The Changing Face of Public Policy Studies in Technical Communication

Andrew J. Roback

COM 521

Dr. Stolley

December 11, 2009

Abstract

The last decade has seen a great deal of interest in public policy studies within the field of technical communication. Recent political events and technological advancements have made public policy debate more accessible and commonplace. This paper categorizes and synthesizes some past approaches to analysis of public policy discourse, explores pedagogical directions for integrating public policy studies into curricula, and suggests areas of future exploration such as the study of the role of social media and e-Government in public policy discourse.

The Changing Face of Public Policy Studies in Technical Communication

In 2000, a special issue of Technical Communication Quarterly was published that examined the discourse of public policy. Since that time, a flurry of scholarship has appeared that questions the role of a technical communicator in society, specifically a technical communicator's role in policy debates. Rude's (2004) landmark article on the subject was probably, in no small part, responsible for this heightened interest in demarcating the spaces that technical communicators, both practitioners and scholars, should inhabit with regard to public policy debates. As conceptions of what it means to be a technical communication scholar broaden, so too does the breadth and scope of research into public policy debate and what rhetorical role technical communicators play in such a debate.

In this essay, I wish to explore and highlight some of the scholarship in the last decade, from the 2000 special issue of Technical Communication Quarterly to recent research on public policy and technical communication. I will also outline new directions on research that will fill the gap that has emerged in the wake of an explosion in web-based social networking and news delivery. First, I will outline the circumstances that warrant an increased attention to, and involvement in, understandings of public policy debate and what role technical communicators should, and already do, play in it.

Multiple, Concurrent Exigencies

In the last decade, several crucial policy decisions have occurred with regard to a variety of issues. Public policy debates which once seemed marginal (e.g. national security, climate change, health care reform, and banking regulations, to name a few) have become central to daily life due to various exigencies. In a period where radical public policy changes are to be rapidly enacted, an explosion of new media has thrust previously underrepresented issues of social

importance into the arena of public debate. An increased period of domestic turmoil combined with the international fallout of a global recession has brought about a moment in history where fierce policy debate can be conducted in a variety of traditional and nontraditional forums.

When initial inquiries were made into public policy debate (2000-2004) the internet was in a stage of comparative infancy. Since then, multiple social media sites, widespread access to broadband internet access, and a host of more affordable computing technology has lead to a technologically literate public that is able to receive and disseminate information rapidly through various web-based forums. The result of such a technological expansion is a public that has the potential to play a greater role in shaping public policy and influencing policymakers.

In the years leading up to the present, technical communication has evolved in its understanding and examination of public policy debate, but there is still a degree of uncertainty as to the role that technical communicators play in such debates. This essay will categorize and synthesize some of the approaches that scholars have taken in the past, explore pedagogical directions and theories for integrating public policy studies into technical communication curricula, and suggest areas of future exploration for scholarship.

Establishing Interpersonal and Societal Context

Policy debate does not occur in a vacuum. Relating this axiom to public policy studies in technical communication, Dombrowski (2006) argues that "technical communication is not simply the relaying of absolute and pre existing information. Instead, it is a complex, fallible, and highly social human act involving not only empirical information but also thinking about, conceptualizing, writing, situating, and applying such information" (p. 235). Old conceptions of the existence of knowledge separate from human understanding and interaction have been repudiated by theories that aptly analyze situational context (Miller, 1979; Driskill, 1989;

Harrison, 1987). A trademark of context analysis in public policy studies is the movement away from traditional, organization-only studies to a wider view of the social factors that influence decisions within organizations. For example, while Driskill (1989) addresses the idea that outside economic interests played a significant part in the conference call meeting between NASA and the independent contractors responsible for manufacturing O rings in the *Challenger* disaster, Dombrowski (2006) casts a wider net in examining both the *Challanger* and *Columbia* accidents through an analysis of the entire history of the space shuttle program.

Dombrowski presents five categories of contextual influences that played into the loss of the *Columbia* space shuttle and crew, including societal, cultural, historical, budgetary, and political influences on NASA and its engineers. His analysis of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board's (CAIB) findings demonstrates that engineers were caught in a real-life Catch 22 situation; engineers were unable to obtain evidence via satellite photography of damaged heat tiles on the wing of the shuttle without first providing evidence that such damage existed in order to retask a satellite to take the images of the damaged area. This impossible dilemma, combined with a disturbingly familiar assumption about the thermal resiliency of shuttle materials, proved tragic to the victims of the disaster. Also factoring into the disaster were longstanding beliefs about what the space shuttle program should and could accomplish; Dombrowski asserts that this was not overlooked by the CAIB: "understanding events requires a thorough understanding of the interaction between communication and the social and cultural context" (2006, p. 250). Dombrowski takes this report as evidence that the field of technical communication is impacting the understanding of how contextual factors influence communication.

The expansion of the idea of context in the field of public policy studies within technical communication is critical to understanding the multiple approaches that various scholars take when contributing to the field. Context in the Dombrowskian sense is a matter of developing a broad, historical understanding past events. Rude's (2004) landmark essay on the uses of reports in public policy debates envisions context as a matter of delivery and interpersonal interaction. Repurposing Aristotle's definition of the rhetorical cannon of delivery, Rude asserts that delivery is not limited to a single rhetorical act; she warns that "delivery understood as a finite act, ending with the performance or publication, neglects […] the impact of the publication on the rhetorical situation, the exigence that called the publication into being" (p. 274). The report becomes a tool, "not just […] a publication presenting information," and the writer of the report is responsible for "resolving the exigence that calls the publication into being" (p. 280, 286). This broad themed definition of delivery challenges the notion of a technical writer as merely a document producer; a technical writer instead is a person who creates documents in a context of debate, with the intent to provide information to decision makers and use that information to persuade. The example that Rude supplies is one where a single, finite document brings about a cascade of supplemental reports and public engagements in support of the original report's message.

Context as it relates to public policy studies can therefore be viewed in two different ways: understanding the context which leads to the production of a text, or a writer centered approach, and understanding the context of delivering the text or message to an audience, or a reader centered approach. In the following sections, I will address each approach and give examples of the various and rich work done in this field that examines a broad variety of interesting public policy issues from these two related perspectives.

Writer-Centered Policy Analyses

Writer-centered analyses tend to focus on the document itself, examining the narrative or meaning that the document conveys from the perspective of rhetorical decisions that the writers themselves make. Writer-centered discussions examine the circumstances surrounding the creation of a document (exigence), the authors of the document, the writers' source material, and the construction of authorial credibility or objectivity (ethos).

In examining the context in which actions are taken and documents are produced to alter the course of existing public policy, activity theorists are positioned perfectly to comment on the systems by which governmental organizations take action in policy debates. Of particular interest are the conditions by which a problem is realized (the exigence), and the methods of inclusion (or exclusion) by which community members are chosen to deliberate and take action (specifically, in the form of a committee).

Two key studies in this area offer very different models for how exigencies are realized. In Wallace's (2003) study of power management policy in New Zealand, we can see that popular conception of an issue need not factor into whether or not policy change takes place. According to Wallace, a key aspect of governing bodies is the unresolved tension apparent in democratic society that both asks the government to "lead a process of social adaptation to ever-continuing change" as well as "consult the affected social body about measures to be taken" (p. 160). In his study, Wallace asserts that the government had already decided on the privatization of power supply in New Zealand and he points out that the terms of reference guiding the governmental report restrict its logical conclusion to some kind of reformatory action, eliminating the possibility of retaining the status quo: a publicly owned power supply system that has been in place for years. Some elements of the report process were worded beyond the grasp of the

average citizen, leading to anemic public feedback; the limited amount of feedback that was collected was buried in the report so that it would have little impact on the results of the study. Wallace concludes that policy deliberation that supposedly seeks collaboration and input from informed citizens can actually function as a deterministic statement of governmental intent that marginalizes civic involvement. Considering that the system to be reformed was functioning adequately, a clear exigence was lacking; therefore, public involvement was hindered and later buried in order to suppress popular support for the current power supply system.

However, a clear exigence is not necessarily the only necessary element to ensure civic consensus when dealing with a contentious issue of policy debate. Knievel (2008) examines the revision of the use-of-force policy of the Denver Police Department (DPD) after the fatal shooting of a mentally impaired boy by a DPD officer. In his study he utilizes activity theory to examine the use-of-force policy "genre" and how a "rupture" (the shooting) caused the policy to be "excavated" by the mayor through the appointment of a panel to revise the department's written policy (Knievel, 2008). The public engagement after the rupture resulted in a relatively speedy policy change, in contrast to Rude's (2004) assertion that policy change is a slow, multi-step process that occurs on many levels. However, while the excavation of this genre in the wake of the rupture led to rapid alterations to the use of force policy, the appointment of a panel that included both civic activists and police officers led to a bitter debate over whether the public should be allowed to modify a police use of force policy, a policy described by Knievel as a "tacit contract with the populace" (p. 346). Hence, a clear and provocative exigence may lead to rapid policy reformation, but does not always engender consensus.

This is a particular problem for the writer when creating national consensus is the goal of the policy document. One particular situation where consensus is highly desirable by the policy

writer is the prelude to military action. In her study of an intelligence report presented to the people of the United Kingdom in 2002 to justify armed conflict with Iraq, McKenzie (2009) exposes the subtle rhetorical techniques (which I will return to later) imbedded in the report used to persuade the audience. By legal mandate in the UK, intelligence reports are supposed to supply information only, the deliberation of action being reserved exclusively for the legislative branch of the government. Although the report's rhetorical strategies were rightly exposed through subsequent judicial investigation, the unprecedented effectiveness of the report in strongly biasing opinion is addressed by McKenzie when she calls for further research into how "public rhetors' backgrounds and purposes play out in the communications they produce" (18). A question of ethos is raised when examining documents intended to sway public opinion, especially in a field such as national intelligence, where intelligence information is portrayed in a very similar way to scientific fact (McKenzie, 2009).

Many times, public policy discourse authored by both government writers and oppositional policy advocates rely on the same source material for their arguments. In her analysis of the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository project Tillery (2003) analyzes fact sheets that environmental organizations constructed in order to persuade the public to oppose the US senate approved waste site. In their dispute with the Department of Energy (DOE) over the safety of the site for storing nuclear waste, environmental organizations often utilized scientific studies commissioned (or sometimes conducted) by the DOE as evidence of the DOE's inability to manage the repository projects efficiently, creating a situation where the authors of the fact sheets ask readers to accept the DOE study as credible while simultaneously accepting the study as evidence of faulty decision making by the DOE's; the studies are thereby used to question the ethos of the DOE (Tillery, 2003).

In her follow up article, Tillery (2006) identifies the problem of writer ethos as a primary concern for parties generating documents that are designed to persuade the reader to take sides in an ecological debate. Tillery asserts that the government typically carries a negative ethos just by virtue of public distrust, and she outlines three areas—developed from Aristotle's ethical proofs— that the writer of a technical document must foster in order to present a convincing argument: practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill towards the audience. In particular, Tillery recommends "acknowledging uncertainties," a tactic that demonstrates to the audience the admission, on the part of the author, "that scientific knowledge is far from certain" (2006, p. 332). Tillery's (2006) recommendations demonstrate how to mitigate negative ethos, but also leave open the question of ethical ramifications: is it ethical to present an authoritative and trustworthy ethos when covert interests contradict valid concerns?

Reader-Centered Policy Analyses

Reader-centered policy analyses examine how reader reactions are shaped by the presentation of scientific information in policy studies. They examine issues such as the ethos of the authors or organizations and they ways in which authors use credibility to manage reader response, particularly in issues involving debate over the interpretation of scientific fact.

Graham and Lindeman (2005) explore the question of perceived ethos in their analysis of two different reports issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) written to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) about the hydrodynamics of the Missouri River system. In their study, they point out that "an organization does not write reports—people representing that organization write reports," and they take exception when two reports, issued under the auspices of corporate authorship by the Service, completely change perspectives on use of the Missouri River system (p. 423); the 2000 report promoted a balance between human use and ecological

preservation, while the 2003 report, written by replacement authors, privileges human use to the detriment of endangered species living in the ecosystem. Graham and Lindeman adopt a reader-response critical approach arguing that a report's meaning is made by the reader of the report. Using this approach, the authors' rhetorical study concludes that the environmentalist report of 2000 favors conservationist concerns by using a narrative technique and admitting scientific uncertainty to (as suggested by Tillery, 2006) build ethos for immediate action to preserve endangered species. The 2003 report exploits the uncertainty of the science behind the recommendations of the 2000 report to delay action until further research can be done. The authors argue that delaying action while waiting for scientific certainty to be achieved is a common strategy to counter an oppositional, conservationist argument (Graham & Linderman 2005). They term the strategy used by both sets of authors "manipulative silences," or the exclusion or amplification of specific scientific information in order to generate ethos and enhance the credibility of the information presented (Graham & Linderman, 2005, p. 443). A concern exists, then, about whether presenting a course of action as a scientific uncertainty (or utilizing the fact that science is an uncertain prospect) is ethical or acceptable when the deliberative act is compromised or biased toward one particular course of action by such an admission. In other words, does the "admission" of uncertainty of an opposition's conclusions based on scientific measurements or facts constitute an ethos building exercise, or a deliberate attempt to undermine the opposition's ethos? An example of this tactic is the claim that "global warming is not a scientific certainty," capitalizing on the infinitesimal number of scientists that fail to recognize climate change as a threat to humanity.

Spoel, Goforth, Cheu, & Pearson (2009) demonstrate such techniques in action in a comparison of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* to a Canadian museum exhibit, *Climate Change*

Show. In analyzing ethos, they identify Al Gore (the presenter in *An Inconvenient Truth*) as an "outsider-insider science communicator" who can both reflect on scientific fact as a layperson as well as portray himself as having privileged and complicated (beyond the audience's means of comprehension) scientific knowledge (Spoel et al., 2009, p. 62). This narrative style is in contrast to the animated sheep narrator in *Climate Change Show*, who is a humble scientific outsider. While both the film and exhibit treat the same topic and are designed to make the public scientifically literate in order to understand and participate in the discourse of climate change, both "in essence tell the audience what to think about climate change," and they fail to "facilitate the integration of the audience's lay knowledges and concerns about the subject (Spoel et al., 2009, p. 77). Spoel et al. contend that the most effective types of communication that foster "engaged understanding" utilize "all three modes of rhetorical proof" to foster "public expertise and scientific citizenship" (p. 77-8).

Both Graham and Linderman (2005) and Spoel et al. (2009) raise serious questions as to whether the ethos building strategies utilized in public policy communications are appropriate to effectively communicate information, or whether they simply obfuscate the issue under debate and give license to the authors to shift the focus away from evidence based rational debate (logos) and engage in credibility contests through the downgrading of an opponents ethos, or the inflation of their own ethos.

Visual Analysis: Human-Centered Theory

Similar to reader-centered criticism, visual analyses that focus on the humanistic element of representation are concerned with how graphics and visual representations (photographs, charts, etc.) are utilized to present information in a public policy document. I use the term

humanistic because this type of analysis is concerned with representations of humans or states or conditions that affect humans adversely.

Dragga and Voss (2003) perform a rhetorical analysis of accident investigation reports and argue for a greater human presence within the reports, specifically where loss of life and injury occur (e.g. the use of a stick figure instead of an "x" to represent a person in a diagram of an accident, or the inclusion of pictures of deceased victims in an accident report). The appropriate strategy for technical communicators to use when constructing information graphics in accident reports, the authors claim, should be to avoid further injuring victims or invading survivor(s) privacy, while simultaneously seeking to represent human injury or loss of life (Dragga & Voss, 2003). The authors' paper is primarily a tutorial of how to inject humanity into accident report diagrams, but the strategies that they outline point to an important facet of visual elements in public policy documents, mainly that they not be used to misrepresent the factual information that the report is trying to convey; in other words, much like a scientist would not alter the scale of a graph to over- or underemphasize findings, a the proper rhetorical use for a graphic should be to represent information in a true and unbiased way (for a detailed discussion of visual graphics and ethics, see Barton & Barton, 1993).

Visual ethics aside, accurate representation is a fundamental concept of technical communication. In public policy documents, it is important that the audience understand which information directly relates to the policy being debated. Strikingly similar to Graham and Linderman (2005), McKenzie (2009) points out the disconnect between individual motives and a finished report. In the British intelligence report, where the effects of chemical weapons are shown and described, the connection is not made clear between the chilling effects of those weapons (the narratives and pictures of those killed) and the threat posed to the British public by

those weapons (McKenzie, 2009, 16). Specifically, McKenzie links the strategy of the British intelligence report writers to one of the faults of accident reports shown in Dragga and Voss (2003): the dehumanizing effect of nameless, faceless victims (the British intelligence report shows only corpses on a street). McKenzie concludes that the report writers "merely used the [Iraqi chemical weapons] attack victims and the pathos their stories evoked" to "[generate] emotional support for their underlying cause" (p. 16). When the motives of the writers are not made explicit (or presented as neutral, in spite of a deliberate attempt to influence the readers) and selective evidence is presented, the result is a mixed message that leaves it up to the readers to question the supposed objectivity or neutrality of the report in the face of subtle, but strong rhetorical techniques.

In the case of the British intelligence report, the desire was to quickly move to military action and increase the pace of the debate by making the situation seem more urgent. While it is reprehensible to misuse this rhetorical strategy, visual graphics can also spur social reform and lead to action where it would not have otherwise occurred. Drawing on visual rhetoric, Kimball's (2006) study of Charles Booth's late 19th century London poverty maps explores how Booth's maps undercut the notion of widespread civil unrest regarding poverty in London by visually demonstrating that the worst poverty was confined to certain city districts. While this at first seems to marginalize the poverty problem, it also made the problem seem "manageable" through concrete social reforms (Kimball's 2006, p. 359-60). Discrepancies occur in Booth's research, but his sustained campaign and subsequent presentations of his findings, similar to the strategy outlined in Rude (2004), causes poverty to be viewed in a new light and leads to positive social action (Kimball, 2006).

Hyper-accurate representation of data or perspectives should not necessarily be a consideration when preparing a graphic in a policy document. The irony that Kimball points out is that "adding detail or multiplicity of viewpoints to information graphics contradicts one of their central advantages: their ability to enable decisions or actions by aggregating data into unified ideas that viewers can grasp at a glance" (p. 378). Thus, in each case, the presentation of information has to be balanced with the need to motivate social action: in terms of armed conflict, climate change, and mitigation of poverty, the immediacy of human suffering has to be among the many ethical considerations when analyzing the extent to which visual representations stress the need to terminate debate and spur the audience to action.

Public Intervention and Activism: The Public Intellectual

Since immediacy of human suffering is a strong concern of the study of public policy in technical communication, ethics are often weighed against potential benefits. As Katz (1992) points out, expediency is not sufficient to stand alone as the only ethical consideration, lest it be perverted into the sole end of communication, eliminating moral and humanistic concerns. However, expediency is a consideration when determining a course of action, where delay may cause additional human suffering. Direct intervention by technical communicators is often viewed as an acceptable means of quickly facilitating or effecting policy change, but such involvement also carries an ethical responsibility to avoid damaging the community or harming its members through inadvertent, albeit well intentioned interactions.

The role of the technical communicator in the community is something that has been addressed by scholars, mainly in the light of service learning or partnerships between industry and the academy in the form of internships or case studies. Two recent studies, however, posit a

different approach, and their aim is more in line with the participatory nature that has been adopted by many technical communicators investigating public policy studies.

In discussing the historical relationship between academic institutions and the communities they inhabit, Eble and Gaillet promote a tight partnership between the two and advocate for educators to develop programs that "emphasize rhetoric and ethical inquiry inherent in writing projects" (349). Their goal is to create academics that develop into "community intellectuals," civic-minded persons that utilize their communicative talents for the civic good. The authors locate the tradition of such a practice in eighteenth-century Scotland, where, as a result of the 1707 political union with England and Scotland's subsequent inclusion in international trade, universities had a tight-knit relationship with the surrounding community (Eble & Gaillet, 2004); the community informed and shaped the pedagogical decisions of the university and the students that graduated from the university benefited from and shaped the community through the reciprocal exchange of values and ethical ideals. Eble and Gaillet propose a continuation of such a model by modifying existing technical communication curricula to encompass a high degree of reflexivity about ethical and social considerations within the surrounding community. While Eble and Gaillet support their approach with historical tradition, their plan appears at times detached, lacking an urgency and specific plan of action.

Bowdon (2006) takes a similar view of the participatory nature of technical communication, arguing for the creation of a "public intellectual," but argues adamantly that technical communicators do not have a choice in whether or not to become civically engaged advocates. Through the act of collaborating with individuals or organizations involved in disseminating information directly related to the formation of public policy, technical communicators must accept a role of rhetorically situated public intellectuals that share their

knowledge with researchers and decision makers. Drawing on her experience with an AIDS prevention program, Bowdon suggests three vital avenues that technical communicators must explore when assuming the role of a public intellectual: bringing research relevant to "the history of science and rhetoric to sites where decisions are being made," "export[ing] skills for producing critical frameworks and performing rhetorical analysis to these sites of action," and sharing information with colleagues and students to benefit from their critical feedback (2006, p. 338-9).

The role of the community intellectual is therefore to engage the community that they serve. As seen in many of the above case studies, often the technical writer serves as the intermediary between complex information and the people poised to make decisions based on that information. When directly engaged with the community, technical communicators must not only be proficient in their skills, but also understand the ethical ramifications of their interactions. A participatory stance in technical communication necessitates training that fits the interpersonal contexts in which practitioners and academics operate.

Pedagogical Approaches

Case studies of public policy documents help us understand the ways in which rhetoric and context influence the communication of technical information and sway the opinions of involved stakeholders; however, these types of studies can only provide so much. While they present a rich palate from which to draw examples of failures, conflicts, and sometimes even successes in technical communication, much of the applicatory work resides in the pedagogical approaches that transmit what has been learned to future generations of technical communicators and "community intellectuals." In this section, I will examine some of the suggested classroom

approaches and what each pedagogically progressive approach brings to the field by including public policy studies in technical communication curricula.

Environmental writing, as demonstrated above (Graham & Lindeman, 2005; Tillery, 2003; Tillery, 2006; Rude, 2004; Spoel, et al, 2009), is a popular topic of technical communication studies. In their curriculum piece, Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan (2009) present a plan for a course in conservation writing, pointing out the conditions that call for such a course: the current zeitgeist of environmental action to stem the results of climate change has created an enthusiasm for the propagation of responsible environmental interactions. Their article stresses the need for technical communication courses specifically tailored to conservation writing (as opposed to engineering writing as is often the case) and the larger societal need to foreground education that teaches students to tailor complex scientific knowledge to fit arguments aimed at layperson decision makers and the general public.

A vehicle that Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan (2009) propose for educating students about conservation writing is service-learning, but the benefits of such an approach have come under question from scholars studying civic engagement projects. One seductive aspect of service-learning projects is the idea of providing free labor for a worthy organization, particularly a non-profit, while helping the student gain "real-life" experience. Scott (2004) takes issue with this system of learning, arguing that service-learning has been co-opted by what he terms as "hyperpragmatism," a perspective that values pragmatic pedagogical concerns (i.e. preparing students to transition from an educational institution to industry) over cultural concerns and reflexive practices (i.e. considering the impact of technical communication on users and exploring conflicts in personal versus corporate ideologies). Scott argues for a more relaxed conception of what can be accomplished in service-learning, and places emphasis on meta-

reflection: not just having students reflect on what is accomplished (physical production), but also compelling them to consider why they need to interact with the community and in what ways their interactions are constrained by outside factors. This approach ensures that students are not only participating in civic engagement, but are using the opportunity to reflect on broader societal factors and not just on meeting the client's requirements (Scott, 2004).

Ornatowski and Bekins (2004) question the very idea of what constitutes a "community," and they explore various conceptions of communities and how those conceptions reify or challenge existing practices within the field of technical communication. The authors introduce the competing concepts of orthodox and radical communities, where radical communities challenge the notion of common belief, continuity, and political detachment espoused by orthodox communities (Ornatowski & Bekins, 2004). In the process of mitigating between communities or factions (oppositional entities within communities), the technical communicator performs a rhetorical act by selecting or excluding discourse in a written product. The goal of community learning that the authors' suggest is to teach technical writers to analyze the results of their actions on a multiplicity of communities through a complex understanding of intra-communal relations. Such a conception seems fundamental, but case studies often reveal that the so called community that technical communicators seek to engage is rarely as homogenous as first thought of when conceiving of the project (take Booth's mapping project, for example, as outlined in Kimball, 2006).

An alternative approach to community learning projects is suggested by Mara (2006). Originating first in the fields of design and architecture, Mara borrows the design project method of the charette: "a number of collaborative processes, most notably those in which architects and planners collaborate with groups of people—often the general public—to solve a design

problem" (p. 221). Mara asserts that charettes are excellent projects for technical communication students to engage in because they not only promote the students' civic participation, but they solve real world problems and help students develop their "professional ethos" in ways that service-learning cannot. Mara (2006) concurs with Scott (2004) that students in service-learning programs are often detached from the public and placed in a servicing role to a larger entity such as a corporation. The case studies Mara provides demonstrate how students can be organizers and essentially constitute their own service-learning partner organization by creating task groups to engage the public and issue reports based on what they learn about public interest. Mara also warns of the potential pitfalls of charettes: misrepresenting the public interest, creating visuals or flashy designs that misdirect the public interest, and the potential for backlash that is inherent when engaging the public (Mara, 2006).

Mara's (2006) proposal of charettes aims pedagogical efforts at true civic engagement in that he proposes direct contact with community stakeholders, advocating for and solving problems in the community. Many service-learning approaches tend to wed "real-life" experience to experience in a corporate environment, but such an approach is sometimes unwarranted. Consider for example the work of Ranney (2000) who proposed that harassment policy documents have become authorless, "discursive technology" that serve only to describe behavioral standards and outline punishments for offenders of the policy (11). Her solution of drafting revised policies that focus on prevention rather than punishment called for a group-constructed policy, which, although it must overcome the challenges of employer paranoia (i.e. that free and open discussion may lead to more complaints), has the potential to expose additional cases of harassment that may otherwise lay dormant (Ranney 2000). Some situations may not warrant involvement by a technical communication student where such involvement

would rob community members or corporate employees of potential benefits of internal conflict resolution. Many times, case studies and pedagogical approaches focus on the consequences that result from an absence of intervention by a technical communicator, but the presence of a technical communicator has the potential to advocate for communities at the expense of failing to analyze all possible dimensions or considerations that an action may have on a community. An excellent example is provided by Orntatowski and Bekins (2004) whereby a technical communicator argues in favor of retaining public control of a cemetery over a private takeover (arguing that the cemetery was an important part of the "community"), but neglects to consider the potential benefit that cheaper burials would have to the poorer members of the same community. Recognizing communities as heterogeneous entities that are capable of, and sometime better off, resolving problems without intervention of a technical communicator, is a concern that should temper technical communicators' involvement in their communities.

Future Directions

Through a sampling of some of the scholarship that has been produced in the last decade, it is evident that public policy studies are fast becoming a large part of technical communication scholarship. In this section, I suggest some future directions for work in this area that will explore the increasing potential for citizens to become civically engaged through technology.

An interesting conception of public policy formation is proposed by Williams (2009) who seeks to move the study of public policy away from technical considerations (i.e. how technology is communicated in policy documents or how the communication of technology affects policy) to the study of the formation of public policy as a technology itself. Williams compares the steps in developing and testing software to the steps necessary to conceive of, draft, implement, and evaluate public policy, developing a fusion model that combines the steps

of both processes; she then provides the example of e-rulemaking, a process where multiple stakeholders can view and comment on proposed government regulations. While Williams recognizes the limitations involved in e-rulemaking (issues of access), she asserts that a participatory model is essential in the development of policy and that technical communication scholars should continue the research of public policy as a technology.

Indeed, the focus of technical communication on web design and accessibility is a burgeoning topic itself, and public policy studies within technical communication need to keep pace with the quality and amount of scholarship produced in other web media analyses. An excellent example of such a study is the work of Sidler and Jones (2009) who perform a rhetorical analysis of two websites maintained by organizations at the heart of public policy debate concerning genetics. Although the two sites examined by the authors employ different techniques, both organizations conform to Rude's (2004) conception of delivery (p. 33). The actions taken by the organizations include not only sections of their websites that inform the readers of the pertinent issues of debate, but also instructions on how to become involved in public policy debate and to contact and influence elected officials. The authors assert that analyses such as the one they performed could help students become aware of "the effect that rhetorical decisions about interface technologies can have on deliberative actions of the *citizen-users* that access these interfaces" (Sidler & Jones, 2009, p. 46, my emphasis).

The concept of the "citizen-user" that Sidler and Jones (2009) adopt to describe NGO public policy website users is an interesting approach, and future study should be directed toward addressing the issue of online participation in public policy debate. Civic authority has traditionally been tied to voting, but websites like Twitter and Facebook offer new media channels directly to the offices of some national and local politicians. Further research must be

done to identify practical and creative uses for such sites in public policy debate. For instance, my local alderman (or more likely, a staffer) maintains a Twitter account, but mostly posts regarding community events. Without privileging one use over another, certainly issues discussed in open session in the city council chambers would make an equally productive use of social media as a Christmas block party or Halloween parade.

While recent research into e-Rulemaking outside of technical communication is an excellent beginning (Carlitz & Gunn, 2005; Muhlberger, 2006), it is also still primarily aimed at professional stakeholders like governmental regulatory agencies, environmental groups, and industry: people whose livelihood is directly linked to advocacy. I propose that technical communication scholars should approach issues such as these with an eye on citizen engagement, examining how to increase civic participation utilizing strategies and tools that already exist. Looking at the case studies presented in this paper, it is clear that a great deal of emphasis is placed on written artifacts such as investigation reports, environmental impact statements, and policy manuals or corporate policy statements. Unexplored are a myriad of web-based tools that politicians and professionals use to disseminate information and endorse or facilitate citizen advocacy.

An Example and Conclusions

On November 7th, 2009, I tweeted the following[1]: "To Rep. Luis Gutierrez: Please vote for health insurance reform. #hc09 #IL." A page on barackobama.com called "Tweet Your Representative[2]" contained a link that opened a new browser (provided you were signed in to Twitter) and automatically generated this text, along with a shortened URL for the "Tweet Your Representative" webpage and other hashtags (e.g. my home city, #chicago). Although I

[1] http://twitter.com/andrew0writer/status/5520204117
[2] http://www.barackobama.com/twitter/tweetyourrep/

customized my own tweet, the user needed only hit the "Update" button in Twitter to post this information, making broadcasting your position on the issue and contacting your elected representative a "single click" affair that involves no more effort than entering your street address. This message was not only aimed at my representative, however. The shortened URL was no doubt so my followers on Twitter could easily access the same page and send their own tweet to their representative in Congress, while the hashtags allowed people searching for regional information to view the tweet; the intent is clearly a cascade effect. The use of social media in public policy debate is clearly becoming a mainstream tactic for rallying support from the civic body at all levels of government.

The study of public policy in technical communication is closely linked to traditional topics of scholarship in the field. Because of the deliberative nature of public policy documents, rhetorical analyses are easily employed to both expose deceptiveness and humanize discourse. Since the communication of technical information to the layperson is a mainstay of the genre, issues of representation and clear and ethical communication have quickly become popular in technical communication discourse. Issues of reader response and humanistic concerns such as objectivity versus activism, and the impact of community outreach are intertwined with pedagogical approaches, a ubiquitous topic in technical communication studies.

In order to sustain relevance in this field, these issues must be applied to media that is on the forefront of public policy debate. The inclusion of new genres in this field is well justified; indeed, many articles from earlier in this decade included justifications for why environmental reports were suitable topics to address in a technical communication paper (Rude, 2004; Graham & Linderman, 2005; Tillery, 2003). The inclusive nature of the study of public policy in technical communication has provided a rich tapestry of analyses that explore a wide array of

interesting topics, from 19th century maps, to 21st century genetics websites. Future studies might explore social media polling, accessibility to information about public deliberations, rhetorical analyses of public appeals to legislators, and inquiries into the utilization of the web to increase public interaction by addressing the ever present stigma of civic apathy. The broad base of interest in public policy discourse within technical communication studies and the natural points of convergence outlined above demonstrate how technical communication can continue to engage these issues in the future.

References

Barton, B. & Barton, M. (1993). Ideology and the Map: Toward a Postmodern Visual Design Practice. In Nancy Roundy Blyler & Charlotte Thralls (Eds.), *Professional Communication: The Social Perspective*, (p. 49-78). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Bowdon, M. (2004). Technical Communication and the Role of the Public Intellectual: A Community HIV-Prevention Case Study. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 325-340.

Carlitz, R. & Gunn, R. (2005). e-Rulemaking: a New Avenue for Public Engagement. *Journal of Public Deliberation,* 1(1), article 7.

Dombrowski, P. (2006). The Two Shuttle Accident Reports: Context and Culture in Technical Communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 36(3), 231-252.

Dragga, S., & Voss, D. (2003). Hiding Humanity: Verbal and Visual Ethics in Accident Reports. *Technical Communication*, 50(1), 61-82.

Driskill, L. (1989). Understanding the Writing Context in Organizations. In Myra Kogen (Ed.) *Writing in the Business Professions*, (p. 125-145). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Eble, M., & Gaillet, L. (2004). Educating "Community Intellectuals": Rhetoric, Moral Philosophy, and Civic Engagement. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 341-354.

Graham, M., & Lindeman, N. (2005). The Rhetoric and Politics of Science in the Case of the Missouri River System. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 19(4), 422-447.

Harrison, T. (1987). Frameworks for the Study of Writing in Organizational Contexts. *Written Communication*, 4(1), 3-23.

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard, & Morgan, Lawrence (2009). Conservation Writing: An Emerging Field in Technical Communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly,* 18(1), 9-27.

Katz, S. (1992). The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust. *College English*, 54(3), 255-75.

Kimball, Miles A. (2006). London Through Rose-Colored Graphics: Visual Rhetoric and Information Graphic Design in Charles Booth's Maps of London Poverty. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 36(4), 353-381.

Knievel, Michael S. (2008). Rupturing Context, Resituating Genre: A Study of Use-of-Force Policy in the Wake of a Controversial Shooting. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 22(3), 330-363.

Mara, A. (2006). Using Charettes to Perform Civic Engagement in Technical Communication Classrooms and Workplaces. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 15(2), 215-236.

McKenzie, K. (2009). The Public Presentation of a Hybrid Science: Scientific and Technical Communication in 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government' (2002). *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 39(1), 3-23.

Miller, C. (1979). A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing. *College English*, 40(6), 610-17.

Muhlberger, P. (2006). Should E-Government Design for Citizen Particiaption?: Stealth Democracy and Deliberation. *Proceedings of the 2006 International Conference on Digital Government Research*, p. 53-61.

Ornatowski, C., & Bekins, L. (2004). What's Civic About Technical Communication? Technical Communication and the Rhetoric of "Community." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 251-269.

Ranney, F. (2000). Beyond Foucault: Toward a User-Centered Approach to Sexual Harassment Policy. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 9(1), 9-28.

Rude, C. (2004) Toward an Expanded Concept of Rhetorical Delivery: The Uses of Reports in Public Policy Debates. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 271-288.

Scott, J. (2004). Rearticulating Civic Engagement Through Cultural Studies and Service-Learning. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 289-306.

Sidler, M., & Jones, N. (2009). Genetics Interfaces: Representing Science and Enacting Public Discourse in Online Spaces. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 18(1), 28-48.

Spoel, P., Goforth, D., Cheu, H., & Pearson, D. (2009). Public Communication of Climate Change Science: Engaging Citizens Through Apocalyptic Narrative Explanation. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 18(1), 49-81.

Tillery, D. (2003). Radioactive Waste and Technical Doubts: Genre and Environment Opposition to Nuclear Waste Sites. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 12(4), 405-421.

Tillery, D. (2006). The Problem of Nuclear Waste: Ethos and Scientific Evidence in a High-Stakes Public Controversy. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 49(4), 325-334.

Wallace, D. (2003). Writing and the Management of Power: Producing Public Policy in New Zealand. In Charles Bazerman and David R. Russell (Eds.), *Writing Selves/Writing Societies: Research from Activity Perspectives* (p. 159-178). Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse. Taken 14 October 2009 from http://wac.colostate.edu/books/selves_societies/.

Williams, M. (2009). Understanding Public Policy Development as a Technological Process. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 23(4), 448-462.