

12. Ethics

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To newcomers in the field of technical communication, the term *ethics*, and the phrase “ethics in technical communication,” may seem superfluous if not oxymoronic. The phrase may seem superfluous because technical communication is by definition *technical*, and many people believe that *technology* does not have ethics (think of how many times people have argued that “guns don’t kill people, people do.”). Therefore, technical communication has nothing to do but simply communicate technical “facts,” “truth.” And *if* technology has ethics and values, they’re those of the manufacturer or company or culture. The phrase “ethics in technical communication” may seem an oxymoron because the idea of allowing space in technical communication for considerations of human morals may appear both contradictory and a waste of time. In all cases, ethics themselves usually remain unarticulated.

In fact, ethical questions in *rhetoric* are as old as Plato and Aristotle, and as young as the field of technical communication (begun as a field of study in 1953 [Whitburn, 2009]). In technical communication, ethics entails different sets of moral concepts and values and associated practices. In its short *history*, ethics in technical communication continue to evolve, with important keywords and concepts determining the direction of the field—in theory if not always practice. Whether acknowledged, these different concepts of ethics, like technical communication itself, are deeply rooted in epistemology, the study of *knowledge*. One thing that these keywords and concepts have in common is that they ultimately devolve to one question: *What is the relationship between language and reality?* For example, is language a transparent window onto some objective reality? Or do authors to varying degrees use language to construct reality, co-construct it with readers?

The relationship between language and “reality” in a given context can have implications for the kind of ethical roles played by technical communicators. If authors are viewed as shaping reality to some extent through technical communication, their ethics become increasingly important. But if language does not matter in the perception and communication of what are regarded as “facts,” then writers have little or no ethical responsibility for what they say (Katz & Linvill, 2017).

Reductively speaking, this latter view was held by Plato (1956), who believed that “Truth” existed not only outside language but outside the material world, in a transcendental realm of Ideal Forms. Plato’s pupil Aristotle, who differed from his teacher in believing in observable empirical facts located in the physical world, was a little more forgiving. But Aristotle (1984) wished that language—in particular, *style*—was unnecessary, “owing to a defect in our hearers” (emotions); he wished that facts could be communicated without style.

This position also was held by the inventors of modern *science*, and by extension technical communication (Longo, 2000). Francis Bacon (1902, LI-LXII; 2000, XVIII), often called the father of modern scientific method, mistrusted the human senses and thus called for repeatable experiments and the verifiable replication of results, which rhetoric could be used to report “systematically.” Thomas Sprat (1667) vehemently opposed the “flourish” and “digression” of rhetoric in science and urged the Royal Society to develop and practice a “plain style” of writing that would lead to a “faithful *Records*, of all the Works of *Nature*” (p. 61). Underlying this idea of the “plain” communication of facts, articulated a little later by John Locke (1975), was the notion of language as a “pipeline.” In this view, the morality of the author is not as important as scientific method and facts plainly reported via “a conduit.”

In this view, the author is invisible, and thus “ethically” the objectivity and accuracy of transmission are all that count. Although perhaps an ideal rarely achieved in science and technology given the multiple meanings of words, and even mathematics when considered as arguments, this ideal is the standard, default *ethical* position in traditional scientific and technical writing (Slack et al., 2006). In this standard view of technical communication, any consideration of author morality is minimized: Language and authors are just passive receivers and transmitters of *information*—the so-called “information model of communication” (Katz & Miller, 1996; Waddell, 1996).

This view of language as a transmission line, a conduit for information gleaned objectively, placed on naïve senses, and printed directly upon the mind, reappears in several contemporary schools of ethics in technical communication, perhaps most notably “instrumentalism,” which holds that technical communication is not rhetorical (Moore, 1996). The purpose of technical communication is not to persuade, but rather to simply convey information that serves corporations and society. One might be tempted to say that instrumentalism has no ethics at all, but this would be wrong on two accounts: 1) Any statement or position—any human endeavor (including this one)—uses language to persuade; 2) Instrumentalism itself, as its proponents argue, *is* ethical in its ideological commitment to capitalism (Moore, 2005). In this utilitarian philosophy of ethics in technical communication, the moral role of the author is present, but diminished. Perhaps one manifestation of this philosophy in technical communication is what Bradley Dilger (2006) calls “extreme usability,” which “reduces user engagement, forbids considering the wider scope of culture, and limits the ends of usability to achievement of expediency” (p. 47).

Contrary to these conventional scientific or instrumental philosophies of language focused on communicating facts objectively for economic ends, there are several schools of contemporary ethics of technical communication that are *rhetorically* based. In these schools of technical writing, ethics, and thus authors, figure more prominently. The study of rhetorical ethics in technical communication can be said to have begun with Carolyn Miller’s (1979) foundational work “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing.” In this essay, the question of the relation of *praxis*, or practice, to *phronesis*, wisdom or prudence, is *the* primary consideration. That is,

the basis of ethical reasoning is not only the morality of the means (*praxis*) but also reasoning about ends (*phronesis*). Miller's essay rooted technical communication in the ancient and reviving discipline of classical rhetoric, finding there its humanistic as opposed to simply technical rationale. Miller's essay spawned many essays central to understanding ethics in technical communication, including the dangers of what Katz (1992) labels "the ethic of expediency," in which technological means becomes its own moral end.

Katz, in both the 1992 essay which explores one translation of a technical memo (Ward, 2014) about improving gassing vans prior to the Final Solution of death camps in WWII, and a follow-up essay on Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (Katz, 1993), discovered *phronesis* itself operating on an ideology of utility *in extremis*. This ideology is not limited to genocidal atrocities, and Katz points to a number of technical decisions in the 20th century that share not the political ideology of Nazism but the technological ideology of expediency. Paul Dombrowski (2000) applies Katz's concept of the ethic of expediency to a number of classic examples in technical communication, including the Three Mile Island communication disaster and the Challenger shuttle explosion. Later, Sam Dragga and Dan Voss (2001) employed the ethic of expediency, among other considerations, to question the "humanity" of the newly burgeoning study of graphics in technical communication.

Perhaps it is in the relation of *praxis* and *phronesis* that we find moral space for the introduction of other ethical concerns in technical communication. For example, the Society for Technical Communication (STC), the largest technical communication practitioner organization in the US, broadened the scope of its Code of Ethics to include professional principles beyond "objectivity," "accuracy," and "clarity." They include legality, honesty, confidentiality, fairness, professionalism, creativity, obligations to clients and employees, proper attribution, and use of employer time and equipment (STC, 1998).

Growing out of feminist critiques of gender bias in scientific and technical communication, "the ethics of care" rejects "ethics based on impersonal, abstract principles" (Dombrowski, 2000, p. 63). The ethics of care acknowledges and implements "women's ways of thinking" and emphasizes empathy and compassion in technical writing for the welfare of the people, which already was shifting theory, practice, and teaching away from being exclusively male-dominated "technological reasoning" (Brasseur, 1993; Lay, 1991; Sauer, 1993). Ecological ethics too, with their focus on environmental issues in the Anthropocene (Zylinska, 2014), also are a central focus in technical communication as rhetorical (Pilsch, 2017; Propen, 2018). In a discussion of ethics and expertise that would include all of these, Ashley Rose Mehlenbacher (2022) critiques Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* itself (pp. 7-19).

Echoing Rebecca Walton et al. (2019), in the "*social justice* turn" and beyond, technical communication itself is seen as an important form of advocacy, addressing structural oppression, making ethics and social change the primary concern of technical communication (Colton et al., 2017; Colton & Holmes, 2018a). Ethics in technical communication pay new attention to equality for people

“otherized” on the basis of race and ethnicity (Williams & Pimentel, 2012), queer and transgender identity (Edenfield et al., 2019; Fancher, 2018; Ramler, 2020), and incarceration (Stephens, 2018).

If readers were expecting this brief survey of *ethics* in technical communication *not* to return to concepts and practices like *truth*, *accuracy*, and *objectivity*, they will be disappointed. For there is a new school of ethics in technical communication, as in society at large, that is powerful because it is both pervasive and invisible. In it, accuracy, objectivity, and truth have been reborn in another keyword that has become what Kenneth Burke (1969) calls a “god-term”—one that organizes and dominates a way of seeing and thinking and behaving. That word is *transparency*. Not only in technical communication, but globally, *transparency* “is a buzzword . . . applied freely by government agencies, scientists, the media, and the public”; it mythically “assumes an ideal, objective unvarnished coding and decoding of information,” constitutes “a metaphor for access and ‘clarity’ of communication,” and “conceals the operations of rhetoric” (Hartzog & Katz, 2014). Transparency is a “happy vision” of communication and society (Han 2015).

In *visual* communication, Jay David Bolter and Diane Gromala (2005) demonstrate that transparency is “the myth of the windowpane.” That myth is built on the metaphor of *perception* “as a clear glass.” The myth and metaphor of transparency is found not only in graphic design but technical communication as a whole. One easy example is the computer screen. The screen seems transparent, a window that creates the illusion that the writer has direct and unfettered access to and control of the data, words, and meaning. But “phantom” hardware/software intervene: Not only do they necessarily underlie and co-construct meaning, but also, in emails for instance, they encode social status (.edu, .net, .com, etc.) and other data that belie the ostensible freedom (including privacy) that users believe; other values such as speed, productivity, and efficiency are ideologically embedded in the technology itself (Moses & Katz, 2006). Jared Colton and Steve Holmes (2018b) examine the assumed morality of “networked collaboration” in the face of proprietary rights, cookies, privacy, etc., and argue for rhetorical “virtue ethics” (equality, care, generosity, patience) in designing and programming new forms of digital communication.

The content of transparency *in language* is also created by and hidden in writing style; the best way of making transparency visible is to render it “opaque” through style analysis (Lanham, 2003). For example, in biotechnology communication with the *public*, where transparency is hailed as a panacea, style analysis reveals contradictory motives in the language, including an unintended and unfortunate metaphor after the Titanic of biotechnology as “the tip of the iceberg”! (Katz, 2001). Style is like a “black box” where the “real content” of language might be revealed (Latour, 2007; Simon, 1999). For instance, a style analysis of the diction from the guidance document of the National Society of Genetic Counselors exposes a deep rift in that field concerning empathetic vs. objective communication with patients (Mebust & Katz, 2007)—a conflict partially resolved by rhetorical flexibility (Flach, 2019).

As a metaphor of a clear windowpane, transparency seems to reflect democratic values, and thus grounds for good governance. Transparency presents itself as a neutral medium or tool for communication. But there is no deliberation, no consideration of *praxis* and *phronesis* in transparency, only the myth of direct and open access, shiny diaphanous surfaces. Transparency is a contemporary word for “truth.” This is the case in two technical reports prepared by the Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee that, *based on the information model of communication*, “argue . . . for transparency” in their discussion with the public about labeling GMO foods. But at the level of style, these reports are studded with two contradictory sets of words in the same description: “objective” visual and spatial imagery vs. “affective” appeals to social beliefs and subjective emotions (Katz, 2009).

Transparency also may cloak the profit motive, as seems to be evident in a debate between the British biotechnology firm Oxitec and scientists at the Max Planck Institute (MPI) in Plön, Germany, concerning the release of genetically modified mosquitoes on unwitting populations. Guy Reeves (2012) of MPI argued for transparency “not for its own sake” but as part of an “engagement approach” that “seeks to involve the public, stakeholders and local inhabitants of release areas . . . by making all scientific content available”; Camilla Beech (2012) of Oxitec, on the other hand, argued that transparency is letting the public “see” only the “relevant” (and nonproprietary) “information”—ironically what Molly Hartzog and Steven Katz (2014) call “selective transparency.” Thus, transparency can *conceal* data in support of any other economic, political, scientific, or technical end, “frame” discussion (Heidegger, 1977; Katz & Rhodes, 2010), and so become what Kenneth Burke (1966) calls “terministic screens” that not only “reflect” but also “select,” and thus “deflect” as much as reveal (p.45). Like conspiracy theories, claims of transparency can obviate the need for more, good evidence (Rice, 2020); transparency can be weaponized against opponents (see Ridolfo & Hart-Davidson, 2019). And like “the ethic of expediency” (Katz, 1992), transparency can become an ethical end in itself.

Technical communication began (at least for some) as an instrumental discipline. Turns to rhetoric, *feminism*, care, social justice, and racial and ethnic equality have reframed the discussion of ethics in technical communication. Yet in the wider sphere in which technical communication operates, the old values of objectivity, accuracy, and open access have been reinstated in transparency as *the* communication ethic. As such, “the ethic of transparency” (re)presents 1) the same epistemological problems of Truth, and validity of empirical *knowledge*, found in Platonic philosophy and traditional science; 2) rhetorical ambiguity regarding *phronesis* and the moral contribution of practicing technical writers; and 3) an ongoing ethical challenge to the field of technical communication, and society as a whole.

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