

Languages, Infrastructures, and Ecologies:

Toward Rematerializing Activisms

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Abstract

This article reports on the three sessions of the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference including the Keynote Address and connects them to three other sessions through the lens of social justice to navigate the intersections of language, access, material ecologies, and social infrastructures. Echoing the conference theme, I suggest that those sessions attend to material complexities and local conditions and help us recognize culturally and locally responsive approaches to discursive activities in research and pedagogy in the field of TPC and that this work helps technical communicators and educators sustain and advance disciplinary identities of which social justice scholarship is a central part. By using my reflections on the observed ATTW sessions, I conclude that we can adopt what I term ethical pragmatism as an actionable takeaway, which refers to practical approaches grounded in each community's history, culture, and sociomaterial conditions.

Introduction

During the 2021 ATTW Conference, I focused on exploring concrete local solutions provided by technical communication work to promote access and justice for linguistically, culturally, and racially minoritized groups. Technical and professional communication (TPC) scholars and practitioners play significant roles at the forefront of countering social injustice that is often invisible and embedded in our systemic infrastructures and sociomaterial ecologies. The 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference made concrete contributions to the field by asking questions around social justice, language, material ecologies, and writing infrastructures:

- What can technical communicators do to address social injustice and dismantle forms of oppression at the intersection of race, language, access, and power structures in communication, writing, and technologies?
- How can technical communicators advocate for marginalized communities?
- How can technical communicators engage marginalized communities in research projects?

These justice-related questions have been regarded as part of disciplinary identities. In her influential 2009 article, Carolyn Rude uses mapping frameworks that define technical communication as a distinctive field, which includes “social change” as one of the categories along with “disciplinarity,” “pedagogy,” and “practice” (176). Rude describes questions of social change: “How do texts function as agents of knowledge-making, action, or change?” (183). She aptly explains, “If we are to understand ourselves and our field, we must understand where power is located and how it shifts” (178). Through these social change questions, she emphasizes the ethical role of technical communication as a discipline: “They [social

change questions] reflect a discipline's responsibility to contribute beyond self-improvement and self-perpetuation as well as the relevance of this field's knowledge to the public sphere" (179).

While attending this conference, I, as a scholar who studies community-based literacy, linguistic diversity, and intercultural rhetorics, focused on coupling the ATTW conference's agendas including language, access, and power with social change questions Rude demarcated. As she points out, the social change area can be represented as "the most amorphous part of the map" (Rude 2009, 202). Indeed, the presentations, research questions, and processes the 2021 ATTW sessions shared have shown the diversity and complexity of social justice work in TPC. In their 2019 book *Technical Communication After the Social Turn*, Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha Jones extend this strand of TPC inquiry and explicitly redefine the field through the social justice lens by delineating the problems of systemic oppression and inequities and offering frameworks for practicing social justice work in TPC. I take their work as a groundbreaking and central framework for me to engage myself with the TPC field, as it explicitly situates social justice questions and practices (or social change, in Rude's term) and coalitional action as the pivotal constituents that shape disciplinary identities. Rude's (2009) work on the disciplinarity of the field of technical communication and Walton et al.'s (2019) call for social justice work in TPC help us recognize that social justice and coalitional actions are not only parts of the research questions that arise in the field of technical communication but also parts of the most important components and potentials that sustain and renew the TPC field.

Overall, the focus on language of this conference helped me address questions and practical research project examples. My own questions about engaging language and culture in TPC started from my lived experiences in which I felt rigidity in researching and teaching TPC with a focus on linguistic diversity. While

literacy education, rhetoric, and writing studies have actively questioned white supremacy in Euroamerican linguistic norms (i.e., Standard American English and its whiteness as a dominant and standardized norm) and attempted to include vernacular languages and a wide range of different registers, languages, modalities, and contexts into writing classrooms in higher education through critical reflection, research and pedagogy in technical communication and industrial practices often emphasize transmission models of communication, which is similar to what Carolyn R. Miller (1979) describes as the “windowpane theory of language” (611) that represents language as a transparent medium. Often, the emphases on clarity and plain language are used as an excuse that maintains Euroamerican or other dominant linguistic and cultural norms in workplace and public settings. My belief that the linguistically, culturally, and locally specific needs of users at the intersection of regional regimes and global flows should be more included in TPC motivated me to create more transformative activism in TPC, and I felt my belief was firmly supported by the conference organizers, committees, panelists, and audiences involved in the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference. While crossing disciplinary boundaries and facing different attitudes to language and writing, I decided to revisit the 2021 ATTW presenters’ work and the ensuing conversations with iterative reflections on globalized workplaces, multilingual contents, and diversified localization strategies to meet the goal of social change. It has been acknowledged that the ATTW conference organizers over the past decades have actively created spaces for social justice work in the field. For example, Walton and Agboka (2021) point out that the ATTW conference organizers have amplified work from marginalized researchers and arranged sessions focused on social justice, “actively engag[ing] in decolonial, advocacy, and civic work” (4). More recently, by comparing keywords in the titles and abstracts published in *Technical Communication Quarterly* (TCQ) or appeared at ATTW, Heather Noel Turner (2022) suggests that the ATTW Conferences have been an important forum for social

justice scholarship: “The keyness of the terms advocacy and justice and their increase in frequency in connection to those [ATTW] conference CFPs suggests the importance of those topics to conference organizers and leaders, as well as academic technical communicators” (11).

However, as Walton and Agboka (2021) also point out, “relatively few resources are available within the field to directly support and inform it” (4). Researchers from other relevant fields have pointed out that the term *justice* is a “concept within Western thought” (Simpson 2016, 21) or that “dematerializing the term ‘justice’” (Tuck and Yang 2018, 4) should be forewarned. While attending to these concerns, I would argue that these critically nuanced approaches (Simpson 2016; Tuck and Yang 2018) reorient us toward more social justice work informed by careful consideration of the specific locality and materiality. It is agreed that spaces for social justice still need more resources and examples of active engagement. The 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference was an attempt to *rematerialize* social justice work with a focus on language and diverse stakeholders including community partners, scholars/research assistants, and disenfranchised or marginalized community members, who have yet to be fully advocated for, whose agency and expertise have yet to be recognized, and who have not been ethically represented in the field. Although community partners and members were engaged in research processes in community-based participatory research the field of TPC, it does not ensure that they are ethically presented in research dissemination and distribution of research benefits. To study practical resources and examples of social justice work, I was attentive to especially participating in sessions that discussed community-based research, ecological and infrastructural dynamics, and decolonial and transnational approaches to TPC research. In this article, I will examine how the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference sessions helped me navigate what practical solutions and collaborative practices among stakeholders can be envisioned and how those takeaways are intertwined with

my positionality and prior experience as a community-based research scholar. Then, I will share some implications and actionable suggestions with TPC scholars, workers at organizations, and community partners/members. Many parts of my reflections are retrospective, based on my personal notes and observations added with my own thoughts. Some observations are based on the shared access materials provided by the presenters if my attendance or notes were incomplete. Rather than intending to provide documentation, my aim here is to develop my own reflections as a scholar at the intersection of social justice agendas and diverse users and audiences—such as multilingual communities, immigrants, language minorities, and disenfranchised or unenfranchised people—and suggest actionable directions.

Specifically, my reflection will use two frameworks: ecologies and infrastructures through the lens of linguistic justice. Aiming at networking these different perspectives that mediate risk environments, ecologies, built-in infrastructures and languages is important. It should be acknowledged that intercultural decolonial approaches to technical communication have undertaken these intersections. Extending this scholarship in TPC and networking the current orientations of scholarships that address ecologies, environmental risk communication, and infrastructure, my reflections will call on TC scholars to envision more *radical* and *material* approaches to languages and access in order to include noncitizens and nonhumans into decision-making and designing processes. I will also point out those radical approaches are already exemplified by the ATTW presenters (e.g., Angeli, Lester, Grawey, Deep, Jezykowski, and Sinclair; Banyia; Robledo; Cagle, Sackey, and Ross; Sun; Lopez; Cardinal; Lindgren and Fernandes) and Keynote Address speakers' (Barker and Bloom-Pojar) sessions that developed collaborative projects and centered community workers' grounded experience and knowledge. Below is my reflection on the three sessions I focus on: B1 "Decolonizing and

Internationalizing Technical Communication Research;” F2 “Defining and Demarcating Infrastructure as a Concept, Methodology, and Object of Study for Technical Communication;” and the Keynote Address by Maria Barker and Rachel Bloom-Pojar. I also extend discussions by using materials from sessions B4 “Community, Family, and Critical Engagement in Environmental Rights Action,” F5 “Analyzing and Intervening in Technical Communication Contexts,” and H3 “Justice in Technical Communication Research and Practice.”

Revisiting the sessions above, I set up three guiding questions that organize my reflections:

- What intersections of language, access, and power should we recognize and navigate in research and pedagogy in TPC?
- What non-discursive factors intervene or inform in the connections among language, access, and power?
- What material relations do we need to pay more attention to regarding language, access, and power in order to promote justice in researching and teaching TPC?

The ATTW Conference Sessions: An Overview

Presenters have taken diverse approaches to the research study of technical communication across contexts, different partnership arrangements, and diverse research designs and methodologies. My reflection started growing from a question from the F2 session where the term *infrastructure* was defined in relation to ecology. If infrastructure and ecology frameworks in TPC discuss relations between humans and nonhumans (i.e., animals, plants, environments including air, land, and water, organizations, writing technologies) despite their differences, how does each framework approach languages differently? In what follows, I will briefly

summarize the sessions I attended and narrate my reflection and positionality.

Language, Access, Material Ecologies, and Social Infrastructures

Language and access are operated, arranged, disseminated, governed, and controlled by power. Trans- or multilingual approaches to language, writing, and communication or participatory approaches to research design alone cannot secure access and justice for minoritized groups and marginalized communities. For example, Derek Ross and Lauren Cagle, in the session of “Community, Family, and Critical Engagement in Environmental Rights Action,” state, it is important to recognize “the shared humanity” (Ross 2021) and meet the needs of the “nontraditional stakeholders” (Cagle 2021) to shape organizational or community-based research ethics in environmental communication research.

By using her research on a non-profit organization and its redesigned intake form, Alison Cardinal’s session “Justice in Technical Communication Research and Practice” examined how a local community organization uses its knowledge and experience in revising the intake form through the lenses of superdiversity and human-centered design. She discovers that the localization and redesign process of their intake form in addressing superdiverse clients, which is different from conventional UX industry practices. In this approach, community workers and experts prioritized the “dignity and humanity of their clients above everything else, even at the expense of the organization” (Cardinal 2021). These local values and human-centered user experience designs, rooted in the lived experiences of the community organization workers in serving their clients, are at the intersection of language and shifting environments in globalized contexts.

In the same session, ecological and environmental issues were discussed in relation to social justice work. Dina Lopez examines how local communities in Puerto Rico use culturally sensitive, creative strategies to navigate post-Hurricane Maria realities. These grassroots strategies and tactics based on social media make a stark contrast to government authorities' approaches. Based on the sociopolitical and historical specificities of Puerto Rico and their cultures, Lopez investigates language, communication design, and disruption of material ecologies. Their work helped me recognize creative and place-based practices, which arose in the process of localization from underserved marginalized communities and organizations in which we can observe a lack of resources and access that is appropriate to locale-specific communities. Cardinal's "superdiversity audience analysis" and Lopez's analysis of Puerto Ricans' culture-based approaches to technical communication help me recognize with empirical evidence and stories about how local values are leveraged and honored by underserved communities and groups of people from/within these communities who have not been fully recognized as technical communicators. In community-based settings, we see how community experts, as Laura Gonzales and Ann Shivers-McNair state in their Call for Proposals, not only transmit but also articulate the needs of users and practically meet the communicative and material needs of their clients/users with the "full authorial contribution and power of the mediator" (Slack, Miller, and Doak 2006, 37). These presentations help us reaffirm that "[we need to think] of our work less as discovery of the new and more as the *recovery* and *recuperation* of alternative dispositions toward meaning making practices, including both those our dominant training has led us to recognize as monolingual or monomodal and those that training leads us to think of as multi- or trans-lingual/modal" (Horner, Selfe, and Lockridge 2015).

In the session "Decolonizing and Internationalizing Technical Communication Research," David Robledo explained how

research projects that deal with the displacement of small-scale fishers ironically rely on extractive practices that devalue their local work. Sweta Baniya described how transnational risk communication enacts decolonial methods and communication strategies in the aftermath of the Nepal 2015 earthquake. In their session “Analyzing and Intervening in Technical Communication Contexts,” Chris Lindgren and Maggie Fernandes investigated how social media infrastructures are emerging as *infrastructures* that facilitate or disrupt access. By coupling Susan Star and Karen Ruhleder’s 1996 work on infrastructure and Nastasha Jones’ 2016 work on “praxis,” Lindgren and Fernandes used the term “infrastructural praxis” and navigated “Twitter hashtag activism” in the material reality of Trump’s border-wall plans. As Sarah Read (2019) points out, “Technical communication and composition scholars have either anticipated or explicitly drawn on the material, functional, social, and relational notions of infrastructure as they have been articulated in economics and computing” (241). The “relational, social, and functional aspects” of social and material infrastructures (Read 2019, 239) ask us to see writing practices informed by systems of oppression and injustice. A traditional boundary between social discourses and material environments was questioned in Lindgren and Fernandes’s work alongside Huatong Sun’s work from the session “Defining and Demarcating Infrastructure as a Concept, Methodology and Object of Study for Technical Communication” and productively generated research agendas and methodological questions that involved social justice in material and discursive environments and infrastructures.

Rematerializing Language Labor and Research Processes

In their Keynote Address, Barker and Bloom-Pojar foregrounded the notion of *confianza* to explain how words and languages affect relationships by using their community-university-partnership-based project with *promotores de salud* at Planned Parenthood of

Wisconsin. The detailed process they shared about how they came to be partnered, what kind of carefully designed procedures were involved to better communicate between them, and who came from different positionalities helped me reflect on my previous community-based research and better plan and design my future research projects. How community expertise can be valued and how words can help researchers and community experts build their “*confianza*,” which is often beyond the literal meaning of “trust”: the time, commitment, labor, and attention to practical outcomes that can help communities. The feelings, anxiety, affective dimension, and language labor, and time and emotional commitments from both perspectives or from multiple stakeholders have been rarely reported to the field and often regarded as tacit knowledge, not as an explicit scholarship or a subject matter. These labor aspects have been invisible and considered less important than research outcomes despite their significance in the research process. Similarly, Elizabeth Angeli, Jessica Lester, Tom Grawey, Nikita Deep, Julia Jezykowski, and Patrick Sinclair’s roundtable discussion showed how collaborative research can be shaped around the rhetorical aspects of medical communication across diverse professional contexts by acknowledging interdependence between stakeholders beyond disciplinary silos and more importantly can be ethically represented to the public by involving undergraduate research assistants and partnered medical professionals and materializing/visualizing mutual reciprocity (“Building Knowledge”). In these presentations, it is reaffirmed that social justice should be implemented in research results, research processes, and research disseminations to benefit communities or organizations who partnered with the researcher.

Takeaways and Actionable Suggestions: Toward an Ethical Pragmatism

As shown above in the Keynote Address, Bloom-Pojar and Barker advised that researchers should pay attention to the importance of language in building relationships and practicing social justice in the research process and dissemination. In her personal email communication with me in my preparation for this writing, Barker added, “continuing conversations and commitments on ecologies and infrastructures is super important and if I may, please remember to keep the language simple. We want communities to be able to read, understand, what the research is about and have access to the findings, in a manner they understand. Writ[ing] more about the future actionable approaches researchers, practitioners, and community take is a great way to continue to bring attention to this” (Barker, personal email, November 24, 2021).

How do we work in the field of technical communication to stand up against settler colonialism, white supremacy, and dominant narratives and address social inequality in technical communication contexts in global migration? I still hear Barker’s advice. To respond to her suggestion, I turn to the notion of hyperpragmatism conceptualized by J. Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine V Wills (2006). This term has been used to identify how technical communicators are complicit in systemic oppression by using pragmatism as a “hegemonic ideology and set of practices that privileges utilitarian efficiency and effectiveness, including rhetorical effectiveness, at the expense of sustained reflection, critique, or ethical action” (9). As defined, “hyperpragmatism is decidedly not radical” (10).

Echoing Barker’s voice, I propose we need to reshape hyperpragmatism for marginalized communities through a revision. Technical writing is critically described as a “hegemonic tool for maintaining cultural and material capital” (Scott, Longo,

and Wills 2006, 7). Nastasha Jones, Kristen Moore, and Rebecca Walton (2016) also state that TPC has been described as a discipline that has “a pragmatic identity that values effectiveness” (212). As Scott, Longo, and Wills (2006) point out, we already made progress in acknowledging that technical communication is a social construction and that we as technical communicators do not serve “purely utilitarian” (10) purposes. Synthesizing social justice work in TPC that attends to ecological concerns and infrastructural foci with a deep understanding of built-in oppression, I propose that we can redefine hyperpragmatism as a way of renewing the field to serve the needs and locale-specific challenges that our communities and organizations have, with a problem-solving, caring, and a culturally, linguistically, and locally sensitive mindset and knowledge of material conditions. For example, in their 2020 *Reflections* article, Bloom-Pojar and Barker said that “prioritiz[ing] building relationships with community partners over shared interests” through *confianza* and “recognizing that funding is very important to compensate communities for their time and expertise” are important. I think these suggestions can be examples of what I term ethical pragmatism—that is, hyperpragmatism grounded in each community’s history, culture, and sociomaterial conditions.

My emotions and felt experiences that I had as an Asian immigrant living in the United States in the year of 2020, with global pandemic outbreaks, unequal access to healthcare, the murder of George Floyd, and the Atlanta shootings, repeatedly returned me to educate myself to learn U.S.-specific racial inequalities, power relations, and gender- and ethnicity-based biases. I felt that dismantling Euro-centered norms and whiteness in teaching language and writing in diverse settings are important. However, after the 2020 year, my lived experiences led me to a more explicit advocacy work for marginalized and underrepresented communities (Lee 2021) and furthering activist practices by practically solving the urgent needs of underserved and

unenfranchised communities. The 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference sessions taught me how to respond to unequal realities and required me to practice hyperpragmatism in a very different sense—that is, in a way that addresses unequal oppression and meets the needs of those communities. Beyond mechanical mutual reciprocity, the sessions oriented audiences to rethinking (hyper)pragmatism that have problematically normalize neutrality, objectivity, and “expediency” (Katz 1992) and revised it into a social justice-based pragmatic identity that prioritizes “the immediate and pragmatic needs of an organization” (Rose and Cardinal 2021, 93)

As a rhetoric and composition and TPC scholar who does community-based participatory projects with a focus on disaster rhetorics and situates myself as a woman of color who has been historically less attended in TPC (Gonzales et al. 2021), I was drawn to technical communication and its emergent social justice work. It should also be noted that my participation and experience in the conference cannot be generalized. Indeed, I was unable to attend many sessions I aimed to attend due to my teaching commitment every weekday during the summer semester. The 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference work offered us more ethical and theoretically informed toolkits for methods and introspection for the current and future research in TPC. The sessions offered me terminology for TPC research methods, procedures, and data analyses, which pay more activist attention to intersectional oppressions and marginalization occurring in minority groups. For example, the participants in my current research on Korean immigrant communities’ knowledge-making process in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic have helped me observe immigrant women community organizers create disaster relief and care work as active agents and work as technical communication experts equipped with local knowledge about the specific needs of multilingual communities. I am particularly interested in expanding this reflection on the 2021 ATTW Virtual Conference to refine my

research methodologies and strategies and tactics in sharing the collected data and narratives. For example, we can further ask: How can we do social justice work with renewed research methodologies and ethics with other stakeholders? Combining numerous works on methodologies and social justice frameworks in the field of technical communication and the specific projects presented in the sessions, we can generate more provocative questions in TPC, which are informed by our own power and positionality in order to practically address the urgent needs of marginalized communities in *confianza*-centered spaces.

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