

Guest Editorial

Centering Social Justice at ProComm Limerick 2022

The IEEE Professional Communication Society's International Professional Communication Conference was successfully held in Limerick, Ireland, 17–20 July 2022. It was the first among a handful of academic conferences in our field to be held in person following the global pandemic that led to more than two years of lockdowns and restricted travel. Under the theme of “reconnecting,” ProComm 2022 brought together professional communication stakeholders from all over the world. With interests ranging from technical writing and communication to engineering communication, as well as academic and industry research, attendance was both in-person and virtual.

ProComm 2022 also took place following waves of social unrest in the US and other parts of the world. In the US, some of that unrest was precipitated by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN—the latest in what seemed to be an endless parade of deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of police officers. That murder spurred solidarity among marginalized groups and justice-minded people of all races—globally. In response, the Editor-in-Chief of the *TRANSACTIONS*, George Hayhoe, put out a request for proposals for the Guest Editorship of a Special Issue on “Enacting Social Justice in Professional Communication.” In that call, Hayhoe invited potential guest editors of the Special Issue to deliberate on “the ways that professional communicators [can do] the critical work of social justice in communities and workplaces” [1]. The call gave potential editors the liberty to “define the specific scope” of the special issue “as long as the proposed topics centered on enacting social justice in professional communication” [1].

In other words, this Special Issue would solicit practical ideas for redressing specific manifestations of injustice rather than theorize or deliberate about the nature of social justice.

That call was taken up by Dr. Godwin Agboka (University of Houston, Downtown) and Dr. Isidore Dorpenyo (George Mason University). Their Special Issue on Enacting Social Justice, published in March 2022, was the basis for a special panel at the ProComm 2022 Conference moderated by Josephine Walwema, *TRANSACTIONS* Associate Editor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Held on the first day of the conference, this panel centered on panelists' experiences managing and contributing to the Special Issue, some of which is reflected in their introduction titled “Social Justice in Technical Communication” [2]. Attendees included Dr. Lisa Philips and Dr. Jamal Jared Alexander, whose work had been published in the Special Issue who attended in person, as well as both guest editors and other contributors who attended virtually. Following some brief opening remarks by the panel moderator, panelists were invited to respond to questions related to their contributions to the issue.

Much of what the guest editors discussed is encapsulated in the content of their introduction to the Special Issue, “The Role of Technical Communicators in Confronting Injustice—Everywhere” [3]. In addition to discussing themes raised in the Special Issue (see, especially the editors' introduction), audience members from across the world were invited to raise matters of interest that were perhaps not given prominence by panelists but which were of concern in their respective corners of the globe. Attendees shared how the movement for social justice in the US had inspired movements around the world, united in their collective rejection of the injustices that permeate nations. From the UK to France, Colombia, and New Zealand, they recounted ways in which ordinary people found their agency and were galvanized in their advocacy against injustice, resulting, for example, in the government of New Zealand reversing a decision to arm police during routine patrols [4].

In addition, a second prominent conversation involved ongoing injustices that attendees experience with the *TRANSACTIONS* itself. Of immediate concern to them was the publication

Date of current version 21 February 2023.
IEEE 10.1109/TPC.2023.3236544

process beginning with submitting manuscripts, the peer-review process, and the arduous process required to get published in the TRANSACTIONS. A few attendees voiced the suspicion that the journal privileges western forms of knowledge and methodologies. Moreover, they argued, the genres that the TRANSACTIONS has published through the years are constricting. They cited, for example, the integrative literature review, which they deemed too prescriptive and work intensive. They also found that the fixed nature of manuscripts eligible for submission to the TRANSACTIONS, such as case studies, tutorials, and teaching cases, required rather stilted formats that constrict scholars' ability to engage with their research in more capacious ways that might center nonwestern ways of knowing.

As it so happens, the TRANSACTIONS editorial team has been looking into these very concerns. I took this opportunity, as associate editor, to apprise attendees of the developments that the TRANSACTIONS has made to

- Make the editorial process itself more transparent
- Dispense with the gatekeeping function of the peer-review process in favor of mentoring
- Broaden topics that illuminate injustice, expand readers' knowledge base, and enact social justice in all its forms

For example, the TRANSACTIONS has articulated a policy on nonwestern/nontraditional topics, genres, rhetorics, theories, and methodologies, enacted a policy on inclusive language, provided a means for open access publication, and established a procedure to challenge editorial or peer-review decisions [5]. These revised policies signal the openness of the TRANSACTIONS to interested scholars and practitioners and signal openness to demystifying the publication process.

Throughout the session, attendees agreed that a pivot to social justice is warranted, given the public nature of technical and professional communication in people's everyday lives. As scholars have established, ours is a discipline that interfaces more with the public than previously thought [6]. From documents related to government services, to healthcare, and voting, publics are better served when technical documents are ethically and justly constructed. Moreover—and to echo the Special Issue editors—addressing social justice requires more than simple proclamations of allyship and promises. It requires acknowledging the harm that socially unjust systems have

inflicted on marginalized people [3] followed by doing the work that dismantles privilege and lack of access. It is exposing medical technologies that yield different results for people of different race, gender, or ability [7], [8]; streamlining application systems for public goods, such as Federal student aid, unemployment, and taxation; grappling with inbuilt biases in speech and facial recognition technologies [9], for example, as well as credit scores that predispose certain communities to predatory lending [10], [11], to name just a few.

Moving forward, we must gain and sustain awareness of the ways in which inequities creep into otherwise innocuous spaces. Take, for instance, recent revelations that two-factor authentication, designed to provide an additional layer of security by requiring two different forms of authentication to gain access to an account or system, harms some of the very people it is intended to protect. When logging into a website, a user may be asked to enter a code or answer a security question in addition to their username and password to ensure that the person accessing the account is the legitimate owner. As Chad Loder has observed

when you require a mobile phone number for authentication, you guarantee that unhoused people will permanently lose access to their email when their phone is lost, stolen or destroyed (roughly every 12 weeks). [12]

This is very much a technical and professional communication problem.

As technical and professional communicators, we can ameliorate this injustice by advocating for the homeless. We can sensitize and challenge developers to build more inclusive authentication processes that do not shut people out, such as providing alternative authentication options or other forms of identification.

As these examples indicate, a turn to social justice emphasizes the humanity and proximity of users. It brings audiences to the forefront of technical and professional communication, given its transactional nature. Our field's continued engagement with humanistic issues [13], with power and hegemony [14], and with access and inequality [15] has led to breakthroughs in user-experience (UX) studies and aligns it beautifully with the ideals of justice and inclusion that undergird it [16].

Following the conversations at ProComm 2022, we must continue examining how race and class often predetermine people's destinies and how systems of power are wielded in institutions, including universities, governments, corporations, nonprofits, and even extra-institutional settings. In doing this work, we need to continually ask ourselves what can technical and professional communication do in the world? How can its practice and pedagogies best impact our societies? Along with posing these questions, we must be watchful of new technologies and ways that we integrate them in our lives without them doing us harm.

I invite new kinds of work exploring these questions for the TRANSACTIONS; for continued modeling within our professional organization as

well as our communities, to center these questions of ethics, of using our knowledge as technical and professional communicators to question and resist, as well as to forward new ways of advocating and supporting users and society writ large.

Ultimately, it behooves us as technical and professional communicators to do the advocacy work that can bring an end to systems of injustice; to prioritize care and the kind of equality, we have all been promised under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [17].

JOSEPHINE WALWEMA, *Associate Editor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*
Department of English
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195 USA
(email: walwema@uw.edu)

REFERENCES

- [1] G. Hayhoe, "Request for proposals for guest editorship special issue on enacting social justice in professional communication IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication," Mar. 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://procomm.ieee.org/transactions-of-professional-communication/for-prospective-authors/guidelines-to-follow/>
- [2] Social Justice in Technical Communication, in IEEE ProComm Conf. Schedule, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://attend.ieee.org/procomm-2022/schedule/>
- [3] G. Y. Agboka and I. K. Dorpenyo, "The role of technical communicators in confronting injustice—Everywhere," *IEEE Trans. Prof. Commun.*, vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 5–10, Mar. 2022, doi: [10.1109/TPC.2021.3133151](https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2021.3133151).
- [4] IEEE Transactions, "Submitting a manuscript," IEEE Prof. Commun. Soc., 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://procomm.ieee.org/transactions-of-professional-communication/for-prospective-authors/guidelines-to-follow/>
- [5] S. Sy, "How George Floyd's killing has inspired a diverse range of protesters," *PBS News Hour*, Jun. 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-george-floyds-killing-has-inspired-a-diverse-range-of-protesters>
- [6] M. Bowdon, "Technical communication and the role of the public intellectual: A community HIV-prevention case study," *Tech. Commun. Quart.*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 325–340, 2004.
- [7] J. Shaprio. (2020 Jun. 9). "COVID-19 infections and deaths are higher among those with intellectual disabilities," NPR, Jun. 9, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/09/872401607/covid-19-infections-and-deaths-are-higher-among-those-with-intellectual-disabili>
- [8] D. M. Christensen, J. Manley, and J. Resendez. (2021 Sep.). Medical algorithms are failing communities of color. *Health Affairs Forefront*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/forefront.20210903.976632/>
- [9] H. M. Lawrence, "Siri disciplines," in *Your Computer is on Fire*, M. Hicks, B. Peters, K. Philips, and T. Mullaney eds. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2019, pp. 179–198.
- [10] W. D. Heaven, "Bias isn't the only problem with credit scores—And no, AI can't help," *MIT Technol. Rev.*, Jun. 17, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/17/1026519/racial-bias-noisy-data-credit-scores-mortgage-loans-fairness-machine-learning/>
- [11] S. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press, 2018.
- [12] Chad Loder (@chadloder), "Google's product designers should talk to my unhoused friends," Oct. 6, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/chadloder/status/1577880638044020736?lang=gu>
- [13] C. Miller, "A humanistic rationale for technical writing," *Coll. English*, vol. 40, no. 6, pp. 610–617, 1979.
- [14] C. U. Itchuaqiyay and J. Frith, "Citational practices as a site of resistance and radical pedagogy: Positioning the multiply marginalized and underrepresented (MMU) scholar database as an infrastructural intervention," *Commun. Des. Quart.*, vol. 9, pp. 10–19, 2022.
- [15] S. Zdenek, "Transforming access and inclusion in composition studies and technical communication," *Coll. English*, vol. 82, no. 5, pp. 536–544, 2020.

- [16] M. Zachary and J. H. Spyridakis, "Human-centered design and the field of TPC," *J. Tech. Writing Commun.*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 392–401, 2016.
- [17] "Universal declaration of human rights." [Online]. Available: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Josephine Walwema is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of English, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195 USA.