discourse on entrepreneurship as a social change activity (ESC) has been dominated by the concept social entrepreneurship (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). This reference is relevant because social entrepreneurship has essentially taken the economic way of thinking about entrepreneurship and shifted its meaning (Frank and Shockley, 2014; Swedberg, 2006) to suggest a business model for social change (Calás et al., 2009). As an outgrowth of management thinking (Hjorth, 2013), social entrepreneurship scholars envision social change primarily as resulting from the application of "market principles and economic value thinking to social problems" (Driver, 2012, p. 424). Despite strong sympathies, this article argues that the popularity of social entrepreneurship may obfuscate the existence of entrepreneurial forms of social change which are not (primarily) "a beneficial outcome of associated economic activity" (Calás et al., 2009, p. 553). We therefore insist that it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurship as social change (ESC) and that there is merit in envisioning ESC primarily as a 'social force' (Hjorth and Holt, 2016) or a way of 'disclosing new worlds' (Spinosa et al., 1997), irrespective of whether it is based on economic activity or not.

With this as a backdrop, in this article we propose an alternative approach to theorizing ESC that moves from conceiving 'entrepreneurship as an *economic activity* with possible social change outcomes' (Calás et al., 2009; emphasis added) to envisioning 'entrepreneurship as an inherently *disruptive activity* with positive social change outcomes'. In the spirit of Steyaert et al.'s (2011) plea to keep entrepreneurship theorizing "imaginative" and "open to new and unexpected directions" (p. 1), and embracing Hjorth et al.'s (2016) contention that "the entrepreneurial is not synonymous with economic enterprise, despite their frequent association" (p. 601), we aim to demonstrate the fecundity of combining different strands of humanities literatures to expand ongoing debates about entrepreneurship as a social change activity.

We propose the neologism 'activist entrepreneuring' to emphasize processes of entrepreneuring which remove constraints of collective imagination, or what we refer to as the orthodox social imaginary: the shared interpretive frameworks people use to make sense of reality, and which limit what can be thought of and done at any given time. The concept activist entrepreneuring attends to a form of entrepreneurial creation that combines critique with transformative aspiration. Activist entrepreneuring is a composite term that assumes that ESC and activism have an important quality in common. This shared quality, or *tertium comparationis*, can be summarized as a desire to empower people by changing "the operating rules of a field […] so as to change the status quo" (Bureau and Zander, 2014, p. 124). Being linked by a *tertium comparationis* does not, of course, suggest that ESC and activism are identical.