AI Implications in TPC: Disabled Knowledge for the Social Justice Turn

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ABSTRACT

While AI technologies are positioned to help disabled people, these narratives overlook the disability bias embedded within these systems. With the emergence of AI technologies, scholarship in the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) is still emerging. Drawing upon disabled scholars and disability communities, technoableism, and the tenants of disability justice are used to identify the responsibility TPC practitioners have in ethical AI, especially in light of the social justice turn. Given the complex history and position of the field, the solution requires a multi-pronged approach in order to fully commit to equitable technologies.

KEYWORDS
Disability studies; social justice; AI; ableism; ethics

Introduction

As the field of TPC responds to the emergence and popularization of artificial intelligence (AI), large language models (LLMs), and machine learning (ML), I believe there are important lessons to be learned from disability scholars and disabled people on the ethical uses of these technologies. While technical and professional communication (TPC) scholars have been concerned with the bias inherent in these algorithms and models (Carradini, 2024; Graham & Hopkins, 2022), I am specifically concerned with the impact on disabled people. Using Ashley Shew's concept of technoableism (2020, 2023), I will evaluate the narratives of AI technologies for disabled people. While disabled people are viewed as a monolith, there is a wealth of experiences of disability. I do not seek to define disability, but rather work towards cross-disability solidarity as defined by the tenants of disability justice (Sins Invalid, 2019). Sins Invalid, a disability justice group, calls for the connection between "people with physical impairments, people who are sick or chronically ill, psych survivors and people with mental health disabilities, neurodiverse people, people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, Deaf people, Blind people, people with environmental injuries and chemical sensitivities, and all others who experience ableism and isolation" (Sins Invalid, 2019). I also acknowledge intersectionality: disability is not experienced independently of other vectors of oppression. The final tenant of disability justice, collective liberation, is the reminder that my concerns are not just about disability and AI, but the potential harms AI has to magnify oppression faced by all marginalized individuals, communities, and groups of people.

Despite that the first users of technologies are often disabled people, they are excluded from the creation and design of these tools. I will draw upon the work of disabled scholars and disability studies scholars to argue for the potential harm AI poses to these communities. While TPC has been mainly concerned with accessibility and user-centered design, I believe that the TPC field must take an active role in supporting disability justice. Given the social justice turn in TPC, responsible AI is a part of the field's commitment to justice. The understanding of AI implications in TPC are still being developed, with Carradini (2024) arguing that the enthusiasm and skepticism are both founded. Through my research, I have realized that TPC support for disability justice requires further work on existing questions in the field. While the issues are complex, I argue that the AI boom is the exigence the field needs to reckon the field's associations with engineering and technology with the social justice turn. While this expands the purview of the already fluid field, I believe a more critical view of technology is necessary to fully commit to justice.

Calls for collaboration of disability studies and TPC

Meloncon (2014) calls for TPC's commitment to disability studies and the intersection of scholarship from both fields. Given the prevalence of disability in the world, Meloncon (2014) argues that technical communicators need to be attuned to issues of disability. Both fields employ a social constructionist view that requires ethical, social, cultural, and political analysis in discourse. Within TPC, universal design and usability were the only fields to have sustained research on the intersection of disability. Meloncon (2014) also argues that technical communicators are in the unique position to put disability studies theory into practice. Oswal (2018) calls for the recognition of disabled scholars in TPC, both disclosed and undisclosed. He hopes that the discussion of disability will increase the visibility of disabled students in TPC classrooms. This alone, may not increase the conditions for disabled scholars if the urge for accessibility is not paired with the call for anti-oppressive technologies. Building on the work of these scholars, I believe there is even more the TPC field can be doing to integrate disabled knowledge into the field.

The social justice turn in TPC

As Walton, Moore & Jones (2019) argue, "injustice is a technical communication problem" (p. 1). While much social justice scholarship and pedagogy has focused on the equity of communication, there has not been extensive unpacking of the technologies technical communication supports. Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023) also bring attention to the historical impact of TPC and surface level social justice work after the turn. Based on their intersectional and coalitional understanding of TPC, I am bringing awareness to disability as a vector of oppression. TPC is complicit in injustice in many ways: professional and technical communication codifies oppression. TPC practitioners must first understand how oppression manifests in order to understand our role in furthering injustice (Walton, Moore & Jones, 2019). Drawing upon this, I will explain how oppression is manifesting within AI technologies for disabled people in order to identify how technical communication explicitly and implicitly endorses these inequities.

How does TPC reckon with technologies that further oppression? With the rising popularity of AI technologies, all existing oppression is at risk of being amplified. Graham & Hopkins (2022) argue that ML can be leveraged effectively for social justice research in the field. While they acknowledge that insidious bias is built into algorithms, they believe it is possible to build ML systems to serve social justice. I question the possibility for social justice, when racism, ableism, sexism, and other forms of oppression have been found in these technologies (Bennett & Keyes, 2020; Lillywhite & Wolbring, 2019; Keyes, 2020; Whittaker et al., 2019). We can only harness these technologies for good when we are also acting to interrogate the oppression built into the algorithms. Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023) also call attention to the field's ties and entanglements to oppressive power. The field of TPC is relatively young, compared to many other academic disciplines, which makes it more difficult to define our stake and our responsibility with these technologies. The 2009 mapping of the field (Rude, 2009) was the first acknowledgment of social change and there is more to be done in assessing the work that is being done about our orientation. The transdisciplinary work the field does, and the academic positioning also present further barriers to understanding our responsibility in the development of ethical technology.

Lessons from Critical Disability Studies

While there are calls for the inclusion of disabled people in technology research both within and outside of TPC (Lillywhite & Wolbring, 2019; Meloncon, 2014; Shew 2020, 2023; Smith & Smith 2021; Whittaker et al., 2019) the efforts to follow through have been lacking. Disabled scholars have the lived experiences and scholarly expertise that offer important lessons for TPC practitioners to learn from. Disabled scholars in human-computer interaction (HCI) find themselves misrepresented and dehumanized in the literature (Ymous et al., 2020). The marginalization disabled scholars experience in academia only furthers the divide from non-disabled scholars. When non-disabled academics believe that disabled people (both students and scholars) do not belong here, they do not engage with their scholarship. While we can theorize on how to best support disabled people, disabled scholars, and disabled people are the experts to inform work in TPC.

The field of TPC does not have a visible community or affinity group for disabled scholars. Despite disability being a highly discussed and taught subject, there is not the same visibility of disabled scholars in the field compared to other marginalized identities. The inclusion of disabled students and faculty in the field could transform our work. For example, a popular conference in TPC uses the incorrect terminology for describing neurodivergent students in a recent call for proposals. While neurodivergent and neurodiverse are related terminology, the misuse of these terms is a common pitfall (Walker, 20). Conference organizers use the phrases "Neurodiverse Students" and "neurotypical and neurodiverse students", which show the fundamental misunderstanding of the neurodiversity paradigm. Neurodiversity is the natural diversity of human minds, whereas neurodivergent is the proper descriptor for individuals whose brains diverge from normative understandings of human brain function. While this mistake may be just an incorrect word choice, it is indicative of the state of the field and the absence of disability-informed practice.

We talk a lot about anticipating the needs of disabled users, but I believe disabled people have knowledge that is extremely valuable in TPC. A common phrase in disability rights work is, “Nothing about us, without us” (Smith & Smith 2021). Given the field’s commitment to UX, usability, human-centered design, accessibility, and plain language, TPC needs to expand our efforts in engaging disabled people and attracting disabled students to become scholars.

Against epistemic violence: disabled people as experts

Shew (2023) centers disabled people as the experts on disability rather than medical or “helper” field experts. Through her assertion that the future is disabled on every axis imaginable, Shew (2023) creates an understanding of disability within our world that positions disabled people to be experts in uncertain futures and provides insight into our technological developments. While this knowledge exists within communities of disabled people, academia does not see people with disabilities as being capable. Disabled scholars in HCI argue that this refusal to value disabled knowledge is epistemic violence and epistemic injustice (Ymous et al., 2020). They also highlight the ways disabled ways of knowing are marginalized from “real” research. They note, “disabled ways of knowing and disabled researchers are often marginalized away from ‘real’ research deemed to produce the appropriate kinds of knowledges and the way that disability is frequently taken to identify someone as not only incapable of testifying as to themselves, but as to anything” (Ymous et al., p. 4). For the TPC field to be anti-ableist, in commitment to the social justice turn, TPC practitioners must value the wholeness of disabled people and the variety of identities, experiences, and knowledge inherent to disability.

Technoableism

Shew (2021, 2023) defines the term “technoableism” as the belief that the power of technology will eliminate disability for the benefit of society. As a professor of science, technology, and society, and a disabled woman, Shew’s work is not only informed by her scholarship, but her connections with disabled friends and communities. Technoableism reasserts the traditional biases of ableism under the guise of empowerment (Shew, 2023). While disabled people use technology and recognize the impact it has had on their lives, disabled people are excluded from the conception and design of new technologies (Nagy, 2022; Shew, 2020; Smith & Smith, 2021. Shew (2023) also emphasizes that building things for disabled people creates better things for all people. This is important for the technical communication field and discussions of usability and UX design. The inclusion of disability would generate more useful features for all users. The narratives of AI technologies make assumptions of what it means to be disabled and suggest that the process of aging is an individual problem rather than a societal problem. If independence is the main goal of design, this is another tell for ableism. Shew (2021) argues that all humans are interdependent. Shew (2021) argues that “these technologies are touted as empowering, but designing technologies without consulting their user base is the ultimate in disempowerment” (p. 49).

Disability & AI: Avoiding technoableist narratives

The narratives surrounding new AI technologies promise to help people with disabilities and promise easy solutions. These narratives are problematic for many reasons, but in particular

quickly fall into technoableism. The idea that AI technologies can “fix” disability or aid helpless people leverages oppression.

Moving from “fairness” to justice in AI ethics

There is also discussion on the ethics of disability and AI and how harm should be measured (Bennet & Keyes, 2020; Keyes, 2020; Lillywhite & Wolbring, 2019; Nagy, 2022). Trewin et al. (2019) fail to define fairness despite that being the only metric to measure AI harms. In order to be truly anti-oppressive, justice should be the preferred metric. Trewin et al. (2019) has many weaknesses in regard to the breadth of knowledge, but it is an important insight into corporate understandings of AI bias. The difference between corporate documents regarding AI, bias, and technology shows the importance of AI ethics informed by disabled people.

Collaboration across disciplines on this topic is possible (Whittaker et al., 2019) and important for making significant change. The report from the 2019 Disability, bias, and AI Symposium calls for an intersectional approach to understanding disability, rather than as a discrete identity piece (Whittaker et al., 2019). This explicit call for disability to be understood within other vectors of oppression is important and aligns with the calls for understanding the matrix of oppression in TPC (Walton, Moore, & Jones 2019). The case of AI ethics is important for the field of TPC. TPC cannot advocate for the best conditions when the metrics corporations are using fail to conceptualize justice.

Discursive & material harms

We, as technical communicators must pay special attention to how communication mediates our values. This headline from the New York Times has common markers of technoableism. New AI technologies are touted as able to help disabled students, without recognizing the bias embedded in AI systems.


A.I./REAL LIFE

How Robots Can Assist Students With Disabilities

New tools use artificial intelligence to assist students with autism and dyslexia and address accessibility for those who are blind or deaf.

Figure 1. *New York Times* Headline that reads “How Students Can Assist Students with Disabilities” (Tugend, 2022)

The article starts with “Imagine: Robots that help teach social skills to children with autism.” Given Nagy (2022), we know that this is more complex. The designed robots modeled social-gaze behavior, such as making eye contact and sharing attention. Using a disability-informed

narrative, autistic people find this to be oppressive and merely compliance with neurotypical behaviors. These same technologies that were developed with autistic boys and marketed to them, will also be the basis of the technologies that oppress them. Nagy (2022) uncovers the troublesome relationship. While Affdex, an “emotional hearing aid” was developed on assistive pretext, the technology was redeployed to a profitable mass market as commercial emotional AI, which was refined on autistic children. The implications here are troublesome. While we know there is labor exploitation inherent in the AI systems and that these programs can amplify oppression, disabled children being co-designers of emotional facial recognition is shocking. We know artists’ and authors; work is being exploited, but I had not predicted the wide-reaching, insidious nature of it. Nagy (2022) also traced this as the start of emotion data. The quantification of autistic compliance is another way disabled people will be surveilled (Nagy, 2022; Shew 2021). These headlines mediate the power and lead our societal values toward viewing AI technologies for disabled people. Technical communication about AI is reinscribing ableism and disabled people as deficient: the definition of technoableism. While this is a newspaper and not written within the field of technical communication, this example shows what is at stake.

Given the focus of TPC is all about users, there are many implications for the data from usability testing. How can this data not be used to oppress and to serve surveillance capitalism? While access is important, it can also serve as the precursor to exploitation (Itchuaqiyaq et al., 2022). Evident here, access to the development of technologies has generated data to exploit both non-disabled and disabled people. While Haas (2012), also calls for an alliance and power redistribution between designers and users in TPC, this is not enough to create more equitable technologies. Shew (2021) also calls attention to ongoing data privacy issues with AI as a disability technology, given the policing of disabled bodies. Disability activists see this as a violation of civil rights, with patient care assistants being equipped with mobile phones to track their work. Disabled people have these devices in their homes and do not have control over how these devices are used. Shew (2021) also argues that the main problem with AI designs is that disability technologies are not organized by people embedded in the disability community, which is shown through the reinscription of ableism. Technical communication practitioners have a responsibility to ensure there is fully informed communication information about these technologies. It is an issue that is clearly within the realm of technical communication. The communication that overlooks the complexity of AI systems, is complicit to the oppression amplified and exacerbated by these technologies.

Implications for the TPC field

There are many implications to the TPC field, including the development of equitable AI and user advocacy. Technologies are not neutral or objective—nor are the ways that we use them (Haas, 2012). TPC must reckon with technology as systems of domination, in particular the emergence of AI. The adoption of these technologies by academic institutions, corporations, and individuals ensures that the bias of AI will be far-reaching.

Moving beyond accessible design

While TPC has been concerned with accessible communication and user-friendly designs, there must be more of a commitment to antiableism and disability scholarship. A commitment to anti-ableism and disability scholarship can only come from increased representation of disabled scholars and disability-informed narratives. Given the complexities of the intersection of disability and technology, technoableism shows that communicating about technologies is a social justice issue. While the social justice turn in TPC has meant the expansion of inclusion and diversity within the field, the production of knowledge in the field has revolved around linguistic and rhetorical language in scholarship and research. In what ways is TPC sustaining and legitimizing the oppression inherent in AI technologies?

Reckoning with Big Tech and industry

With the increase of technical writing jobs related to AI, there are also ethical and social justice concerns regarding TPC professionals. While the social justice turn has been focused within the academy rather than industry, TPC academics may still be training students who will help corporations sustain and legitimize oppression. I argue that this commitment to anti-ableism requires a larger conversation and reckoning within the field. The struggle to define and map the field of TPC (Rude, 2009; Shelton & Warren-Riley, 2023) limits the ability to identify how TPC practitioners respond to disability bias in AI. While the field has gone through the social justice turn in the academic world, the industry-academia relationship must be acknowledged.

While we don't know the exact role of technical writers, of TPC workers involved in design, development, and use of AI technologies, workers at Big Tech companies most likely have to employ these technologies. Additionally, writing professionals will become more advantageous for companies, given the role of natural language needed for the development of generative AI (Chowdhary & Chowdhary, 2020). As TPC teachers, pedagogy must consider that our students will not merely encounter these tools in the workforce, but our students will be actively working to train, design, and document these technologies.

A search of job boards will reveal that AI is not replacing technical writers, but rather evolving the work they do. AI is just another technology technical writers will help support. These job postings look largely similar with keywords for documentation, technical guides, communicating complex technical information, and work to explain AI technologies to users. The field has to reckon the social justice turn in the academy with the professional world. These enterprise corporations have unethical technologies and technical writers help support them. While AI may seem like a novel issue, it is just an extension of the existing issues of bias and oppression embedded within Big Tech. Now more than ever, we need to figure out these important questions.

Disciplinary questions and defining our role in technology

Walton, Moore & Jones (2019) identify Rude (2009)'s mapping of the field as an important marker in the turn towards social justice. Based on her evaluation of research questions in the

field, Rude (2009) defined the central question to TPC, as *“How do texts (print, digital, multimedia; visual, verbal) and related communication practices mediate knowledge, values, and action in a variety of social and professional contexts? (p.181).* Generative AI technologies generate text, images, and other communications. TPC has to interrogate these communications, despite it being more difficult to tackle (requires an understanding of algorithms and data).

I believe the true social justice turn is not possible without acknowledging that communication practices alone cannot result in a more equitable world. We, as a field, have to interrogate the purpose these communications serve. Particularly, *who* they serve. The academic–industry relationship is becoming more important to define, now with the emergence of AI technologies. We have to ask bigger questions, we need to expand beyond how communication is ethical, to is the system ethical? While texts can be constructed to work effectively and ethically, in the most complicated issues of ethics we will have to ask if the communication is serving an ethical practice. How do academic practitioners, industry professionals, and technical communication students navigate complex ethical issues in which they are serving in favor of the oppressor?

The unclear parameters of our field, make it difficult to identify what we have say over. The field’s “existence as a discipline is legitimized by its relationships rather than its content and therefore its power is arguably contingent on forces beyond the reach of its scholars and practitioners” (Shelton & Warren-Riley, 2023, p. 318). The entanglement of TPC with technology, means we are complicit in these technologies for oppression. The lack of a consistent definition or identity, is warranted due to the complexities of the work, however, it severely limits our ability to do tangible social justice work. When our role is unclear, it makes it difficult to discern our shared responsibility as TPC scholars. Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023) correctly identify, “TPC scholars have the opportunity to characterize the content of this discipline by a critical and inclusive conceptualization of expertise, wherein specialized knowledge is not constrained by the positionality of the knower” (p. 322). For the case of disability bias and overarching themes of technoableism in AI and overarching technoableism, TPC scholars can help to position disabled people as experts of their own experience. Drawing on disabled scholars, TPC practitioners can leverage their positionality to redistribute power. TPC scholars must work to legitimize disabled knowledge and expertise. Sins Invalid (2019), curators of the 10 tenets of disability justice, boldly state, “we are not looking to academics and experts to tell us what’s what”. Sins Invalid also reflects on the lack of credit of their ideas and the historical erasure of disabled knowledge in the academy (2019). TPC scholars are already doing work in ethical community engagement projects (Itchuaqiyaq et al, 2022). Like Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023), Sins Invalid share the sentiment that lived experience is a time of specialized knowledge. We must apply the same to social justice work: community organizers have the experience TPC scholars can learn from.

From Advocate to Activist: The TPC practitioners' role in activism

Social justice scholars across the field warn of the potential for insincere and shallow commitments with the social justice turn. Walton, Moore & Jones (2019) also warn against the hypocrisy of scholars who study social justice but do not fully commit to serious coalitional

change. Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson (2021) warn against the appropriation of decolonial frameworks within TPC. Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023) urge for the reckoning of the field's history in order to true socially just work. I choose to explain genuine work in the social justice turn as moving from advocacy to activist. Scholars of social justice can identify and reject systems of domination but often stop there. Following the 4Rs framework, coalitional organizing is needed to reject and replace these systems (Walton, Jones & Moore, 2019). TPC scholars are comfortable with recognize and reveal, but often do not fully reject opportunities to perpetuate injustice and do not work towards replacing oppressive practices.

TPC practitioners have the ability to create accessible tools to understand the complexities of technology and oppression. Collective power for social change cannot be built without outrage over these injustices. While computer scientists, feminist data scientists, and others are studying the manifestation of oppression within our technologies, this knowledge is not easily accessible to public audiences. Making this important research widely accessible and easy to understand will prevent the doomsday narratives of AI coming to "end the world". While there are plenty of valid and practical concerns with AI, the dominant narratives surround AI coming to take jobs, students using AI to cheat, and AI leading humans to lose control over society/humanity. If the public can understand the ethical, environmental, and oppressive implications of AI, they are better positioned to enact social change than that of the moral terror of AI. To me, the AI boom is the true test of the social justice turn in TPC. TPC practitioners are posited to be advocates for justice.

Final Words

While there are many pressing issues to be dealt with, I believe that this work is important and worth doing. The wicked problems in technical communication are inextricably linked. As Walton, Moore, & Jones (2019) argue, coalitional action is the future of social change. We cannot solve issues of inequity separately, but rather we have to work holistically and tackle these issues together. The issues presented by AI only amplify the existing issues: climate change, mass surveillance of the police state, and oppression of marginalized groups. While this article is focused on the expert knowledge of disabled people, I know that marginalized activists have the respective bodies of knowledge to tackle these issues. Climate activists, land defenders, the police abolition movement, and Indigenous sovereignty movements, among so many others, have the infrastructure and organizing experience to navigate complex issues related to AI. I echo Shelton & Warren-Riley (2023)'s call for avoidance of "narcissistic" tendencies towards individual social justice work and push towards collective action.

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