

27. Public

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Many approaches to technical communication (TC) locate the field's work in corporate, industrial, and scientific workspaces—not the public sphere (Rude, 2008). And yet both the cultural turn (Scott et al., 2006) and the *social justice* turn (Haas & Eble, 2018; Walton et al., 2019) provide examples of the role of technical communication outside of these more traditional spaces. From public policy to *health and medical communication* to community-based literacies, technical communication often serves the public. And yet “the public” is not such a straightforward audience or set of users as one might hope.

Outside of TC, the term *public* has been well-theorized by scholars in communication (e.g., Asen, 2000; Goodnight, 2012), philosophy (e.g., Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1962/1991), and *rhetoric* and writing (e.g., Flower, 2008; Long, 2008; Rice, 2012), among others (notably, Warner, 2005 in literary studies). In TC, however, the theoretical takeaways often fade into the background of practice and application. As such, this entry provides an overview of the theoretical debates by organizing them into four key (if false) dichotomies that affect TC (see Table 27.1): public vs. private, the public vs. publics, public vs. counterpublic, and public vs. community. Rather than linger in the theoretical, this entry focuses on the ways each of these dichotomies affects the practice of technical communication in industry, *pedagogy*, and sites of *research*.

Public vs. Private. If we consult Jürgen Habermas (1962/1991), the public realm of authority, the public sphere (of cafes, politics, and the market), and the private realm (of the house and civil work spaces) exist as separate spheres (p. 30). Habermas writes that the public sphere includes “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” noting that “citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted faction . . . about matters of general interest” (Habermas, qtd. in Hauser, 1999). As the site of communication, the public sphere provides freedom from the restrictions of either the private sphere or the state. Yet theoretical critiques of Habermas argue that the differences between public and private are not so clear (e.g., Berlant and Warner, 1998).

Technical communication often exists in corporate, scientific, or government spaces; these spaces seem to live in a gray area between Habermas' public and private, entering into a discourse community that seems to be neither general enough to be considered “public” or intimate enough to be considered “private.” This dichotomy serves as the foundation for how TC has traditionally been conceptualized. Yet, countless examples draw our attention to the limits of conceptualizing public as separate from private. Katherine Durack

(1997), for example, highlighted how technologies used in the domestic (or private sphere) have been ignored by technical communicators because they are gendered. From a public vs. private perspective, however, the gendered nature of the *technology* she discusses is also wrapped up in the gendered nature of the home as a private sphere.

Many forms of technical communication mediate between the traditional public and private spheres, collapsing the dichotomy on itself. For example, the adjustable mortgage rate documents that Natasha Jones and Miriam Williams (2017) analyze are designed to be used by all members of the public to enable work in the public sphere. Yet, as they discuss, language use in these documents deeply affects and reflects the private realm: where someone lives and how they can make personal decisions about where to make a home. Similarly, medical/health communication and policies are often written to articulate policies for the public but ultimately affect activities and decisions that often occur in what might be called the private sphere (the body). Medical and health-related technical communication contexts, from DIY hormone replacement instructions (Edenfield et al., 2019) to fertility tracking apps (Novotny & Hutchinson, 2019) to HIV testing (Scott, 2003), provide examples of technical communication that defy the public vs. private dichotomy.

Table 27.1. Theoretical and Practical Takeaways That Emerge from Four Key (False) Dichotomies for Understanding the Complexity of the Term *Public*

Dichotomy	Theoretical Takeaway	Practical Takeaway
Public vs. Private	The distinction between public and private is murky at best.	TC often mediates between the traditional public and private spaces.
The Public vs. Publics	No single, homogenous public exists.	When moving into the public sphere, our audiences must be broken down into stakeholders, users, and localized contingents.
Public vs. Counterpublic	People traditionally excluded from the public sphere—marginalized groups or oppressed groups—often constitute their own groups in opposition to the dominant public sphere.	When considering information products of all kinds, the conceptualization of a public must account for the fact that not all groups have historically been considered central, important, or worthy of our attention.
Public vs. Community	Publics have been theorized as gatherings of strangers without shared interests or common goals; communities, on the other hand, provide loci for shared decision-making and values.	When considering public-facing technical communication, understanding community-driven values encourages a kind of localization that helps TC address injustice and solve discrete problems.

The Public vs. Publics. Early articulations of the public sphere articulated it as a location occupied by a singular entity: *the* public. Political discourse occurs in public, of course, but it is also marketed to “the public.” Despite the supposed neutrality of technical communication, scholars like Steven B. Katz (1992) and Dale Sullivan (1990) demonstrate that TC is political and addresses public problems; as such, the public is an audience for TC. But it’s complex and in no way homogenous. Indeed, as Robert Asen (2000) argues, “A single, overarching public sphere ignores or denies social complexity insofar as it invokes a notion of publicity as contemporaneous face-to-face encounters among all citizens potentially affected by issues under consideration.” This complexity has driven most theorists to articulate that multiple publics exist in any communication scenario.

The dichotomy between “the public” and “publics” has importance because technical communicators are often challenged to create a single technical document (a webpage, a policy, an instruction manual) that works for “the public.” Susan Youngblood (2012), for example, demonstrates the complexities of developing emergency-planning websites for “the public” where *information* products must meet the demands of a number of stakeholders. In these cases, “the public” remains ambiguous at best and might best be described as “anyone who reads the document”.

Technical communicators have handled the need to communicate with “the public” through a range of best practices, most notably *accessibility* standards and *plain language*. Accessibility standards and *user experience* testing, for example, allow for *designers* to ensure that even if and as “the public” is conceptualized as homogeneous, public-facing information products have a base-level of accessibility for a wide range of users. Plain language standards also provide a foundation for addressing “the public” in its diversity and difference by simplifying language for the widest range of readers and users. Yet even with these strategies, the problems facing technical communicators writing for “the public” are many: Different users will use the document or technology in different ways (Johnson, 1998). In other words, there is never really just one public; rather, there are many publics who “gather” around the same document or technology for different purposes. As a result, technical communicators navigate public-facing projects using user-centered approaches, breaking down “the public” into stakeholder and user groups whenever possible (Acharya, 2017; Zoetewey & Staggers, 2004).

Public vs. Counterpublic. Perhaps the most important result of the public(s) conversation is the acknowledgement that some publics exist in contradistinction to what might be called *the* public—those at the margin (minoritized groups and individuals) versus those in the center (typically those who most closely resemble Audre Lorde’s mythical norm: straight, white, male, Christian, and middle class). For example, in *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn*, Rebecca Walton, Natasha Jones, and I describe the

ways able-bodied users are often *de facto*, leaving those with disabilities at the margin (Walton et al., 2019). This example demonstrates the need not only to articulate that there are multiple publics but also that those publics are unequally positioned to navigate political and institutional authorities. The concept of counterpublics (Warner, 2005) offers an import frame for understanding these inequities. As Michael Warner (2005) observes, “Some publics . . . are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people” (p. 117).

Counterpublics are “not merely a subset of the public”; instead, they are defined in contradistinction to the dominant or mainstream (Warner, 2005, p. 118). Subordinated by the dominant public, counterpublics (including women, workers, and people of color, among others) have “no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies” (Fraser, qtd. in Warner, p. 118). In her articulation of “the” Black Public Sphere, Catherine Squires (2002) takes this further, arguing not only that counterpublics exist, but that they sometimes operate differently in order to thrive or survive. In the wake of political inequity, then, counterpublics develop as resistant, oppositional, or contrary to the dominant public.

The implications of this dichotomy have caused a tectonic shift in the field of TC. It is not enough to acknowledge that there are multiple publics; instead, technical communicators must understand the way that power and oppression imbue the public sphere. W. Michelle Simmons (2007) provides a foundational example of this as she articulates the ways TC practices needed to shift in order to ethically and justly accommodate those with less power in an environmental case. The role of systemic oppression has become prominent in the field’s social justice turn, emphasizing the need for technical communicators to consider *counterpublics*. Emma Rose and Rebecca Walton (2015), for example, articulated the ways particular users of public-transit systems (homeless bus riders) are often vulnerable to (and under-consulted on) system changes. Similarly, Lucía Durá and colleagues (2019) revealed the way Latinx migrants have limited support to navigate end-of-life contexts in the United States.

Public vs. Community. In the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication (JBTC)* special issue on business and technical communication in the public sphere, a number of articles address the impact TC can have in the public sphere and “convey a quiet optimism about the possibilities of using and improving texts for solving problems in the public sphere” (Rude, 2008). The first article in the issue begins “In a community we call Harbor . . .” and then describes “finding a way to work effectively with communities marked by severe distrust and broken relationships” (Blythe et al., 2008, p. 279). This linguistic move provides insight into a final proposed dichotomy: public vs. community.

TC has, as demonstrated in this entry, engaged with the public sphere in many ways, but often, there is slippage between public and community work. For example, the work of Dura et al. (2019) mentioned above arguably focuses on counterpublics, but the authors describe their project as a form of community-based user experience (UX). What do we get from *community* that we don't otherwise get from *publics*?

Warner (2005) describes a public as a collection of strangers; he argues that publics are formed through the circulation of documents. The public or publics cannot be known because they aren't stable and cannot be pre-determined. Communities, on the other hand, are intimate collections of individuals. When Stuart Blythe and colleagues (2008) describe Harbor as a community, it is because the group is a known entity, an emplaced and connected group of individuals. Community, in other words, focuses on connection and what is shared among individuals. Walton and colleagues (2015) demonstrate as much when they discuss their *research* in Rwanda. Focusing on the community, their research emerged as messy, deeply contextualized, and fundamentally collaborative. The focus on community provided these two research groups with an ability to engage with members who have specific needs, individualized stories, and culturally specific *knowledge*. When technical communicators write for a collection of strangers (or a public), our orientation towards those individuals may become distanced, neutral, and objective; this neutrality, as Cecilia Shelton (2020) argues, can do harm. Shifting to a community-based framework may be one strategy for critically engaging those who have traditionally been excluded from "the public sphere," that is, the counterpublics.

The various dichotomies about "public" don't hold together under scrutiny and do not create easily defined categories or labels, yet they offer productive tensions to consider the way the concept of the public has and continues to affect TC practice.

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