

25. Social Justice

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Definition and Background

While technical communication has traditionally been regarded as an objective, unbiased, fact-driven field, over the last couple of decades, the field has experienced a movement towards cultural studies (Scott, 2003; Scott & Longo, 2006) as well as what Angela Haas and Michelle Eble (2018) call the “social justice turn.” Social justice, as it is theorized and practiced in technical communication, is a large-scale amending of social injustice that affects humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment. To apply social justice frameworks to technical communication includes incorporating scholarship in cultural rhetorics, human rights and human dignity, feminism and gender studies, disability studies, race and ethnicity, intercultural communication, and community engagement. Although conversations in these research areas have been ongoing, the advancement to include them within the field of technical communication is relatively new and growing in momentum, as evidenced in recent and forthcoming publications (Agboka, 2012; Colton & Holmes, 2018; Haas, 2012; Jones et al., 2016; Shelton, 2020; Walton, 2016; Walton et al., 2019).

The social justice turn resulted from scholars openly acknowledging the need for inclusivity, as well as the need for scholars and practitioners to investigate how social and ideological identity markers impact the way we communicate. Instead of viewing these identity markers as isolated from the technical communication documents that we produce, this turn has brought theories and methods into conversation with each other. For example, social justice research argues that all technical communication situations are intercultural and that technical communicators must examine the role of systems of power (Agboka, 2012; Haas & Eble, 2018). As technical communicators consider relationships of power, some have studied the implications of environmental justice within minoritized communities in Dearborn, Michigan (Sackey, 2018), as well as how to communicate about climate change within multidisciplinary contexts (Cagle & Tillery, 2015). Social justice has informed the way technical communicators consider identity markers such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, country of origin, sexuality and gender, and ableness, and in doing so, interrogates seemingly objective documents to promote equity and transparency. While social justice concerns intersect with almost all conversations in technical communication, a few keywords in this collection are particularly relevant and informative when practiced alongside social justice principles. In this collection, Zarah C. Moeggenberg identifies the

field's interest in *inclusion* as a direct effect of the social justice turn. Likewise, Rachael Sullivan addresses the importance of *design ethics* to account for a variety of social justice contexts, and Ashanka Kumari examines how the application of *equity* promotes a design environment that accounts for all bodies.

■ Design Application

In terms of design thinking, integrating social justice contexts has changed the way the field studies and creates. For example, software engineers have examined how code and coding are inherently biased and how computer algorithms exhibit the racist and/or sexist leanings of their designers. In terms of user experience (UX), technical communication is more concerned about the accessibility of design and considering which bodies are not able to access certain projects. Another perspective is human-centered design (HCD), which is a way that technical communicators have sought to design documents that are more equitable and just (Friess, 2010; Jones & Wheeler, 2016; Walton, 2016). This kind of design places people at the center of projects and works to empower users, regardless of their race, class, gender, sexuality, country of origin, or ableness.

Langdon Winner's (1986) study of architect Robert Moses' designs presents an excellent example of what happens when social justice is not incorporated into design principles. Moses, who was responsible for countless park, road, and bridge designs in the first half of the 20th century, is infamous for designing a low-clearance overpass in Long Island that prevented buses from accessing many parkways, as well as Jones Beach. This design was intentionally biased to prevent impoverished residents, as well as Black and Brown people, from moving about these spaces and places (Haas, 2012; Sackey, 2018; Slack & Wise, 2005). This illustration underscores the significance of social justice matters within making and design. While there is much more work to be done to revamp making and design thinking within a social justice framework, the field of technical communication has made significant strides over the last several years.

■ Pedagogical Integration

There is a growing community and body of knowledge that support integrations of social justice activism in our pedagogy. For example, the Digital Rhetoric Collaborative out of the University of Michigan Sweetland Center for Writing has curated a wiki resource for teaching social justice in the technical communication classroom ("Social justice," 2017). The case example on the wiki shared the conclusion that social justice is not optional to technical communication, and thus students must engage with advocacy work that resonates with their values and beliefs. A viable assignment that introduces this importance involves having students examine an everyday technology (e.g., microwave, Keurig coffee maker, Fitbit tracker, Apple iPad) and its associated technical communication (e.g.,

user guide, help documentation, customer support resources). Students can be assigned to perform a socio-rhetorical analysis to understand the intersection of ideologies and issues of class, race, gender, and ability in the design and use of technical tools and documents.

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