Recognizing Historical Tactical Technical Communication

Scholarship in technical communication has been working to expand what exactly is considered technical communication. Jones, Moore, and Walton’s social justice “antenarrative” of technical communication as well as Kimball’s tactical technical communication bring to light communications which have not been historically prominent in technical communication scholarship. This essay encourages the exigence for historical tactical technical communication to be considered in scholarship and classrooms today, with particular attention paid to user-generated technical communication by women around the turn of the twentieth century. First, social justice, antenarratives, and tactical technical communication are defined. A new form of technical communication is proposed for an antenarrative. Finally, steps for moving forward—adding to antenarratives and bringing these communications into classrooms—will be discussed.

Social justice is seeing an increase in technical communication scholarship. Jones, Moore, and Walton call the shift toward social justice a necessary turn, “moving from mere ethics, which often exist in an individual’s character or behavior, to a social justice stance, which tends to be more collective and action oriented” (211). Yet, despite efforts making social justice work more mainstream, social justice in technical communication still faces resistance. Jones, Moore, and Walton write, “scholars working at the boundaries of social justice and TPC are bombarded with pushback as to why a focus on inclusion matters in TPC research. These scholars are often called to defend their work as viable technical communication research” (223).
A continual focus on social justice by scholars will reinforce the place of social justice in technical communication and defend it against being pushed aside.

Furthermore, a continued effort toward social justice is needed because technical communication is also capable of producing injustice. Kimball writes, “Despite many voices pointing out its complexity, in practical terms we still like to think of technical communication as something that makes lives better. Perhaps it’s time to grow beyond that feeling” (6). Walton, Jones, and Moore explain that there is no neutral; we either reinforce oppressive structures or help break them down (29). Even ignoring issues reinforces oppression. Because we are all complicit in injustices, Walton, Jones, and Moore say, “our only recourse is to overtly, purposefully engage in these injustices” (2). Furthermore, they explain:

If technical communication is not intentionally, coalitionally pursuing inclusion and social justice, then it is actively reinscribing oppression. Thus, it just doesn’t hold that TPC scholars can ‘opt out’ of social justice if we are to effectively take up the tasks and foundational work of the field. One cannot engage with user advocacy without considering social justice. One cannot effectively conduct intercultural communication…without considering social justice. One cannot effectively instruct students without considering social justice. And one cannot build programs, curricula, or organizations of TPC without considering social justice. If technical communicators choose not to consider social justice, they are working ineffectively. And unjustly. They are doing harm. (Walton, Jones, & Moore, 166)

While social justice work in technical communication can often be neglected, it is essential work that should be undertaken by all technical communicators.
To acknowledge, confront, and attempt to lessen injustice, Jones, Moore, and Walton suggest an antenarrative, taking into account previously neglected historical technical communication. An atenarrative as a tool can show the path or history of technical communication to include more minority authors, which is an act of social justice. Jones, Moore, and Walton write, “part methodology and part practice, an antenarrative allows the work of the field to be reseen, forges new paths forward, and emboldens the field’s objectives to unabashedly embrace social justice and inclusivity as part of its core (rather than marginal or optional) narrative” (212). By opening up reinterpretations of the past, different possibilities are allowed for the future, such as changing the perspective of technical communication to be more inclusive. Different threads of the antenarrative proposed by Jones, Moore, and Walton are: feminism and gender studies, race and ethnicity, international/intercultural professional communication, community and public engagement, user advocacy, and disability and accessibility. While this essay places a focus on feminism and gender studies due to the relevance of the scholarship chosen for evaluation, and while feminism and gender studies is a more popular thread of the antenarrative compared to the others in technical communication, the other threads should not be diminished. Antenarratives should work in conjunction with each other and even overlap to strengthen their validity and commitment to social justice.

Along with the antenarrative, Jones, Moore, and Walton also describe what they call the “3Ps”: positionality, privilege, and power. While many scholars want to promote social justice, some are paralyzed at getting it wrong (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 5). The 3Ps are a tool that can be used by scholars to question their own research to evaluate how and if it promotes social justice.

The following chart takes questions from Jones, Moore, and Walton (222).
<table>
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<th>Positionality</th>
<th>Privilege</th>
<th>Power</th>
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<td>• How do aspects of my identity shape the way I think about research: what it is? what is it for? who does it? how to do it well?</td>
<td>• What unearned advantages are at play in interactions among stakeholders (including myself) in the research environment?</td>
<td>• What potential harms (e.g., blind spots, assumptions, discourtesies, offenses) might the unquestioned, unacknowledged wielding of my power cause?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• In what ways do aspects of participants’ identities inform their perspectives of the research phenomena and the processes used to study it?</td>
<td>• What disadvantages exist as a direct result of stakeholders’ positionality (including my own)?</td>
<td>• Who is silenced in my research?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How do I acknowledge a multiplicity of perspectives?</td>
<td>• Who is given voice in my research?</td>
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Taking these questions into consideration, when doing this research, I need to be aware of my 3Ps. For example, as a white woman I have many privileges that others do not have.

Furthermore, I should be careful not to generalize any populations and to make note of voices I have neglected in my research. By following the 3Ps, scholars can “check” their research and help allay the paralysis of fear that comes with dealing with a concern that they may not know how to address.

The point of an antenarrative is not to stick to the well-trod path of research, which is why recognizing traditionally neglected forms of technical communication, in this case, tactical technical communication, is important. Tactical technical communication, as explained by Kimball, involves user-authors creating technical communication outside of an organization; there is a shift from institutional settings to extrainstitutional settings (3). This shift allows users to subvert the often rigid structures of recommended use set by companies and institutions. Because user-authors are not obligated by an employer to follow the “rules,” and they are not
sharing information from an organization’s perspective, user-authors have a liberty with the technology that a company employee would not. This liberty can involve communicating about how a product “does” work rather than how it “should” work (Kimball, 3). These technical users/communicators may also share shortcuts or even ways to manipulate a technology. In today’s age, tactical technical communication is very prominent on the internet. For example, user-authors may write video game tips and tricks on a blog, upload a video to YouTube reviewing art supplies, or contribute to one of the many instruction websites such as iFixit, Instructables, or Wikihow. Though tactical technical communication may seem to take out the “professional” aspects of technical communication, it still involves core tenets of technical communication: conveying information about uses of products and processes.

Tactical technical communication and social justice can go hand-in-hand. First, tactical technical communications often inherently promote social justice. For example, Edenfield, Holmes, and Colton wrote about texts for the self-administration of hormone therapy. These instructions were not produced by the manufacturers, but by users themselves. Edenfield, Holmes, and Colton explain that these communications can be considered “queer” not only because they provide assistance to LGBTQ+ individuals, but also because the communications are tactical and going against institutional practices. They write, “researchers should understand that what makes DIYing one’s gender transition and tactics ‘queer’ is that these practices work outside of institutions precisely because institutions are necessarily invested in the heteronormative project” (Edenfield, Holmes, and Colton, 187). Additionally, Olivia Webb, the outreach coordinator from iFixit, explains the social justice concerns of this user-author instruction website:
When you fix a device instead of throwing it away, you keep it out of the landfill and extend the life of its components. At iFixit, we believe that when you purchase something, you own it, and you should have the right to open, tinker with, and repair it to your heart’s content. Unfortunately, manufacturers make it difficult for consumers to access the parts, tools, and information they need to fix their stuff. And that’s what iFixit is all about: selling the parts and tools, publishing information, and advocating for Right to Repair laws—which will require manufacturers to make those things accessible, thereby keeping devices out of the waste stream.

These communications promote the agency of their users, thereby making them acts of social justice.

Second, technical communication scholars can promote social justice by looking at tactical technical communications created by minority authors. Considering technical communications by minority authors disrupts the status quo. Scholars usually cite white male scholars, which reinforces the lack of minority scholarship (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 3). Taking into account communicators other than the “mythical norm” (white, straight, male, middle class, Christian, cisgender, and able-bodied people) is an act of social justice (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 19). Petersen and Walton write, “Social justice scholars must prioritize the recovery of contributions of other underrepresented groups in order to influence what is legitimized and direct our attention to new sources of knowledge” (422). Considering tactical technical communication, rather than just institutional technical communication, allows more technical communicators to enter the conversation. Tactical technical communication provides a bountiful field of texts to consider when adding to antenarratives.
Looking at tactical technical communication is also a way to include more women in technical communication history. Lippincott says, “most historical studies now produced by technical communication scholars examine writing by men for male-dominated workplaces; only a few such investigations include women as writers or audiences or focus on women’s interests, such as home sewing and other household technology” (366). Work has been done by scholars, showing the validity of women’s technical communication, such as Durack’s scholarship on sewing machine manuals, Moeller and Frost’s research on cookbooks, Lippincott’s work on the scientist and writer Ellen Swallow Richards, and Hallenbeck’s analysis of bicycles texts. Citing Durack and others for widening the field of technical communication, Moeller and Frost write, “this was an important step, especially for women, as the professional field of technical communication had long been male dominated and a difficult field in which to find counter-narratives” (3). Looking closer at Hallenbeck’s “User Agency, Technical Communication, and the 19th-Century Woman Bicyclist,” Hallenbeck evaluates user-generated texts which, though not mentioned in Jones, Moore, and Walton’s antenarrative article, do belong in an antenarrative. Hallenbeck’s work shows how technical communication can reinforce or subvert norms pertaining to social justice because the bicycle texts involve women gaining agency by writing about and encouraging other women to go out on their own to bicycle and even make repairs to their bicycles. Furthermore, by writing about them, Hallenbeck is doing social justice work by bringing these texts into technical communication scholarship. These bicycle texts would be fitting in an antenarrative thread of women’s tactical technical communication from around the turn of the twentieth century.

When creating or adding to an antenarrative, one should be aware of some background information. For example, considering turn of the century women’s tactical technical
communication, we should be aware that during this timeframe, the “women’s sphere” played a role reinforcing societal gender norms and keeping women connected, and often confined, to domestic life. This is partly why Hallenbeck’s texts promoted social justice—they encouraged women’s agency through bicycle riding. Additionally, communicators during this time did not have the advantage that we have today: the internet. Kimball says, that due to the internet, “we are truly living in a Golden Age for technical communication—in the sense that more people than ever before are engaging in sharing know-how as part of their everyday lives” (5).

Furthermore, Webb also has praise for the internet: “having iFixit live on the internet means that anybody can access or create guides at any time. This is really important, since we want to make repair information reachable to anyone. Online guides allow consumers to find repair guides right when they need to, instead of having to take their device back to the manufacturer.” Despite the lack of this technology in the late nineteenth century, publishing and printing were becoming more common and available to the public. With the rise of literacy, people were able to communicate better. Newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets were in abundance, so information still found a way to travel. Understanding how communications are being produced can be helpful when looking for texts to add to an antenarrative.

I propose another text to be considered for the antenarrative of women’s turn of the century tactical technical communication. As previously stated, magazines were popular during this time, and women’s magazines were in great supply. The Brown Book, a women’s magazine published Boston in the early 1900s, included a sort of advice column: “A Clearing House for Good Ideas.” This section, sandwiched between potboiler stories, pictures of luxurious gardens and mansions, and illustrations of fall fashions, was “conducted” by Rachel Emerson and included letters written by readers. Readers were encouraged to submit letters, within which they
would share advice. While this advice column, at least in volume 7, does not deal with a technological device, The Society for Technical Communication says technical communication can be, “providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication.” In “A Clearing House for Good Ideas,” contributors use their own expertise to communicate with others and provide assistance for certain tasks, therefore falling under the above definition of technical communication. In volume 7 of The Brown Book, from September 1903, one of the advice sections is titled “The Woman Who Laughs” submitted by Georgina Newhall. This section describes ways to discourage inappropriate or discourteous actions done by children or others. For example, Newhall writes, “Don’t tell them it is wicked to swear (Oh, the irresistible heroic charm of wickedness to poor human nature!) Tell them profanity is ridiculous—vulgar…Assume this attitude; that astute, refined children such as you presume them to be could not be led into absurdities. Assure them that you feel their intelligence in unison with your own in this respect.” In this piece of technical communication, Newhall uses her knowledge and experience to communicate helpful strategies for navigating a situation with an audience who likely has come across a similar issue.

The authors in this column are allowed to show their personal voice, a strategy often in opposition to institutional technical communication. In fact, a note at the end of the advice column reads, “the purpose of this department is to afford our readers an opportunity to talk to each other as they would to a friend or member of their household. Professional writers are not expected to contribute.” This extrainstitutional voice encouraged by The Brown Book in 1903 is also encouraged by iFixit today. Webb says, “allowing users to write our content gives them a place to share their knowledge. User-submitted guides can be easier to understand than the
manufacturer’s instructions, since the writer can use their natural voice instead of a stuffy corporate tone.” By showing their own voice, Newhall and other writers work to create tactical technical communication that effectively reaches their audience.

Not forgetting the 3Ps, we should consider how this tool applies to the writers of The Brown Book. Though these women were individuals, some inferences can be made. These women could afford a magazine subscription, had the luxury of time to read the magazine and write in a letter, and were most-likely educated. For example, in her letter, Newhall mentioned Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, so the audience is expected to have some knowledge of the classics to know who that is. These women were not the “everywoman”; they had a higher position, more privilege, and more power than most other women. Still, based on the other inclusions in The Brown Book—the stories, extravagant gardens, and fashion plates—these women were encouraged by society to oblige the domestic sphere. While this specific example neglects many diverse voices, this Brown Book volume was not painstakingly chosen from a library of turn of the century writings; it was selected due to proximity. If this single text was chosen simply due to proximity, one may suppose that a greater search would result in many more texts to add to the antenarrative.

Yet, difficulties will still surface when adding to antenarratives and giving historical voices the recognition they deserve. An unfortunate reality is that many of the voices of minorities may have gone unknown and been lost to history. Durack writes, “women’s special knowledge of and strategies for sewing by machine were consigned to oral circulation, one of many means by which a literate patriarchal society subtly silences the voices of women in histories of technology and technical communication” (193). These silences also may not be
accidental; Petersen and Walton write, “many silences are not just empty spaces devoid of communication but function to defer and even deploy power” (423). They continue:

So, as Sauer (1993) asked, ‘if the women’s voices make such sense, why are they not heard?’ (p. 75). We can similarly ask, if nonexpert or marginalized voices make sense, why are they ignored? And how are they ignored: What are the rhetorical moves that can silence people? If these voices do not make sense, who is making that claim and why? And who gets to set the agenda for logic, determining what counts as making sense?

(Petersen & Walton, 424)

While an abundance of texts may be discovered to add to antenarratives, it is important to note that the “full” story will not be uncovered due to lost or oppressed history.

Considering the future, antenarratives must continue to be built upon. There are many threads of the antenarrative that can be explored. Voices must be uncovered and remain uncovered; we cannot allow them to be lost again. We need antenarratives because inequality issues are still prevalent and oppressing people today. For example, Moeller and Frost looked at modern-day cookbooks to examine how they were reinforcing societal gender roles and found that gender roles are often deeply entrenched into cooking, and this affects how cooking is thought of and written about. Even though antenarratives look toward the past, they are relevant in our present and our future.

As antenarratives grow in technical communication scholarship, they should spill over to the classroom. Institutional technical communication is still predominant when one thinks of technical communication. As Kimball writes, “the organizational assumption obscures a larger view of the technical communication performed by millions of people each day on their own,
working outside of, between, and even counter to organizations” (1). Most students taking technical communication courses are not going to have the title of “technical communicator” in their profession. Yet, students should see how far-reaching the skills they learn in the classroom can apply, and that they, as users, are capable of being technical communicators. For example, Van Ittersum says about involving the DIY website Instructables in the classroom: “students can see from instructables that deviations from the conventions are not inherently wrong but instead represent choices made by authors to address different audiences and aim for different purposes” (244). While a piece of technical communication might not be “professional,” it does not mean that the piece is not technical communication. Furthermore, Hallenbeck says:

We should ensure that students understand technical communication in its broadest sense—not simply as a maximally transparent, neutral activity that occurs within organizations in the service of corporate or manufacturer interests but as an activity of ideological import, subject to our critical attention and available to users as a means of cultural transformation. (306)

Students should learn how the writings of women bicyclists lessened restrictions of the domestic sphere and how user-authors are sharing their own knowledge to help and support others along with all the threads of the antenarrative that have been picked up and brought into the classroom. Furthermore the 3Ps can easily be applied to syllabi: how does the instructor’s identity affect the voices they choose to include and exclude when designing a course?; how can the instructor incorporate a multitude of perspectives when planning course readings?; how does the instructor promote agency in their classroom? Opening up a classroom to a wider definition of technical communication is an important step in creating a social-justice promoting course.
It is vital for us to recognize that minority user-authors have been creating tactical technical communication for a long time. Implementing these historical communications into classes will promote social justice by giving voice to minority authors and adding to the validity of tactical technical communication. Again, technical communicators cannot take a neutral stance. We need to ask “How do I act as an advocate in my research?” and then act upon our findings. Building antenarratives and bringing neglected historical communications into light is a necessary step for technical communicators.
Works Cited


Email interview with Olivia Webb, Outreach Coordinator of iFixit. March 10, 2020.