Call for Abstracts

Tactical Approaches to Technical Communication

Hilary Sarat-St. Peter and Miles A Kimball, eds.

We invite abstracts for essays or research regarding the application of Tactical Technical Communication (TTC). The field of Technical Communication has long been seen as a set of banal practices and products sequestered behind the walls of a cubicle, where pasty-faced technical writers create documentation more frustrating to use than the technology that it documents. Practitioners in this field are seen as know-nothings who merely describe technologies, lacking in the subject area knowledge of a scientist or engineer. Longo (1996) described this knowledge as a "spurious coin" - a counterfeit knowledge.

At the same time, the outputs of this work - not just dull manuals, but the myriad websites, user forums, signs, marks, and other words surround us and organize our existence. In telling us how to do things with technology - what button to push, which operation to perform next, where not to put our hands to avoid injury, technical documentation imposes a layer of script upon most of contemporary human experience (see, for example, Swarts, 2018). Researchers have found that increasingly, this "scriptural" layer provides openings for individuals and small groups to appropriate the information techniques of institutions by creating technical documentation and narratives that cut across the grain of institutions. Meanwhile, corporations are happy to co-opt user communities to institutional ends, such as seen in the growth of online user forums sponsored by corporations to take advantage of user expertise.

Scholars have described this dynamic as materializing at points where institutional power and individual consent are in tension (see Jones, Moore and Walton, 2016, p.2). For instance, corporations use documentation to control users' actions, while people who are frustrated by the 'black box' of technology resist that control through user hacks and modifications (Van Ittersum, 2014; Beale, McKittrick and Richards, 2016). The conceptual vocabulary that has developed around this understanding of technical communication derives from Michel De Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactics – strategies being what institutions do to maintain control, and tactics being what individuals do to try to live their lives as they wish (Kimball, 2006; Hallenbeck, 2015; Holladay, 2017).

In the past several years, the concept of tactical technical communication has become increasingly accepted as a lens through which to understand our field and its work. A number of scholars have explored historical, theoretical, practical, and pedagogical approaches through the lens of tactics (Bellwoar, 2012; Colton, Holmes, and Walwema, 2017). Articles continue to appear that engage the growing literature on the subject, using the concept of tactics to examine what we do and who we are as technical communicators (Edenfield, Holmes and Colton, 2019; Sarat-St. Peter and St. Peter, 2020).

We also see an explicit connection between TTC and the 'social justice turn' in our field (Moore, Jones and Walton, 2019). The complexity of interaction between disenfranchised groups and institutions provides a rich field for action, as well as study. Jones and Williams (2020) remind us that "[T]he just use of imagination is not just conceptual. It must be enacted." Accordingly, we envision tactics as a means of taking action *now* under imperfect conditions instead of speculating what action one might someday take in "the realm of fiction and future" (par. 1). One example might be when protesters painted BLACK LIVES MATTER in monolithic yellow letters upon 16th St. NW in Washington, DC. Mayor Muriel Bowser could have reacted strategically, by running off the protesters and repainting the street. Instead, she began to refer to the slogan as a "mural," and renamed the street "Black Lives Matter Plaza." This tactical action arguably obligated the District to the mural as a work of typographic art, as well as a navigational landmark indelibly attached to the fabric of the city through the visual and verbal language of the city street map.

This continued practical and scholarly engagement with tactical tech comm seems to call out for a different kind of volume - a collection of essays exploring further applications, cases, and problems with the concept.

We are particularly interested in contributions that explore:

- Theories, concepts, and frameworks for understanding TTC
- Critical responses to TTC
- Tactical practices within, between, and outside organizations
- Methodologies and methods for researching TTC
- Information and action in tactical communities
- Pedagogies that incorporate TTC

We would like to pose the following generative questions for authors to consider while developing a proposal:

- What is the role of the individual in strategic action, and society in tactical action?
- How might professional technical communicators cultivate tactical ways of thinking, writing and working within organizations?
- What key terms and concepts belong in the theoretical vocabulary that we use to talk about tactical technical communication? Which terms should we be careful about using?
- Which research methodologies and methods prove most fruitful for researching TTC sites or genres, including sites or genres associated with marginalized communities or individuals?
- What role might the study and practice of TTC play in an undergraduate or graduate course on technical writing?

Thus, we welcome submissions that examine how people within and between groups deploying technical communication tactics as a means of self-advocacy, often transforming institutions and. society in the process. Because people deploy tactics to resist and change dominant

institutions, we especially encourage scholars from under-represented, non-dominant, and marginalized communities to submit proposals. We particularly invite submissions that include Black, Latin-x or indigenous scholars of color, LGBTQIA+ scholars, scholars with disabilities and other scholars.with marginalized identities. We also welcome colleagues representing all ranks and institutional types to submit proposals, including early-career scholars and technical communication professionals working in industry.

Proposal Guidelines

Please submit a 500-word proposal outlining your plan for the argument and structure of your essay. The timeline is as follows:

October 1, 2020: 500-word proposals due

October 15, 2020: Notification of acceptances

June 15, 2021: Manuscripts due for peer review

August, 2021: Feedback to authors

Please send submissions and any questions to Hilary Sarat-St. Peter at hsstpeter@gmail.com and Miles Kimball at miles.kimball@gmail.com.

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