

PRINCIPLE

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Whether you're scouting an action location, doing a power analysis of your political target, or reviewing previous episodes of a TV show you're going to be on: Do. Your. Research.

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““THROUGH RESEARCH WE MAKE SURE OUR ACTIONS ARE STRATEGIC, WELL-TARGETED, IMPACTFUL, AND FREE FROM AVOIDABLE MISTAKES.””

“Knowledge without action is wastefulness and action without knowledge is foolishness.” — Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali

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When faced with a problem, humans often have a bias toward action. This may be particularly true for those of us who claim the label *activist*. And, for the most part, this bias is good. Without action, nothing will change. However, this bias can blind us to the importance of pausing before we act to do the necessary research. Through research, we make sure our actions are strategic, well-targeted, impactful, and free from avoidable mistakes.

In a traditional organizing cycle, research comes after identifying an issue and before taking action. It can be as simple as an online search for information about a target, or a conversation with experienced organizers already working on your issue. It can also be more structured and time intensive, depending on your goals. It can focus on the practicalities of organizing; on the root causes of social problems; or on dreaming up new and creative solutions. Some research can be done by an individual, but it is often more powerful to engage a group of people with different perspectives and backgrounds.

POTENTIAL RISKS

1. Not to be confused with "Do your OWN research," or DYOR. This slogan, which seems like good advice on the face of it, has unfortunately become a popular slogan among online conspiracy theorists. Conspiratorial thinking based on obscure information found online, while casually dismissing the work of other researchers, journalists, practitioners, and witnesses, [is not the same as thoughtful, methodical research]. (<https://elephantinthelab.org/how-conspiracy-theorists-get-the-scientific-method-wrong/>).
2. When researching something you care about, there is always a risk of confirmation bias. You notice data or information that supports what you already think and

Here are a few examples of research approaches that activists and organizers engage in.

Power analysis can help you figure out who has the power to make the changes you want, and to identify potential allies and targets (see (see: METHODOLOGY: Power mapping)).

Asset mapping helps you uncover the strengths and assets of impacted communities that can be leveraged to advance change.

Policy analysis is a process of understanding what laws or policies are maintaining the problem you're addressing, and what policy changes would advance your cause.

Narrative power analysis is a twist on traditional power analysis. It involves analyzing the dominant stories connected to your campaign and determining how you can tell your campaign's story effectively (see (see: METHODOLOGY: Battle of the story)).

Listening tours can help you identify an issue that a community cares about and make sure that you understand the full range of experiences and perspectives on it.

Documenting harm that comes from the issues you are addressing can help bolster your case when you engage the public and decision makers.

Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach to collaborative research that begins with what is working and aims to uncover not just what is, but what could be.

Many of these approaches to research are easy for a group to learn and do on their own. But sometimes it is helpful to bring in a partner with the necessary research skills and resources. A group organizing around environmental justice, for example, may collaborate with a scientist at a local university to document air and water quality differences across neighborhoods. Experienced researchers can also support groups in doing participatory action research. In participatory action research and other similar methods, members of the groups most impacted by injustice use formal research tools to study an issue collaboratively and craft actionable solutions.

discount any information that contradicts you. You will get more out of research if you actively look for contradictory evidence and are open to challenging your assumptions. Research takes a certain amount of humility, an understanding that there is so much we don't know and we can easily be wrong.

3. Don't get stuck at the research phase. You will never have all the information, no matter how long you research, and you can't let that immobilize you. At some point, you must design your action based on the best information available and move forward. Afterward, you reflect on what you learned from the action phase and add it to your collective knowledge so you can design something better next time (see (see: PRINCIPLE: Praxis makes perfect)).

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Whose Tea Party?

Tactics

- Spoof website

Principles

- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Choose your target wisely
- Consider your audience
- Praxis makes perfect

Theories

- Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Methodologies

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Peel the onion
- Power mapping

LEARN MORE

Power Mapping

The Change Agency

<https://thechangeagency.org/power-mapping/>

Asset Mapping Tool Kit

Asset Based Community Development Institute

<https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx>

Participatory Action Research Toolkit

Research for Organizing

<http://www.researchfororganizing.org/>

- SMART objectives

- SWOT

TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Policy