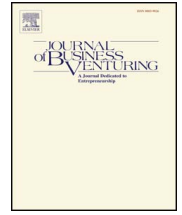




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# Overcoming constraints of collective imagination: An inquiry into activist entrepreneuring, disruptive truth-telling and the creation of ‘possible worlds’

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## 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

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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, leveraging 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.

Rather, the existence of a common quality means that new ways of understanding ESC become available through conceptual alliance between theoretical debates which do not usually come into contact with each other. On this basis, linking ESC with activism permits us to create greater appreciation of a particular kind of entrepreneurial activity that uses critical speech as the elemental means for changing the status quo in intentional, goal-directed ways. Clearly, we cannot claim originality in calling attention to activist entrepreneurship since the phenomenon as such is relatively widespread in practice. However, there is a paucity of research that has explored the confluence of entrepreneurial and activist tendencies within a single organization (e.g. Gawell, 2006; Hockerts, 2006). This gap in turn opens a crucial space for theorizing and we aim to use Foucault's work on parrhesia or courageous speech and various literatures on (utopian) imagination to think creatively and critically about the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneurship. Disruptive truth-telling is thus proposed as a particular form of critical speech employed to problematize and move beyond entrenched modes of collective imagination conditioned by the orthodox social imaginary.

To support and illustrate our theoretical approach, we offer a reading of the *Yes Men*, an activist collective producing cultural artifacts or so-called 'newsmaking tactics' (Reilly, 2013) – e.g. fake websites, bogus news conferences, investigative documentaries. Our interpretation of the *Yes Men* allows us to discuss how disruptive truth-telling subverts a particularly dysfunctional social imaginary that tends to impoverish possibilities of positive change by insisting that change is impossible or simply not needed. Furthermore, the *Yes Men* case will enable us to illustrate how disruptive truth-telling summons 'fake news' to create opportunities for re-imagining reality as we know it.

There are five main parts to this article. First, we offer a brief note on our approach to theorizing. We then introduce 'activist entrepreneurship' and 'disruptive truth-telling' as an inventive stance toward highlighting critical speech's potential in transforming the social imaginary. In a third step we offer a theoretical reading of the activist group *Yes Men* which culminates in a process model. The model plots how disruptive truth-telling is enacted through 'fake news', and how this undermines entrenched beliefs about elite actors. Consequently, this process restores a sense of the alterability of existing relations of power. Based on the insights from the process model, we elaborate on the boundary conditions of disruptive truth-telling. In the discussion, we accentuate the main insights yielded by our theoretical approach, and discuss the article's contribution to existing research.

## 2. A note on theorizing

This article adopts a two-pronged approach to theorizing. The first step involves a process of *conceptual blending* (Oswick et al., 2011) that combines various humanities literatures to establish our two sensitizing concepts: 'activist entrepreneurship' and 'disruptive truth-telling'. The concept 'activist entrepreneurship' allows us to paint the big picture of how critical speech effectuates social change by removing constraints pertaining to the orthodox social imaginary. We have decided to give this phenomenon a new name (Swedberg, 2016) instead of working with existing concepts already discussed in the entrepreneurship community (e.g. social entrepreneurship). The distinct advantage of a new concept is that it offers us tools for thinking outside the restrictions of canonical thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). The second concept is termed 'disruptive truth-telling' and it forms the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneurship which removes constraints pertaining to the orthodox social imaginary, thus actualizing opportunities for imagining reality 'otherwise'. As the humanities literatures – i.e. Foucault's work on parrhesia and different literatures on (utopian) imagination – which our theorizing draws on are *foreign* to established theories of entrepreneurship, this makes it impossible to map them onto ESC debates without much consideration and adaption (Oswick et al., 2011). Consequently, the primary aim of our first theoretical step consists of recontextualizing and reinterpreting the humanities literatures to make them theoretically expedient for entrepreneurship research in general, and research on ESC more specifically.

Building on these theoretical considerations, in a second step we develop a process model (Cornelissen, 2017) based on a theoretical reading of the *Yes Men*. This model splits disruptive truth-telling into its composite elements. We use the *Yes Men* as an empirical case to draw stronger connections between our theorizing and the empirical realm, thus increasing the explanatory power of disruptive truth-telling through "a logic of discovery" (Van Maanen et al., 2007, p. 1146). Focusing on the continuously unfolding dynamic of disruptive truth-telling, our process model is predicated on four *verbs* – or 'process words' (Cornelissen, 2017) – which help us describe and explain the general sequence of activities that leads to the creation of 'possible worlds'. We then expand our process model by identifying boundary conditions defining when disruptive truth-telling will open up new ways of imagining (future) reality as well as when these 'possible worlds' will lead to real-life changes.

## 3. Theorizing 'activist entrepreneurship' and 'disruptive truth-telling'

This section engages in a process of *conceptual blending* to make our humanities literatures theoretically expedient for entrepreneurship research.

### 3.1. Activist entrepreneurship and the orthodox social imaginary

While it is commonly accepted that crisis situations are constitutive of social entrepreneurial activity (Thompson et al., 2000), the same can be said about activist entrepreneurship. However, unlike social entrepreneurship which is apparently sparked by crises pertaining to market or state failure, activist entrepreneurship relates to a crisis of collective imagination. Activist entrepreneurship thus compels us to consider social change as a phenomenon that is related not so much to, for instance, institutional voids, market failures (supply shortfalls) or the negative ramifications of welfare state retrenchment. Rather, activist entrepreneurship relates to the orthodox social imaginary, i.e. the shared interpretive frameworks people use to imagine reality. Obviously enough, combining

entrepreneurship and activism into a new concept violates existing entrepreneurship research where the two terms are often conceived as mutually exclusive. Indeed, entrepreneurship scholars have variously argued that activism forms a non-entrepreneurial activity because it merely *criticizes the status quo* – for instance by “challenging the hegemony of government and business models” (Vasi, 2009, p. 162) – while entrepreneurial activity actually *changes it* (Martin and Osberg, 2007). This analytic demarcation, apart from being disarmingly simplistic, ignores that activism might be related with, or even constitutive of, processes of entrepreneurial social change (Akemu et al., 2016). Creating an explanatory link between entrepreneurship, critique and the orthodox social imaginary possesses theoretical as well as political purchase in light of the fact that many of today's grand challenges are grounded in our profound inability to imagine reality outside of the confines imposed by shared interpretive frameworks.

While our theorizing addresses the social imaginary mainly in terms of its limiting nature (thus ‘orthodox’), it is important to keep in mind that the social imaginary forms an integral part of daily life by providing people with a set of ideal categories and concepts which provides the cultural ‘toolkit’ guiding their subsequent thinking and acting. At the macro level, the social imaginary forms the shared interpretive frameworks people use to “imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). The social imaginary is transmitted through shared narratives and images conveying commonsensical meaning with which to imagine reality. These symbolic references are important sense-giving features (Taylor, 2004) defining the boundary of the thinkable and unthinkable (Unger, 2007). Consequently, and more critically, as much as the social imaginary enables shared understanding and common practices, it also closes down possibilities of imagining reality outside of the parameters of common sense (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). This tendency to close down possibilities of imagination indexes the orthodox dynamic of the social imaginary. The orthodox social imaginary has a limiting effect on collective imagination precisely because each society creates beliefs and assumptions it accepts as legitimate and others that it rejects. Each society or community patrols the boundaries of its social imaginary and controls the distribution of its narratives and images.

Following this line of reasoning, we conceive of the orthodox social imaginary as one of the key obstacles in liberating humanity due to how it renders people incapable of thinking outside of the limits of dominant imagination (Horkheimer, 1982). The orthodox social imaginary, in other words, is ‘deflationist’ (Sider, 2009) as it tends to atrophy people's ability to *imagine that reality could be different* from the reality they inhabit, and which often represents elite actors' sectional interests, or hides their malpractices respectively. The orthodox social imaginary's tendency to foreclose imagination by producing realities that are detrimental to the realization of the common good (Taylor, 2004) are paradigmatically displayed in the narratives of climate change skeptics who notoriously refuse to accept factual evidence about mankind's co-implication in global warming (Tom, 2017). Climate change skeptics' resistance to scientific evidence entails imagining realities which are impervious to facts that do not reflect their own interests. The imaginaries of climate change skeptics are not theories – in a scientific sense – precisely because they are transmitted via everyday stories rather than theoretical propositions (Tom, 2017). Despite, or rather because, of their foundation in colloquial speech and ordinary thought, the narratives of climate change skeptics are highly influential. This is demonstrated, for example, by the USA administration under Donald Trump pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord which has only become thinkable, politically legitimate, and practically feasible through the normalization of a particular orthodox social imaginary which casts doubts on the validity of scientific reports on climate change. While this example is indicative of how many of today's problems are due to a ‘crisis of imagination’ (Jameson, 2016), it needs to be stressed that the orthodox social imaginary is by no means a deterministic force. Within certain limits, people retain their ability to extricate themselves from the restrictions of the orthodox social imaginary (Foucault, 1986). By implication, we claim that the primary function of activist entrepreneurship is to change the way people imagine reality (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Jameson, 2016). Activist entrepreneurship is sensitive to how particular grand challenges have their root in our pervasive way of thinking about reality, clarifying that common ways of thinking necessarily restrict what can be said and done.

As briefly intimated, activist entrepreneurship is a composite term that establishes a connection between the two elements ‘activism’ and ‘entrepreneurship as social change’ (ESC). On this basis, activist entrepreneurship is characterized by both similarities to and differences from the two elements that constitute it. By way of similarity, activist entrepreneurship and activism are united by how they criticize existing relations of power. However, ‘activist entrepreneurship’ goes beyond classical views of activism by combining critical and transformative aspirations, thus using critique to create the conditions for actualizing new opportunities for imagining reality. On the other hand, activist entrepreneurship shares with ESC an interest in (transformative) entrepreneurship – conceived in line with Tobias et al. (2013) as a way of removing constraints to enable the establishment of more emancipatory conditions of possibility. However, ESC debates chiefly construe social change as the result of entrepreneurial individuals or groups removing social and economic constraints caused by, for example, weak or nonexistent markets or outdated institutional arrangements (Montgomery et al., 2012). By contrast, activist entrepreneurship focuses more on intangible constraints caused by the orthodox social imaginary which limits our ability to think ‘otherwise’. The theoretical question that arises from these insights is *how* activist entrepreneurship actually disrupts the constraining effects of the orthodox social imaginary.

### 3.2. Disruptive truth-telling as the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneurship

#### 3.2.1. The critical function of speech: parrhesia, truth-telling and problematization

Having used the previous section to argue that activist entrepreneurship is characterized by its aim to remove constraints of collective imagination by challenging the orthodox social imaginary, we propose that speech is the site where the orthodox social imaginary is disrupted. A considerable number of studies, broadly informed by linguistic and semiotic theories, have examined speech, including specific cultural tools and genres such as discourses, stories, icons or symbols, as a means of persuasion and legitimacy building (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Gartner et al., 1992; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). In contrast thereto, we treat

speech explicitly as “an important part of the [social] change creation process” (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 485). In more concrete terms, we envision speech as an inherently *disruptive activity* that is at the core of how activist entrepreneuring brings about social change. Foucault’s work on *parrhesia*, and different literatures on (utopian) imagination are well positioned to establish how activist entrepreneuring uses disruptive truth-telling to both criticize and transform the social imaginary.

Foucault delivered his ideas on *parrhesia* during different lectures in Paris, Grenoble and Berkeley. His thoughts on *parrhesia* were later published as ‘Fearless Speech’ (2001), ‘Government of Self and Others’ (2010) and the ‘Courage of the Truth’ (2011). *Parrhesia* creates a theoretical landscape that illuminates how activist entrepreneuring uses speech in a particular modality of critique. Foucault located the emergence and etymological roots of the term in Greek literature from the fourth and fifth century A.D. Foucault thereby pointed out that *parrhesia* variously means “to speak everything”, “to speak freely”, “to speak boldly”, or “boldness” (Foucault, 2001). While different meanings of *parrhesia* exist, most definitions conceive it as a *verbal activity* or a *matter of speech*, where the speaker engages in truth-telling to challenge and confront power. In Foucault’s (2001) own terms, “*parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his [or her] personal relationship to truth, and risks his [or her] life because he [or she] recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself [or herself])” (p. 19). Truth-telling comes from ‘below’ and occurs in the context of unequal relations of power (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016), a point which Foucault traced back to the Greek Cynics and the Epicureans who criticized power and social conventions.

A defining aspect of truth-telling is that the truth-teller is committed to “telling the whole truth, hiding nothing of the truth, telling the truth without hiding it behind anything” (Foucault, 2010, p. 10). Unlike the rhetorician, who engages in dissimulated forms of speech, truth-telling is a non-artificial way of speaking.<sup>1</sup> Despite Foucault’s (2011) insistence that *parrhesia* is undissimulated, non-artificial or authentic, as it were, we need to be careful not to take this as an indication of *parrhesia* being true in the *scientific sense* of the term (Lorenzini, 2015). Indeed, the ‘truth’ in truth-telling does not relate to the *truth-value* of a given utterance, i.e. its correspondence with reality. What defines the truth in *parrhesia* is not, in other words, its epistemological status as ‘facts’ or ‘knowledge’. This might appear odd especially during a time where much ink has been spilled on the risks of alternative facts and post-truth politics. However, in line with Foucault our theorizing and our empirical case emphasize the critical and transformative thrust of truths which are fictions (Beckert, 2013) rather than verifiable knowledge (Vogelmann, 2017) but which are utmost effective in perturbing the orthodox social imaginary to envision new ‘possible worlds’.

Foucault’s understanding of ‘truth’ as primarily committed to critique resonates with Heidegger’s notion of ‘unhiddenness’ (*Unverborgenheit*) which is indicative of a process of “revealing something that it is concealed, forgotten or distorted” (Tamboukou, 2012, p. 851). The concept of unhiddenness implies that truth-telling might include ‘truths’ which are, from a factual standpoint, false, but which might nevertheless be crucial in unveiling aspects of reality which are hidden, willingly or otherwise. The role of ‘unhiddenness’ in truth-telling will become more palpable through our empirical case which focuses on how truth-telling is enacted through fake news, revealing some inconvenient truths about powerful actors.

Before we discuss our empirical case, it should be noted that what is critically at stake in truth-telling is ‘problematization’, a theme running through Foucault’s entire oeuvre (Foucault, 1989). Problematization points toward how taken-for-granted objects of experience – in our case powerful actors – “becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions” (Foucault, 2001, p. 74). Problematization describes a state where people start to care about particular issues or actors as a result of how they become subject to public critique. Furthermore, problematization puts political questions of truth-telling center stage by heeding how aspects of everyday life which used to be familiar and, thus, seemingly beyond reproach, are turned into a matter-of-public concern. It is important to note that not all critical truth-telling automatically qualifies as *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia* comprises only those forms of critical speech which problematize current affairs with a view to improving or helping other people (not only the truth teller). *Parrhesia* is more than the realization of the individual’s right of freedom of speech, or an empty gesture of pure confrontation, but about living courageously by speaking the truth in order to advance the common good (Foucault, 2001). Another way of putting this is to say that *parrhesia is a social change activity that aims to benefit other people or society at large*.

The crucial point here is that *parrhesia* invites consideration of how activist entrepreneuring engages in disruptive truth-telling to change the way powerful actors – be that individuals or organizations – are perceived. Formerly either unknown or simply taken for granted, powerful actors are transformed by disruptive truth-telling into matters of public concern. In this sense, truth-telling brings into sharper focus how activist entrepreneurs use critical speech to shift how people think about the role of existing relations of power by exposing the boundaries of what is taken for granted as reality.

### 3.2.2. The transformative function of disruptive truth-telling: creating possible worlds

The point so far has been that disruptive truth-telling is used by activist entrepreneurs to disrupt familiar ways of imagining reality by exposing the limits of collective thought. However, to treat truth-telling merely as a critical activity that turns particular aspects of the status quo into a problem is to lose its transformative capacity to create ‘new realities’. Considering disruptive truth-telling as inherently transformative is consistent with utopian scholars who have acknowledged the transformative power of language

<sup>1</sup> The opposition between rhetoric and *parrhesia* has a long philosophical tradition which Foucault discusses in his lectures (Foucault, 2001). However, there are also philosophical traditions which have tried to reconcile the difference between rhetoric and *parrhesia*. It is thus arguable that Foucault’s lectures have somewhat exaggerated the distinction between the two by ignoring that rhetoric reasoning in many instances is inherent in *parrhesiatic* utterances. It is due to this reason that Walzer (2013) has coined the term ‘rhetorically artful *parrhesia*’ to account for the fact that since “claims to speak frankly always have rhetorical implication, *parrhesia* would seem to have an inherent rhetorical dimension” (p. 2; emphasis in original). Rhetorically artful *parrhesia* can thus be thought of as one pole on a continuum at the other end of which stands Foucault’s interpretation of *parrhesia* as bold, non-rhetorical speech.

(Ricoeur, 1974) epitomized by how speech gives rise to new ways of imagining reality. Acknowledging that disruptive truth-telling has the capacity not only to critique and problematize, but to furnish alternative ways of imagining reality essentially means that disruptive truth-telling is *utopian* (Levitas, 2011; Jameson, 2016). ‘Utopian’ does not relate to the imagination of realities that are practically impossible, pure objects of fantasy. Rather, ‘utopian’ is indicative of how truth-telling opens up possibilities of imagination which *appear impossible* from the vantage point of the orthodox social imaginary. We coin these new possibilities ‘possible worlds’, i.e. images of desirable future scenarios which are more conducive to the realization of the common good. Such possible worlds usually remain outside of people’s reach because they reside outside of the orthodox social imaginary which defines, and thereby confines, what can reasonably be said and thought (Unger, 2007). This capacity to create radically new possibilities of imagination is predicated on how disruptive truth-telling extricates people from the restrictions of dominant imagination, enabling images of the future radically different from the contemporary one (Levitas, 2011). Although Foucault did not explicitly deal with such future-oriented imagination, he was mindful that parrhesia was an essentially transformative practice which “opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known” (Foucault, 2010, p. 62). As this suggests, disruptive truth-telling is more than an antagonistic practice of critique and resistance. Rather, it presents itself as a potential force of pro-social imagination which prefigures possible worlds that counter-act dominant ways of thinking by exposing the disjuncture between how reality is usually conceived and how it *could be* imagined otherwise. Disruptive truth-telling operates as a medium of pro-social imagination by moving people away from the familiar and toward rethinking reality and possibility from an alternative point of view.

While disruptive truth-telling is transformative in how it actualizes new opportunities for imagining reality (possible worlds), this is, to a certain degree, indicative of a *performative act* (Austin, 1962) which creates the reality of which it speaks. But even if truth-telling foreshadows future states of affairs, disruptive truth-telling is not primarily concerned with using language to *depict future realities as accurately as possible* (Gehman and Soublière, 2017), but to *disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of prevailing views of reality* by exposing the void between a limited and distorted present and the possibility of a better future. In other words, disruptive truth-telling confronts people with how the orthodox social imaginary restricts our ability to imagine reality, while *compelling them to imagine reality anew* by exploring what might be missing today and what might become possible in the future if imagination was set free. The transformative thrust of disruptive truth-telling, no matter how imperfect or implausible, is to engage people with the promise of a better future by cultivating the desire for another world that might seem odd or simply unrealistic when set against the present (read: the orthodox social imaginary). In other words, it aims to create hope for the possibility of positive social change.

### 3.2.3. Interim conclusion

Linking the literatures on parrhesia and utopian imagination inspires us to an understanding of *activist entrepreneuring as being predicated on practices of disruptive truth-telling that take us beyond the limitations of the orthodox social imaginary by creating a desire for the realization of possible worlds*. We will now turn to the *Yes Men* to further develop our theorizing by proposing a process model depicting the general sequence of activities through which alternative imaginings of *what could be* become available.

## 4. Introducing the empirical case: the *Yes Men*

The *Yes Men* forms our empirical case which is used to add empirical detail and explanatory depth to our theoretical considerations. As an extreme case, the *Yes Men* form a pertinent means for highlighting our core phenomenon – disruptive truth-telling – in a very pronounced way (Jabnukainen, 2010). The *Yes Men* were founded and are led by Jacques Servin (a fiction writer who worked as a programmer) and Igor Vamos (a multi-media artist and media professor at a private American university). The activist group emerged as a reaction to the broader socio-political malaise and concerns about the relationship between politics, the corporate world and growing inequalities. Various referred to as mockers, art or political activists, parodists, and culture jammers, the *Yes Men*, a collective of independent artists and journalists, try to raise public awareness of the misdeeds and corruption of corporate and public elites (Lambert, 2016). A distinct feature of the *Yes Men* is that their critique is enacted not through direct actions such as boycotts, sit-ins, occupations or demonstrations but through the production of cultural artifacts – e.g. fake websites and television interviews, bogus corporate news conferences, documentaries. These cultural artifacts convey ‘truths’ about powerful actors which are hyperbolic or simply out of place. The truths spoken by the *Yes Men* are skillfully constructed or fabricated fakes (Reilly, 2013). They are created to fashion meaning and new imaginings out of contingent endowments (Sarasvathy, 2001) so as to render visible the entrenched political, economic and social strictures that confine our ability to conceive of reality outside of the orthodox social imaginary (Gibson-Graham, 2006). While the *Yes Men* were not primarily interested in capitalizing on their cultural artifacts by transforming them into monetary value, they did sell movies (*‘The Yes Men’*, 2003; *‘The Yes Men Fix the World’*, 2009; *‘The Yes Men are Revolting’*, 2014) as well as a book (*‘The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization’*, 2004) chronicling their experiences. The revenues from the sales of their movies and book formed the commercial part of their hybrid financing strategy. The earned-income activities were ancillary to the *Yes Men*’s revenues from non-market sources, including fellowships, awards, grants and, most recently, crowd-funding initiatives (Reilly, 2013). The *Yes Men*’s cultural artifacts proved successful in shaping public perceptions and agendas, and in sensitizing people around specific causes.

Importantly, the *Yes Men* are by no means unique, but form an exemplary instance of a wider category of activist endeavors that use cultural artifacts as their primary mode of intervention (examples include culture jammers such as Jonah Perreti, film makers such as Michael Moore or late-night comedians such as Stephen Colbert). Focusing on the particular case of the *Yes Men* has the distinct advantage of enabling us to shed light on how activist entrepreneuring subverts a particularly intricate social imaginary coined TINA (‘There is No Alternative’), which permeates everyday existence under neoliberal capitalism. Various associated with the liberal philosopher Herbert Spencer and the conservative politician Margaret Thatcher, a pervasive feature of TINA is that it

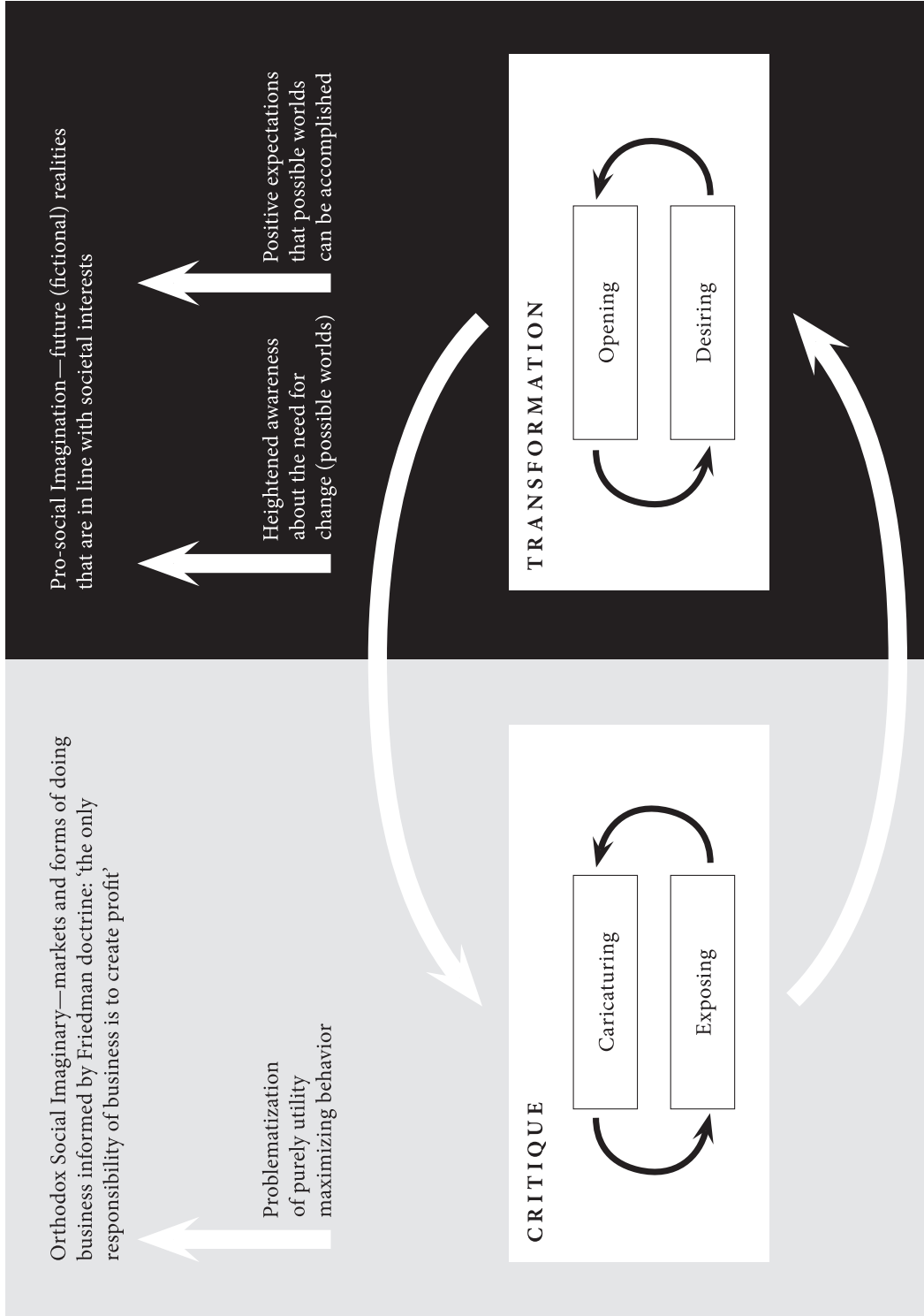


Fig. 1. Process model delineating the double movement (critique - transformation) of disruptive truth-telling.

normalizes the view of the market economy – despite its known flaws and contradictions – representing the superior, most effective system of social coordination (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). Focusing on how the *Yes Men* counter-act TINA (notably its tendency to normalize self-interested corporate behavior) through fake news about powerful actors offers a unique opportunity to look at how activist entrepreneuring exposes and transforms the scope of collective imagination. The analysis of the *Yes Men* relies on publically available data, including documentaries, newspaper reports, magazines, YouTube interviews as well as artifacts of their cultural endeavors (such as a bogus edition of the New York Times). Drawing on this material, the analysis moves back and forth between the empirical data and our theoretical considerations to illustrate how disruptive truth-telling plays out in practice.

## 5. A process model of disruptive truth-telling

In this section, we expand the foregoing discussion by suggesting a process model which unpacks the underlying dynamic of disruptive truth-telling. Refracting the *Yes Men's* disruptive truth-telling into its essential components, our process model inductively derives *four verbs* which help us bracket the constitutive elements of disruptive truth-telling as a generic means of pro-social imagination (for an overview, see Fig. 1). Each of the four verbs is based on constructs that enrich and complement the humanities literature introduced in Section 3.

We first offer a short explanation of the interplay among the four verbs. This is followed by a theory-backed description of the individual verbs using concrete vignettes from the *Yes Men* case to add descriptive detail and explanatory power to our elaboration.

### 5.1. Overview of process model

The process model in Fig. 1 provides a schematic explanation of how disruptive truth-telling gradually leads to the cultivation of a desire for possible worlds. The model acknowledges the dual function of disruptive truth-telling in the form of critique and transformation. The four verbs depicted in the model represent the component parts of disruptive truth-telling, coined respectively *caricaturing*, *exposing*, *opening* and *desiring*. Before discussing the verbs in more detail in the next section, it should be noted that both the duration and intensity of the different verbs vary in practice. Further, the verbs may occur simultaneously, merge into one another or be repeated depending on the particularities of the situation in which disruptive truth-telling is enacted. Even if the model accounts for the fact that disruptive truth-telling forms a heterogeneous process, it is important to note that possible worlds – the desired outcome of disruptive truth-telling – only emerge through a skillful interlocking of all four verbs. Thus, whereas each verb sketches analytically distinctive aspects of disruptive truth-telling, they are intertwined in practice.

The core notion of the model is that possible worlds emerge from a reciprocal process of critique (of purely utility maximizing behavior) and transformation (images of the future conducive to the realization of societal interest). The creation of possible worlds presupposes that disruptive truth-telling is used as a kind of double movement of *critiquing* (particular aspects of) the orthodox social imaginary and *transforming* collective imagination by envisioning future realities different from the existing one. The creation of possible worlds begins with disruptive truth-telling being used as a critical diagnostic of the present which makes fun of powerful actors and/or exposes their essentially self-interested nature. This problematization of powerful actors gradually leads toward an instrument of change which steers common thought away from the orthodox social imaginary to envision more desirable future realities.

The first two verbs – caricaturing and exposing – are representative of the critical function of disruptive truth-telling, whereas the latter two – opening and desiring – represent the subject matter's transformative function. The critical function of disruptive truth-telling forms a pre-condition for innovation and novelty as it establishes the need for new ways of imagining reality. Disruptive truth-telling hence becomes transformative by shaping expectations as to what might become possible if imagination gets liberated from the limitations of the orthodox social imaginary.

### 5.2. Describing the verbs (with a little help from the *Yes Men*)

In this section, we explain in detail the individual verbs. Discussing the critical and transformative aspect of disruptive truth-telling in turn, it should be reiterated that in practice the two interact dynamically.

#### 5.2.1. Truth-telling as critical diagnostic of existing relations of power

**5.2.1.1. Caricaturing.** This first verb is reminiscent of non-violent struggles which use comedy as their primary mode of intervention (Sørensen, 2017). What is at stake in *caricaturing* is how truths are told which render palpable, through hyperbolic representation, some undesirable features of powerful actors (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). Caricaturing uses disruptive truth-telling to grotesquely amplify particular features of the target actor with the aim of making fun of and ridiculing them (Hutcheon, 2000). One of the first cultural artifacts by the *Yes Men* helps us illustrate how disruptive truth-telling qua caricaturing works. The artifact in question entailed the creation of a fake website of the World Trade Organization (WTO) which looked authentic enough to provoke numerous requests for appearances by the supposed representatives of the WTO in interviews, conferences and lectures. The *Yes Men* seized the opportunity to speak on behalf of the WTO in order to ridicule its war on trade unions, environmental protections and indigenous rights. A well document example includes a TV panel debate where Jacques Servin appeared as a WTO representative going by the pseudonym Granwyth Hulatberi. During the debate, Hulatberi tried to defend the WTO against an anti-WTO protestor who accused the organization of having undue influence on national governments and of pursuing policies that were detrimental to the prosperity

of developing countries. In response to these accusations, Granwyth Hulatberi unashamedly argued that “might equals right”, followed by the contention that WTO critics “are simply too focused on reality, and on fact and figures” (see ‘The *Yes Men*’, 2003) and that people should start reading the works of Milton Friedman (‘profit above everything’) or Charles Darwin (‘survival of the fittest’), instead of socio-critical authors such as Leo Trotsky, Maximilien Robespierre or Abbie Hoffman. According to Granwyth Hulatberi, this new focus would effectively curb the steady stream of critique leveled at the WTO (The *Yes Men*, 2003).

As this example shows, masquerading as powerful actors allowed the *Yes Men* to speak absurd ‘truths’ in their name. This is indicative of how the ‘truths’ about the target in question are not accurate in a scientific sense, but tactically amplify particular features of the powerful actors (Hariman, 2008). In the specific case of Granwyth Hulatberi, the feature of the WTO being amplified is their well-known neo-liberal orientation. It is hence by imitating and overstressing the neo-liberal orientation of the WTO (e.g. purporting that the WTO vests rights only into those who have power) that they appear grotesquely disconnected from the reality of everyday people. Two aspects of caricaturing need to be singled out here.

First, the example demonstrates that caricaturing works to playfully subvert authoritative actors. Humor plays an important role in this subversion. As Speier (1998) aptly observed elsewhere, caricaturing turns reality around by making us laugh about the world that we know by giving us a second view of it. ‘Truths’ like the ones told by Granwyth Hulatberi are hence a remedy against seriousness, a temporary respite from the arduousness of everyday life (Scott, 1990). Laughter thus fulfills a psychological function by serving as an outlet for pent-up emotions; it serves as an instrument of emotional catharsis based on the so-called ‘just a joke effect’ (Nabi et al., 2007). Humor and the objective of making the audience laugh were explicit levers of the *Yes Men*’s disruptive truth-telling (Lambert, 2016), which they used to channel their discontent with the current situation and to express their various dissatisfactions.

A second point of caricaturing worth dwelling on pertains to how ‘truths’ which represent powerful actors in a grotesque way help bring to the fore the absurdity of these actors’ everyday doings. Thus, apart from making us laugh, caricaturing helps portray powerful actors “in a new, estranged way” (Vogelmann, 2017, p. 5). For instance, on a different occasion, Servin alias Dr. Andy Bichlbauer delivered a lecture at a conference in Salzburg where he inter alia touched upon the benefits of an international vote auction project that permitted voters to voluntarily sell their votes to the highest bidding corporation. Exchanging democratic power with purchasing power, according to Bichlbauer, was a pertinent means for curbing the unnecessary influence of the people and for ‘streamlining’ the political process (Salzman, 2003). Portraying the WTO as committed to selling out democratic values and rights, the *Yes Men* use the element of hyperbole to expose their target’s malice and the absurdity of their philosophy, aims and modus operandi. Using disruptive truth-telling to caricature powerful actors leads to a sense of ‘loss of familiarity’ (Lorenzini, 2015) as targets are portrayed in ways that are largely at odds with how they are normally represented or how the actors present themselves respectively. This was that case in both the *Yes Men*’s panel discussion and the conference speech, where grotesquely overblown stories of a powerful actor were used to make the organization “look like the absurdities that they actually are” (The *Yes Men*, 2005, p. 8; quoted in Stavrakakis, 2008, p. 1045). This brings into sharper relief how caricaturing counters the idealization of powerful actors by suggesting that there is a spark of truth in their overblown representations. Thus, the funny side of caricaturing powerful actors can make the audience laugh, but it also includes a discrediting act that can produce a “bitter laughter” (D’Errico and Poggi, 2016).

**5.2.1.2. Exposing.** Caricaturing exemplifies the role humor plays in how disruptive truth-telling gives the audience a good laugh, but it also creates a sense of estrangement that makes powerful actors appear in a less favorable light. *Exposing* is suggestive of how disruptive truth-telling makes the limits of powerful actors palpable. It does so by using ‘truths’ to demonstrate that corporate elites and public authorities are corrupt by unveiling their fallible motives. In the case of the *Yes Men*, exposing took the form of ‘truths’ which shed light on powerful actors’ complicity with repressive structures that cause ecological, political or economic problems (Byrne, 2009). A particularly evocative demonstration of exposing can be found in an initiative where Jacques Servin assumed the pseudonym Jude Finisterra to masquerade as a representative of the multinational chemical corporation Dow Chemical. During a press conference hosted by the British TV channel BBC, Jude Finisterra gave assurances that Dow Chemical would take full responsibility for the calamity that one of its subsidiaries, Union Carbide, had caused 20 years earlier in Bhopal, India (considered the world’s worst industrial disaster ever) and that his company would compensate the victims of the disaster through a \$12 billion fund (CNN, 2004). One interpretation would be that the press announcement by Finisterra was not even critical, for the ‘truth’ being uttered was anything but unpleasant (Foucault, 2011). A different interpretation becomes available, though, if we consider what happened when Finisterra was revealed as an impostor. Tellingly, the critical explosiveness of the Dow Chemical spoof was only unleashed once the hoax was made public. Dow Chemical publically retracted the good intentions which its apparent spokesperson had announced. This raised intriguing questions as to why the company had not done the things proclaimed by Jude Finisterra. This made the corporation look bad for not acknowledging responsibility for the Bhopal disaster and for failing to support the victims. Since Dow Chemical kept its passive stance even after public criticism was voiced, the *Yes Men*’s hoax revealed the corporation’s general aversion to any form of accommodation and settlement.

This example shows how disruptive truth-telling works to expose powerful actors’ hypocrisy and unwillingness to change. Exposing can take different forms. For instance, it can involve shedding light on how powerful actors create economic imbalance, how they deprive “citizens of a voice with corporate smokescreens” (Lambert, 2016, p. 78), or how they occupy a privileged status allowing them to take decisions without regard for their consequences for the rest of the world (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). As these examples demonstrate, exposing involves disruptive truth-telling as a means of ‘unhiding’ (Tamboukou, 2012) how powerful actors are either unable or unwilling to take a more proactive stance in aligning their actions and reasoning with principles other than those directly compatible with their self-interests (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). The critical thrust of exposing thus resides in how truth-telling brings to the fore not only powerful actors’ misconduct but their disinclination to exercise accountability for their actions by

justifying what they are doing, and to take responsibility for whatever negative outcomes their actions might yield (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

While disruptive truth-telling qua exposing is different from the type of antagonistic, blame-seeking speech applied by many activist organizations, it has a similar effect: it puts blame on powerful actors. More precisely, exposing instigates a progressive problematization of the ‘benevolence’ of those in power by bringing out undesirable features that powerful actors might not want to admit are there (Foucault, 1989). To unveil such ‘inconvenient truths’ is to put social conventions about the role of elites in society on display for collective reflection (Hariman, 2008). Exposing thus uses ‘truths’ to problematize actors that are overly wedded to utility-maximizing behavior by turning them into outsiders, deviants (Becker, 1963) or what McDermont (2013) refers to as ‘matters-of-public-concern’. Such denaturalization of purely self-interested behavior in turn deprives powerful actors of any moral reason for engaging in or promoting purely self-interested behavior, thus preventing them from absolving of their broader societal responsibilities (Dey and Steyaert, 2012).

The ability to problematize powerful actors, such as Dow Chemical, cannot possibly be overestimated especially during a time in which “global capitalism has such a monopoly on what we can think” (Hynes et al., 2007, p. 109). Indeed, the pervasiveness of TINA<sup>2</sup> has led many to give up on the thought of powerful actors as role models of circumspect business and corporate citizenship. While people in the contemporary conjuncture have become remarkably cynical in simply accepting that ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA) to profit-maximization and self-interest (Gibson-Graham, 2006), exposing creates reflexive insights about how our existence is deeply imbricated with the orthodox social imaginary, and how we are all, to varying degrees, wedded to prevailing systems of truth (Unger, 2007). This was evident not least in the *Yes Men*'s fake news. Although fooling their audiences, the experience of being misled compels people to reflect on how they have been conditioned to simply accept powerful actors' malpractices as a matter of course, and to “think that change can't happen” (Lambert, 2009).

To summarize, exposing uses disruptive ‘truths’ to create awareness about how “leaders and big corporations [...] put profits ahead of everything else” (Bierut, 2007, p. 85). In so doing, exposing problematizes purely utility maximizing behavior, while creating greater sensitivity of how we all too readily accept as ‘given’ powerful actors' misdeeds.

### 5.2.2. *Speaking the ‘truth’ to create desirable possible worlds*

The key insight so far has been that truth-telling works to ridicule and problematize powerful actors. Despite its critical function, the objective of disruptive truth-telling is not simply to raise awareness and cultivate a “better-informed citizenry” (Reilly, 2013, p. 1248), but to enable new experiences of what is possible (Foucault, 1998). The following section will thus focus on the two verbs *opening* and *desiring* which help us explain how disruptive truth-telling uses the problematization of powerful actors as an opportunity to rethink their (normative) role in society (Hutcheon, 1986).

**5.2.2.1. *Opening.*** While the interlocking process of caricaturing-exposing leads to the problematization and displacement of dominant ideas about the self-interested nature of business conduct (Calás et al., 2009), this creates the opportunity space for “something genuinely new to be *thought*” (Hynes et al., 2007, p. 109; emphasis in original). *Opening* is thus indicative of how truth-telling creates future realities which transcend the kind of self-interested behavior discussed in the previous sections. Opening imagines ‘something new’ (see Hynes and colleagues) through the creation of ‘possible worlds’, i.e. imaginatively created worlds which offer a view of a good society (Levitas, 2011). Possible worlds are projections or ‘fictions’ (Beckert, 2013) of the future which sketch “new possibilities of life” (Hjorth, 2013, p. 40).

In the case of the *Yes Men*, opening was particularly pronounced in a fake newspaper edition of the New York Times in 2008. The mock edition of the New York Times was co-produced with the support of around 30 writers from various New York dailies (including some of the New York Times itself) and distributed for free in Manhattan (Pilkington, 2008). Producing a near-perfect imitation of the original New York Times, the spoof comprised a myriad of ‘good news’. Examples included an article pointing out that the US congress had passed a maximum wage law that limits top salaries of executives to fifteen times the minimum wage. This news is clearly at odds with what most people would realistically expect from politicians, whether on the left or the right of the political spectrum. The article thus paints the picture of a possible world which demands a fresh look at reality ‘as we know it’. The idea of a maximum wage law on the one hand violates meritocratic values. On the other, it serves as a reminder that the excesses in executive remuneration, and associated pay gaps between rich and poor, result not necessarily from unequal competency, ability and effort but from unequal relations of power, and in particular the power of CEOs to define their own compensation (Elhagrasy et al., 1999). Probing what might become possible if imagination was set free (Lorenzini, 2015), opening involves the creation of possible worlds which index future scenarios which are in line with broader societal interests (Foucault, 2010). Opening imagination to new, more empowering and emancipatory possible worlds is accomplished by transmitting stories which move beyond prevailing “thought-patterns and categories by bringing them into an as-if world in which given reality is surpassed and a different one considered” (Beckert, 2013, p. 231).

The radically disruptive moment of opening is evident in how the ‘truth’ aspires to transcend the Friedman doctrine, the epitome of self-interested corporate behavior which boldly states that the ‘sole responsibility of business is to maximize profits’ (Friedman,

<sup>2</sup> TINA is, of course, not a self-contained and static interpretive framework but a set of dynamic, geographically and historically varied beliefs and assertions which are circulated, transformed and perpetuated through shared narratives. TINA might thus involve narratives which contend, for example, that the meltdown of capitalism during the recent recession was actually caused by governmental restraints rather than the excesses of the market (Hall et al., 2015), that governments all around the world are well-advised to look “only to capitalist solutions to the problems of capitalism” (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011, p. 92), or simply that neoliberal capitalism is, after all, still the best model of social coordination that “will benefit all” (Calás et al., 2009, p. 553).

1970). An insightful article from the fake New York Times edition by the *Yes Men* permits us to cast light on the disruptive moment of opening. The article in question reports the signing of a ‘true cost’ tax plan. Leveled against contemporary businesses which pass on their environmental costs to society to maximize their profits, the true cost tax plan is presented by the *Yes Men* as an attempt to force corporations to reflect the effective costs their products have on society in their pricing, the idea being that the higher pricing of wasteful or damaging products (such as plastic bottles) will incentivize the manufacture of more environmentally sound products. A key element of opening in this article is that the ‘truth’ is used to exalt (government) power, thereby exemplifying that the rules of the (business) game can, and indeed should, be changed in the direction of a more responsible mode of corporate conduct. The example displays how disruptive truth-telling steers common thought away from the Friedman doctrine by placing a pro-social ideal at the core of what business is. As a result, the *Yes Men's* disruptive truth-telling gives rise to possibilities of imagination which reside outside of the orthodox social imaginary of TINA.

To repeat, possible worlds are fictions. They are not, however, empty daydreams (Levitas, 2011), or Utopias (writ large) which were never even meant to be realized (think about, for instance, Thomas More's magnum opus ‘Utopia’). Far from it, possible worlds form the vehicle for making realities accessible which are more in line with the common good, but which reside outside of the orthodox social imaginary of TINA, wherefore they are sometimes impossible to envision (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). The primary function of opening inheres in how ‘truths’ anticipate future realities “in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved” (Levitas, 2011, p. 221). In the particular case of the *Yes Men's* article on the ‘true cost’ tax plan just mentioned, possible worlds bring to the fore that elite actors *could* have used their power in a more circumspect and responsible manner (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). In this way, opening denotes how disruptive truth-telling prefigures possible worlds which pose questions of what kind of society and economy is worth striving for (Žižek, 2013).

5.2.2.2. *Desiring*. Opening is about the creation of possible worlds which depict desirable future scenarios. The point is that not everything that is *desirable* is *actually desired*. Thus, whereas opening produces fictions of some future reality which are better aligned with societal interests, *desiring* makes those possible worlds *wanted*. Desiring represents the fine art of projecting a sense of possibility into possible worlds. This sense of possibility, paradigmatically displayed by former US President Obama's ‘Yes We Can’ campaign or Martin Luther King's ‘I Had A Dream’ speech, is particularly germane during a time where TINA tends to foster widespread cynicism by insisting that self-interest and utility maximization is all we can realistically expect (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Needless to say, not all truths have the capacity to render possible worlds desirable. For a possible world to become desirable, it is not enough that the prefigured reality looks appealing (although this is important too; Lorenzini, 2015). Desiring presupposes that possible worlds restore a sense of the alterability of reality, enabling people to understand that they are actually able to shape their own destiny. It hence appears easier to desire a possible world if the reality it depicts appears feasible. Or as Beckert (2013) felicitously puts it: “fictions do not have to be true but must be convincing” (p. 222). Two articles from the *Yes Men's* New York Times spoof help us corroborate this thesis. In a first article, it is mentioned that US congress will vote to use the profits generated by oil companies, such as ExxonMobil, to subsidize research into alternative energies. In another article, the New York Times itself apologizes for having been overly wedded to profit which resulted in efforts at media consolidation (i.e. takeover of various newspapers, television and radio stations). The article concludes that the New York Times will voluntarily ‘trust-bust’ itself to secure the independence of American journalism. While it is doubtful that either of these events will happen any time soon, this can make people angry that those in power are not making any effort to behave more responsibly. At the same time, there is a risk that the two articles will discourage people from taking active steps to change the situation precisely because the situation in both cases appears difficult to change. By contrast, if possible worlds do not appear to be difficult and, hence, unrealistic and out of touch with reality, this increases the probability that these realities will be wanted.

Similar to narratives told by entrepreneurs to “offer plausible explanations of current and future equivocal events as non-equivocal interpretation” (Gartner et al., 1992, p. 17), possible worlds need to establish elaborate fictions that support the *expectation* that future realities can be accomplished. This resonates with the fake New York Times edition by the *Yes Men* which comprised various articles creating possible worlds which appeared as something you could actually “hold in your hand, look at, and live in for a moment” (Lambert, 2009). For instance, the news about the maximum wage law that would limit top salaries of executives (see above) came just a few days after then-president Obama had announced that the salaries of CEOs who had received bailout money would be capped (ibid.). On this view, the possible world (capped CEO salaries) delineated by the *Yes Men* became desirable in the way it was “interwoven with elements that are indeed non-fictional” (Beckert, 2013, p. 224).

To use another example, in the bogus New York Times edition *desiring* included the announcement of the elimination of tuition fees at public universities (a reality in many European countries for decades). The notion of free university education through fake news thus puts in place a hypothesis of “how the future might look” (Gartner, 2007, p. 614) which is firmly based on present empirical information. This throws light on how being able to take into account historical information on the possible world makes that fiction convincing and, thus, wanted. This is the case, first, because empirical information proves that the possible world forms a realistic opportunity (Beckert, 2016). Second, linking possible worlds with empirical information helps reduce complexity by providing concrete details of the projected future reality (Smith and Anderson, 2004), thus providing “orientation *despite* the uncertainty inherent in the situation” (Beckert, 2013, p. 222; emphasis in original). Third, concrete experience cultivates hope (Bloch, 1995). To live in hope is not to surrender to inertia, as Camus (2005) famously suggested. Quite the contrary, hope based on experience instills in people a positive motivational state (Snyder et al., 1991), thus providing the kind of goal-directed energy required to achieve the future state. As Swedberg (2017) points out (referencing the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf), hope that is based on experience plays an important role in energizing people into action. For the purpose of this article, this points toward how *desiring*, if properly aligned with real-life experiences, “constitutes a very practical kind of hope, ready to be translated into reality” (Swedberg, 2017, p. 40).

To summarize, desiring brings with it an image of disruptive truth-telling as cultivating a heightened awareness not only for the need for, but also for the feasibility of, change. But even if desiring acts as an antidote to apathy, desiring does not yet guarantee that possible worlds will ever be transposed into actual realities. We will touch upon this point in the next section.

## 6. Qualifying the process model: some boundary conditions

In the previous section, we have theorized a process model which depicts the unfolding processes of disruptive truth-telling which leads from the problematization of powerful actors' self-interested behavior to the prefiguration of more empowering future realities. We now expand the model by discussing the 'who' and 'when' (Busse et al., 2016) of disruptive truth-telling. The aim is to clarify the boundary conditions determining when disruptive truth-telling will lead to possible worlds. We further discuss the boundary condition that influences whether possible worlds will be transformed into actual realities. We focus on boundary conditions as they pertain to (a) the activist entrepreneur(s), (b) the dissemination of possible worlds and (c) the actualization of possible worlds into actual realities.

### 6.1. Conditions of the activist entrepreneur

While the focal attention of our model has been the process of disruptive truth-telling, the ability to produce possible worlds is contingent on a number of individual qualities possessed by activist entrepreneurs. Taking our cues from extant literature on moral and political entrepreneurship (Becker, 1963, Elert et al., 2016; Hartman et al., 2005; Dey, 2016), we argue that for disruptive truth-telling to become successful presupposes a *reflexive understanding* of the orthodox social imaginary being targeted. Such understanding involves in-depth knowledge of and exposure to how each society is predicated on a distinct set of assumptions, beliefs and values, and how these limit and distort collective imagination by naturalizing particular worldviews (Hartman et al., 2005), while excluding alternative ways of imagining reality. Moreover, activist entrepreneurs must be *willing* to provoke and transform the social imaginary, thus essentially accepting the role of parrhesiasts who take risks by speaking the truth to power (Foucault, 2001, 2011). This willingness is based on a strong need to initiate a change of collective imagination that is consistent with the activist entrepreneur's own convictions (Becker, 1963). Third, and lastly, the ability to create possible worlds is mediated by the activist entrepreneur's *inventiveness*. Different from innovation which is mainly about pushing a new idea through in reality (Swedberg, 2006), invention is indicative of how activist entrepreneurs use imagination to overcome the limiting effects of the orthodox social imaginary by *seeing through it*. Invention thus points to the ability to identify and speak 'truths' in such a way as to shake up and challenge the stability and purported normality of the orthodox social imaginary. At the same time, invention entails the ability to envision (fictional) future realities (possible worlds) fostering images of organizations and doing business which are progressively less distorted by oppressive, asymmetrical relations of power.

### 6.2. Conditions of disseminating possible worlds

The conjunction of disruptive truth-telling and possible worlds is largely a function of particular characteristics of the activist entrepreneur. But what additional conditions must be met for possible worlds to become *known*? The answer to this question is *iterability*. Iterability describes the capacity to disseminate a text across space and time. More specifically, it denotes the capacity of an utterance to be repeatable in different contexts. Repeatable thus means that a piece of written or spoken text can be removed from its original context and placed, or 'cited' (Derrida, 1977) in another context. Iterability clearly played a role in the *Yes Men's* media spoofs whose success would not have been possible had their 'truths' not been repeated<sup>3</sup> and hence spread through digital communication technologies as well as print media. The fake New York Times edition offers a case in point in this regard. The possible worlds sketched in the various articles of the fake New York Times edition became known as a result of the hoax being reported in around 1000 press releases in the USA alone (Lambert, 2016). Iterability thus points to how possible worlds created through disruptive-truth telling travel beyond the location in which they were first enacted (which in the case of the New York Times fake was Manhattan). While iterability renders particular 'truths' known, these iterations are often performed by actors other than those who had initially produced them. In other cases, the disruptive truth-teller is involved in the iteration. This latter case could be observed when journalists interviewed the *Yes Men* after their cultural artifacts had been exposed as hoaxes. These interviews offered the *Yes Men* an opportunity to iterate and clarify their problematization of the common belief in the righteousness, integrity and immunity of corporate and public elites (Reilly, 2013), thus strengthening their demand for a future which transcends the biased, narrow self-interest underpinning much of contemporary business. Against this backdrop, we argue that iterability points to the importance of repeating possible worlds as much as possible so that they can reach a broad audience and become part of collective consciousness at large. A high level of awareness increases the likelihood that possible worlds will become the basis for real change. This brings us directly to the last point.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, iterability does not designate a simple repetition of an utterance, since each iteration will necessarily alter, to a greater or lesser extent, the meaning of that utterance.

### 6.3. Conditions of translating possible worlds into actual realities

While iterability attends to how possible worlds are disseminated, a widespread distribution does not guarantee that steps will be taken toward creating actual changes. Succinctly put, iterability makes possible worlds known, but these possible worlds are still fictions. These fictions are actualizable, though, which is to say that possible worlds can motivate actual changes of reality (Beckert, 2016). Many examples of such transitions from possible worlds to actual realities can be stated, such as when the European Union banned battery cages for egg-laying hens in 2012 (Singer, 2012). This shift in practice became possible in the way possible worlds (a fictional reality in which battery cages are banned) started to shape decisions and inform practices in such a way that battery cages eventually were prohibited by law. For a possible world to be actualized into an actual reality, a process of *translation* needs to take place (Waeraas and Nielsen, 2016). Translation describes the process whereby one or several actors assemble dispersed actors with different interests and beliefs into a broader network (referred to by Callon, 1986 as ‘enrollment’) which take the problematization of self-interested business behavior as an opportunity to formulate concrete solutions offering ways for dealing with the state of affairs being criticized. Translation is based on collective narrations, negotiations and mobilizations of eminent actors which build a bridge between possible worlds and actual realities by promoting forms of doing business that help solve societal concerns (Wright and Nyberg, 2017). As possible worlds are often non-prescriptive (they do not determine how the actual world needs to be put into practice), translation processes develop concrete paths of action that help do away with the restrictions that may block the realization of possible worlds (Beckert, 2016). The realization of possible worlds is subject to political maneuvers and power plays as different actors will try to influence and dominate the translation process. Consequently, key actors need to take different measures to ensure that the targeted aims (i.e. promoting more pro-social forms of doing business) are protected and realized, and that actors actually endorse and enact the roles that were proposed for them during their integration into the network (Callon, 1986). Translation draws attention to how the problematization serves the purpose not only of grabbing the public's attention about critical issues associated with powerful actors (such as overly self-interested behavior, corruption, tax avoidance, etc.), but for compelling these actors to rethink their dominant modus operandi so as to encourage more progressive forms of business conduct. There are of course different ways in which powerful actors can be nudged toward a more responsible mode of conduct. Further analysis is needed to take a close look at how possible worlds are translated into actual realities by, for instance, lobbying for government reforms (also referred to as political entrepreneurship; Elert et al., 2016), creating links with transversal struggles, boycotts and campaigns to ‘enforce’ responsible corporate behavior through ‘naming and shaming’, co-creating soft-law standards of corporate responsibility or using market principles to solve existing problems (Driver, 2012).

To end this section, it should be noted that translation is *not* a constitutive element of activist entrepreneuring as activist entrepreneurs do not necessarily lead the translation process, and they might not even be part of this process at all. Activist entrepreneurs are in the business of turning particular experiences and actors into a ‘matter-of-public-concern’ (McDermont, 2013) with an eye toward prefiguring more emancipatory future scenarios (Vogelmann, 2017). This does not exclude that activist entrepreneurs might become part of the solution to the problem they are propagating.

## 7. Concluding discussion

The starting point of this article was that dominant conceptions of entrepreneurship as a social change activity (ESC) have been beholden to a market-based understanding of social change. We have argued that consideration of ‘social change’ merely as “something bolted onto entrepreneurship [as a primarily economic activity]” (Hjorth and Holt, 2016, p. 50) ignores that social change is a multifaceted phenomenon with a wide range of transformative dynamics. Thus, to rethink the intersection of entrepreneurship and social change, we have opted for a creative use of two bodies of humanities literatures: the body of work on *parrhesia* and (utopian) imagination. As the concepts we have drawn on are relatively broad, we have updated and combined the various theories to make sure they have explanatory purchase for the scholarly entrepreneurship community. Based on a process of conceptual blending, we have suggested two sensitizing concepts. The first concept is activist entrepreneuring and it allows an appreciation of entrepreneuring as a critical and imaginative creation process. The second concept is disruptive truth-telling and it describes the generative mechanism of activist entrepreneuring the transformative force of which resides in how it instigates alternative, more pro-social ways of imagining reality. Together, disruptive truth-telling delineates a double movement: it is at once a force of resistance that counter-acts the limiting effect of the orthodox social imaginary and as a transformative force which illuminates what is possible if imagination is set free. Our theorizing has been inspired by previous work which has called for an understanding of entrepreneuring as a primarily social force that transforms our shared interpretive frameworks and the corresponding “facts we otherwise accept” (Hjorth and Holt, 2016, p. 52). Crossing the boundaries of canonical entrepreneurship theory has been a basic prerequisite for suggesting an understanding of ‘entrepreneurial’ as pertaining to how critical and inventive ways of speaking are used to upset the status quo in intentional, goal-directed ways. We would now like to highlight some key insights our article has fostered.

We deem our theorizing on disruptive truth-telling as an elemental social change activity timely in light of all the talk about fake or alternative news. While there is, as Tamboukou (2012) aptly reminds us, a lot of ambivalence about “whether people mean what they say or say what they mean anymore” (p. 849), a key insight from our theorizing has been that fake ‘truths’ are not necessarily undesirable, but positive in the way they help create the conditions under which alternative scenarios of “how the future might look” (Gartner, 2007, p. 614) become imaginable. The *Yes Men* case presented us with a unique opportunity to rethink what fake news can accomplish: they demonstrate that an adroit use of fake news can establish possible worlds which prefigure a reality benefitting society at large, instead of merely satisfying the sectional interests of elites. Thus, our article has demonstrated that the enunciation of

truths, which are not true in a scientific sense, might prove germane to exposing the self-interests upon which (the imageries of) powerful actors hinge, and to transcend the seemingly unavoidable co-implication of power and the maximization of individual utility.

The humanities have been indispensable for our theorizing. Foucault's work on parrhesia has provided the theoretical scaffolding to unpack the critical role of speech in problematizing the abhorrent nature of powerful actors, while denaturalizing the apparent 'necessity' and 'naturalness' of purely utility maximizing behavior. The literature on utopian imagination allowed us to elaborate how disruptive truth-telling opens a crucial space for imagining forms of business and markets which do not resort to the Friedman doctrine. Contained within the possible worlds disruptive truth-telling creates is hence a type of doing business which abstains from purporting that the only responsibility of business is to create profit. While our use of the humanities necessarily remains partial, for entrepreneurship scholarship it signals the existence of ample opportunities for drawing on the humanities to help challenge and revisit conventional insights about entrepreneurial phenomena related to ESC. The humanities have theoretical purchase in that they allow fresh ways of understanding entrepreneurial phenomena which would not have been available from the common stock of 'orthodox [entrepreneurship] theories' (Oswick et al., 2011). We hence believe that the humanities will help galvanize an inspired stream of prospective research that can open up new ways of knowing ESC. This might not be as straightforward as it might appear. While entrepreneurship scholars in the past have been quite open toward interpretive, hermeneutic and phenomenological views adopted from the humanities in their research, they had scant regard for the kind of critical humanities perspectives used in our article. Thus we argue that to reap the rewards of the humanities, we need to shake up the (often implicit) prohibitions and censorship mechanisms which have eclipsed critical research from top-tier entrepreneurship research. Central to this demand is the realization that critical humanities-based research has already made great headway into disciplines outside of entrepreneurship research, such as critical management studies, organization studies, sociology or policy studies, and we argue that it is high time for entrepreneurship scholars to gain a stronger voice in those debates.

Disruptive truth-telling has moved the center of attention toward the 'crisis of imagination' caused by the orthodox social imaginary. This should be of importance to entrepreneurship scholars to the extent that the shared interpretive frameworks, which shape what people can think and do, are constitutive of many of today's most intricate problems. What hence strikes us as paradoxical is that existing research commonly accepts that overcoming constraints is at the very heart of social change-oriented entrepreneurship (Tobias et al., 2013), while abstaining from engaging with constraints in relation to the orthodox social imaginary. But if one accepts that entrepreneurship is well placed to change society (rather than the economy; Swedberg, 2006) by removing constraints – which "can be of an intellectual, psychological, economic, social, institutional, or cultural nature" (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 479) – then does a good reason exist why entrepreneurship might not remove constraints related to the orthodox social imaginary? Thus, we deem it important for entrepreneurship research to acknowledge that changes of collective imagination are a vital change accomplishment in its own right. The pro-social value of such changes, as we have argued, is to instigate significant qualitative transformations of collective imagination by exposing and reconfiguring the boundaries of our shared horizon of thought – think 'There Is No Alternative' – which perpetually refutes the need for fundamental shifts in how powerful decision makers behave. As our article has only scratched the surface of how these qualitative transformations of collective imagination come about, future research is needed to fathom how changes of collective imagination sensitize people to the need for change and for rethinking established solutions (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016).

Our theorizing has suggested that disruptive truth-telling is a heterogeneous process, and that its constitutive elements – *caricaturing*, *exposing*, *opening* and *desiring* – vary in terms of their intensities and temporalities. The four verbs have sketched the process of disruptive truth-telling that leads to, and determines, desirable future realities in a generic and ideal-type fashion. As the explanatory power of our process model is necessarily limited by contingent factors, we have introduced a set of boundary conditions (Busse et al., 2016) which offer a clearer picture of 'who' engages in disruptive truth-telling and 'when' disruptive truth-telling leads to possible worlds, including when they are realized into actual realities. The first boundary condition dealt with the activist entrepreneur (which can be an individual or a collective actor). We have argued that the activist entrepreneur's ability to open imagination to alternative future realities presupposes a profound awareness of the orthodox social imaginary in question, including its limiting and distorting effect. We have further argued that the activist entrepreneur must be willing and capable of critiquing the orthodox social imaginary and of envisioning possible worlds. The second boundary condition dealt with how possible worlds become known. We have thereby suggested iterability as a way of thinking about the importance of disseminating possible worlds beyond the location in which they were first produced. More specifically, we have argued that the success of disruptive truth-telling in making particular possible worlds known depends on the ability to repeat those worlds as often as possible so that they can generate the greatest possible response. As a final point, we have suggested translation as the primary moderating factor between possible worlds and actual realities. This has allowed us to make visible the crucial role of mobilizing various actors around matters-of-public-concern who take active steps toward formulating concrete, tangible solutions. We have stressed that activist entrepreneurs do not necessarily lead or even participate in the translation process, since their primary function is to create conditions of imagination conducive to the prefiguration of more emancipatory future realities. However, even if activist entrepreneuring is not defined by its ability to create concrete pathways leading to the realization of those realities, our theorizing does not exclude the possibility that activist entrepreneurs might participate in finding solutions to the problems they identified.

To conclude, it needs to be stressed that disruptive truth-telling is not endemic to activist entrepreneuring.<sup>4</sup> To speculate, disruptive truth-telling might already be an inherent part of the toolkit of many social change-oriented entrepreneurs. These

<sup>4</sup> We are grateful to the special editors who have pointed this out.

entrepreneurs might complement whatever opportunistic endeavor they are involved in, with critical speech that helps them voice their concerns and take a stance against overly self-interested behaviors. However, apart from the few exceptions we are aware of (Gawell, 2006; Hockerts, 2006), there is hardly any scientific research grappling with if and how social change-oriented enterprises employ critical speech to lever support for their respective social mission. Given the paucity of studies in this area, more research is needed to investigate, empirically and theoretically, how ‘classical’ social-change oriented enterprises combine activist and opportunistic behaviors and endeavors to maximize their ability to enhance the lives of people in largely beneficial ways. Another area of prospective research would be to study activist entrepreneuring not as something taking place within a single organization, but as a shared and collaborative endeavor involving different organizational actors. Such a focus would open up new ways of studying activist entrepreneuring as a ‘distributed agency’ where social change-oriented enterprises and activist organizations pool their complementary resources to create the conditions conducive to more emancipatory forms of imagination and action (Akemu et al., 2016).

We are mindful that our theorizing offers a necessarily tentative and incomplete attempt to expand the scholarly understanding of the intricate relationship between entrepreneurship and social change. At the same time, we hope future research will carry this nascent debate forward, opening up many new conversations in the academic community and in practice.

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