

# connexions

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## Professional Communication, Social Justice, and the Global South

### From the editors

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### Research articles

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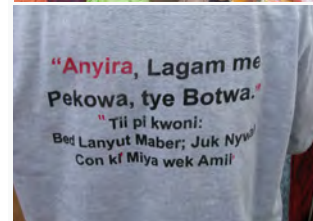
Dawn Opel and Paulette Stevenson

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### connexions interviews

Rebecca Dingo

Sonja Vartiala



Dep. of Communication, Liberal Arts, Social Sciences  
New Mexico Tech

Department of Writing  
University of Central Arkansas

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## **From THE EDITORS**



# GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

## Professional communication, social justice, and the Global South

Gerald Savage

*Illinois State University, USA (Emeritus faculty)*

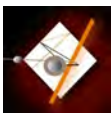
Godwin Agboka

*University of Houston-Downtown, USA*

**Keywords.** Social justice, Global South, Fourth World, Development, Colonialism, Decolonial, Unenfranchised populations, NGOs, Multinational corporations, Corporate social responsibility.

In a nutshell, the “Global South”—like democracy, development, and many other concepts—is now the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom. From the perspective of the global north, the global south needs help. From the perspective of the inhabitants of those regions that are not aligned with the global north, the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging (Levander & Mignolo, 2011, pp. 4–5).

Professional communicators are working all over the world. They practice in business, industry, government, charitable nonprofit organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations. And yet, nearly



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all of the research on international professional communication has focused on corporate contexts in the “developed” world. Consequently, international technical communication practice and research tends to focus on barely more than half of the world’s nations included in the 2013 United Nations Human Development Index. These are nations ranked as “very high” or “high” on the human development scale. Only a few nations ranked as “medium” receive much notice—China (Ding, 2003; Hansen, 200; Yu, 2010), Thailand (Sriussadaporn, 2006), Philippines (Nardo & Hufana, 2014), and South Africa (Meintjes, Nimann-Struweg, & De Wet, 2008) are the most prominent. Even so, the status of some of these “medium” or “developing” nations is not clear anymore. For example, a 2013 United Nations Development Programme report ranks China with India and Brazil as the leading developing nations with significant economic growth. By 2020, the combined wealth of these nations will surpass that of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the US put together (UNDP, 2013).

It’s probably the case that these nations regarded as “low” on the Human Development Index have received little attention in professional communication scholarship, because conducting research may be too costly or these marginalized contexts are not sufficiently industrialized to attract attention. However, many of these nations are sites of transnational corporate activity, of which a significant amount involves various kinds of resource development of questionable benefit to the people of those nations. They tend to be seen as sources for the raw materials of Western industry—pharmaceutical plants, rare metals, forestry products, and food crops. Western industry employs growing numbers of workers in the Global South, of course. The garment industry is one that has earned a great deal of negative attention over the past decade or more, but such work is outsourced through lengthy and complex supply chains which distance Western corporations from their labor sources (Bais, 2005; MVO Platform, 2012; Trócaire & Consulting, 2010). For these reasons, we usually become aware of diversity issues that may arise from business interactions with unenfranchised populations only when activist groups and organizations expose abuses or when disasters such as the recent factory collapse in Bangladesh make international headlines. Too often,



the social justice response to such events is in the form of compensation that is not necessarily adequate and at best only token reforms.

A great number of NGOs throughout the world, however, pay close attention to the unfair, unjust, and environmentally detrimental activities of exploitative transnational corporations among indigenous and marginalized populations. These NGOs' work includes research, legal action, and extensive reporting. Some transnational corporations also document their development and other business activities in sensitive areas of the world, some of them for purposes of accountability for their efforts at corporate social responsibility, others for purposes of denying or whitewashing egregious activities. To be sure, the Global South, which constitutes three quarters of the world's population, has access to only one fifth of the world's income, lacks the requisite technology, and depends primarily on export products (Mimiko, 2012). As Kathleen Malley-Morrison et al (2015) have argued:

researchers have paid little attention to the Global South, which is an area that has been subjugated and exploited by Western powers since colonial times. The Global South has also been afflicted by violence and oppression from within, as members of privileged classes often oppress their poor and disenfranchised counterparts (p. 9).

This lack of attention by researchers is certainly true for professional communication, and especially troubling, considering that a wide range of other professions have given relatively more attention to their roles in the Global South: engineering, medicine, agriculture, economics, business management, computer science, and geography. Only a handful of studies in professional communication, published over the past fifteen years, have addressed these issues (Agboka, 2013a, 2013b); Durá, Singhal, & Elías, 2013; Ilyasova & Birkelo, 2013; Smith, 2006, 2012; Vijayaram, 2013; Walton, 2013; Walton & DeRenzi, 2009; Walton, Price, & Zrally, 2013).

Professional communication scholars and practitioners have taken great pride in the part played by communication professionals in all of these fields, but

we have not kept pace with the awakening global social consciousness these other fields have demonstrated regarding the impacts of their work beyond the industrialized Global North. If professional communicators have roles in these contexts, for good or ill, we know almost nothing about them. Agboka's (2013a, 2013b) work is one of the few studies we have. We believe that research studies and activities involving professional communication scholars in the Global South offer some of the most important and interesting, and the least investigated work, to be done in our field. We believe there are practitioners who are doing socially just work and who have much to teach us. There are, unfortunately, also many egregious examples, as Agboka has reported. In our own field, both Durá et al. (2013) and Walton (2013) have provided some initial insights on social justice communication in NGOs and there is vastly more to be looked at. Such work has great promise for our students who are excited about professional communication but disenchanted with the prospect of compromising their need for a secure job in exchange for serving the interests of employers willing to take profits at the cost of human dignity, rights, and even lives.

The articles in this issue focus on areas and populations of the world variously referred to as the Third and Fourth Worlds, Developing Countries, or the Global South. "Global South" and "Fourth World" are terms intended to include populations that are not necessarily in the southern hemisphere and that also do not include only nation states. Thus, the terms can include populations within "First World" nations, or the Global North, including the US (In this issue, see the article by Ding, Li, & Hagler). It is important to understand that nearly all of these terms have been coined from a Northern—even a Western—perspective. According to sociologist Raewyn Connell (2013):

South and North are not so much geographical categories; they are relationships. They are the name for a bundle of economic, military, and cultural relations marked by centrality and marginality, by global structures of domination. And like all major social relationships, this is not static. This is a dynamic relationship (p. 8).

The term Fourth World arose from various indigenous and other unenfranchised groups in resistance to the persistent tendency in Northern thinking to conceptualize the world in terms of nation-states. Such views generally failed to acknowledge the concerns of indigenous or unenfranchised populations throughout the world, who are commonly subsumed within—and disregarded by—the national governments within whose borders such populations may happen to exist. In many instances these groups transcend national boundaries owing to decades or centuries of Northern colonization, deracination, and postcolonial divisions of Southern regions into national political entities that disregarded ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other precolonial cultural factors. For indigenous perspectives, see, for example, First Peoples Worldwide (<http://www.firstpeoples.org/>), Fourth World Movement (<http://4thworldmovement.org/>), or Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (<http://www.unpo.org>).

The Northern interests and prerogatives that have designated such global categories have also largely determined the policies and programs for economic, social, and political interactions between North and South. It is Northern nations and intergovernmental organizations that have defined the status of economic and human development for each Southern state. It is the North that determines what the North's commitments ought to be to "advance" the South and what the South's obligations to the North will be in order to receive the "necessary" assistance. Even in cases where the intentions are charitable, as with some NGOs committed to social, environmental, and economic justice, a Northern worldview may determine how needs are defined, what remedies are appropriate, and whose voices will be heard in intervention processes.

Resistance from the South has come from various quarters. It is not necessarily antiglobalization nor is there resistance to every aspect of development called for by Northern entities. It does, however, emphasize that the South must have a significant voice, and even the final say, in what advancement and development in their communities should entail (Rizvi, 2005). Some even challenge the Northern terminologies that have defined the "Others" of the planet. Feminist postcolonial scholar Chandra Mohanty (2002) complicates the

various terms currently in use by playing them against one another. “First, let me say that the terms Western and Third World retain a political and explanatory value in a world that appropriates and assimilates multiculturalism and 'difference' through commodification and consumption” (Mohanty, 2002, p. 505). However, she also favors the terms “One-Third World” and “Two-Thirds World” (Esteva & Prakash, 2014), which represent what they call the “social minorities” of the North and the “social majorities” of the South (ibid). Mohanty employs all of these terms, finding them “particularly useful, especially in conjunction with Third World/South and First World/North. . . . The advantage of One-Third/Two-Thirds World in relation to terms like Western/Third World and North/South is that they move away from misleading geographical and ideological binarisms” (p. 506).

Perhaps one of the most effective movements to resist globalization driven by the North is the “globalization from below” movement, sometimes also described as “alter-globalization.” This movement arose from a wide range of organizations and groups around the world, many of which would seem to have few interests in common, but which found common cause in economic injustices they perceive to originate in policies and actions of governments and intergovernmental organizations such as WTO, World Bank, etc. in support of neoliberal economic development that impacts Global South populations. Characterized by protests against deregulation of markets in the name of “free trade,” this movement gained international attention on occasions such as the so-called “Battle of Seattle” at the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle for the WTO Ministerial Conference’s Millennium Round in 1999.

No fewer than 1,387 groups—including nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], trade unions, environmentalists, and a number of religious organizations—signed the call to demonstrate against the Millennium Round. The protest events were prepared in thousands of meetings in many countries and by a global campaign of information (Porta, Andretta, , & Reiter, 2006).

Similar protests occurred in subsequent years around the world, at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa and the 2002 European Social Forum in Florence, and in Paris in 2003. “After Seattle it was said that protests, if nothing else, had

had the immediate success of bringing international summits out from the shadowy world of reserved agreements between diplomats and technocrats” (Porta, Andretta, & Reiter, 2006, p. 7).

## **Social Justice Implications of Professional Communication in the Global South**

With the advent of concerns for corporate social responsibility in the 1990s (Columbia U, 2014) corporations have increasingly, although not necessarily with enthusiasm, adopted policies for proactively recognizing their duty to conduct business in ways that do not cause economic, environmental, or social harm. Responding to the spread of global capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century, the United Nations led a multinational effort to formulate guidelines for corporations operating beyond their home countries (Sapp, Savage, & Mattson, 2013; Trocaire, 2010). Over a period of more than thirty years, at least two UN-sponsored efforts have resulted in the Global Compact, implemented in 1999, and the UN Guiding Principles implemented in 2011.

As a global standard applicable to all business enterprises, the UN Guiding Principles provide further conceptual and operational clarity for the two human rights principles championed by the Global Compact. They reinforce the Global Compact and provide an authoritative framework for participants on the policies and processes they should implement in order to ensure that they meet their responsibility to respect human rights (UN, 2014).

A number of INGOs, civil society organizations, and intergovernmental organizations have become involved—sometimes in concert, sometimes in opposition—in monitoring and critiquing the conduct of multinational corporations, governments, and other INGOs and IGOs in the Global South or conduct that impacts people, economies, and environments in the Global South. These efforts virtually always involve many forms of communication, much of it extensive and much of it complex and more or less sophisticated in the ways that media and genres are deployed. A staggering number of NGOs and INGOs

operate in Global South countries—in 2005 it is estimated there were nearly 100,000 registered NGOs operating just in South Africa (Smith, 2010). Of course, not all NGOs are specifically concerned with social justice, and many do not deal with Global South issues. Nevertheless, professional communicators have for many years been involved in social justice work in the Global South and little of that work has had attention from scholars in this field. This may be particularly true in the US. Indeed, the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs recently observed that “the commitment to CSR, and hence the supply of related jobs is, at present, more developed in Europe than it is in the US, although the market is growing rapidly on this side of the Atlantic” (Columbia U, 2007).

The communication work done by such organizations includes reports, press releases, promotional materials, and educational materials. For example, a 2011 report published by DanWatch, a Danish INGO, reports on the environmental and health hazards of electronic wastes from European nations and the US that are processed by low-income adults and children in Ghana. The report includes investigative journalistic research, summaries of scientific studies by government and other agencies, interviews with officials and e-waste workers, and medical information drawn from medical sources. The title of the report, *What a waste: How your computer causes health problems in Ghana* (Frandsen, Rasmussen, & Swart, 2011) indicates clearly that a key audience is computer users primarily in Western countries.

Such reports often target social justice abuses by specific companies. Finnwatch, for example, explains the purpose of its work this way: “Our research findings form the basis for our participation in public debate. We communicate our findings regarding the impacts of the overseas operations of Finnish companies directly to the consumers and engage in dialogue with the companies. Our goal is to encourage companies to embrace positive change” (Finnwatch, 2016). See the interview with Finnwatch executive director Sonja Vartiala in this issue for a detailed discussion of this INGO and the role of communication in the organization’s work.

The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) is an INGO based in Amsterdam that often collaborates with other NGOs in Europe and the Global South to monitor and investigate practices of large corporations operating in the South. The methodology of these NGOs appears to have become fairly standardized, although particular methods depend on the scope of the study and the nature of the investigation. Typically, preliminary drafts of investigation reports are provided to the target company. The company's responses to the reports are then included in the published versions. It is also common to conduct follow-up studies several years later to check on conditions that the company had agreed to remedy.

We believe that professional communication scholars have vital roles to play in advancing research, public policy, and social justice in and about the Global South. We see room for a lot of research that addresses issues within the Global South as well as opportunities to position professional communication as advocates of social justice.

### **Articles in this Special Issue**

This special issue of *connexions* is an attempt to encourage scholarly discussions and publications about the important role of professional and technical communication in the Global South; promote communication practices that project and advance issues about populations within the Global South, and provide resources (e.g. theories, methods, and cases) for addressing the challenges raised by research in and about the Global South.

Five articles and two interviews make up this special issue. Aside building on and complementing one another, the articles uniquely complicate the notion of Global South, contest constructed knowledges, and magnify the agency of populations in the Global South. For example, the first article by Ding, Li, & Hagler discusses ways in which social injustice may manifest itself in epidemic control, by examining issues of social injustice that medical care workers (MCWs) encountered in the SARS outbreaks in Canada and Singapore. They apply the theoretical frameworks of *oppression*, *civic-based networks*, *access* and *social*

*justice* to their historical cases to investigate potential connections between communication and social justice. In doing this, Ding, Li, & Hagler expertly offer interconnections among these theoretical apparatuses to highlight possible ways for professional communicators to help promote access and thus social justice for marginalized and powerless groups. As you will see, the context of their research challenges traditional notions of the term “Global South,” because it doesn’t necessarily take place in a nation state within the southern hemisphere—it focuses mostly on Asian immigrants in North America and Southeast Asian immigrants in Singapore.

Keeping to the theme of social justice, Lucía Durá introduces the theory of *positive deviance* (PD), an asset-based participatory, inquiry-driven approach, that offers new perspectives about ways in which professional communication can engage in community-based work. PD captures how researchers reinforce what local people are doing right without necessarily seeking outside help. Drawing from an instrumental study on the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda, Durá demonstrates how PD can work as an alternative research framework or interventional methodology to advance transformational research in professional communication.

Mukherjee and Williams provide an investigation of how local, indigenous industries in the Global South construct and negotiate their digital identity, while also seeking to create authenticity around their products. Focusing on localized handicraft organizations (NPOs) in India, they conduct a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian), handicraft NPOs’ websites in relation to handicraft authenticity, global-local tensions, and digital presentation. Their analysis highlights the role of digital technology in marketing authenticity, contemporizing traditional arts, while balancing organizational commitment to social justice.

On their part, Opel and Stevenson reflect upon the exploitation of girls in global development initiatives usually captured in digital storytelling. The authors do this through a case study of *Women Win*, a transnational NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project in which they analyze 37 DST videos. The authors conclude that the girls in the DST project only labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that circumscribes them as postfeminist development subjects,



reproducing ideals that originate in feminism of the Global North. They conclude with a call to international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western contexts.

Finally, Rebecca Walton reports the findings of an exploratory study of how nonelite youth in Kigali (Rwanda) appropriate computers and cell phones in their everyday lives. She demonstrates how technology use in a nonformalized workplace context not only challenges norms about sites and contexts of traditional workplace studies, but also magnifies the agency of oppressed people. Walton warns that our field's overemphasis on formalized workplaces in the Global North only offers a narrow scope that can lead to oppressive, normalizing assumptions. ■

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## About the Authors

Gerald Savage is an emeritus professor, Illinois State University, where he taught technical communication, technical editing, and rhetoric. His most recent book, coedited with Han Yu, is *Negotiating Cultural Encounters: Narrating Intercultural Engineering and Technical Communication*. His current research focuses on social justice, diversity, and intercultural issues in professional communication.

**Email.** gjsavag@ilstu.edu

**URL.** <https://www.linkedin.com/in/gerald-savage-94154a39>

Godwin Agboka is assistant professor of technical and professional communication at University of Houston-Downtown, where he teaches courses in his area of expertise, including medical and science writing. His research interests include intercultural technical communication, social justice and human rights perspectives in technical communication, research methodologies, and the rhetoric of science and medicine. His publications have appeared in forums such as *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, and *connexions • international professional communication journal*. His book chapter, which looks at the connections between human rights and displacement, is forthcoming in *Integrating Theoretical Frameworks for Teaching Technical Communication* edited by Michelle Eble and Angela Haas.

**Email.** agbokag@uhd.edu

**URL.** <https://www.uhd.edu/academics/humanities/about/departments/english/faculty/Pages/bios-agboka-bio.aspx>

**Contact.**

University of Houston-Downtown  
Department of English  
One Main Street 1065-S  
Houston, TX 77002  
USA



# **Research articles**





# ACCESS, OPPRESSION, AND SOCIAL (IN)JUSTICE IN EPIDEMIC CONTROL

## Race, profession, and communication in SARS Outbreaks in Canada and Singapore

Huiling Ding

*North Carolina State University, USA*

Xiaoli Li

*University of Dayton, USA*

Austin Caldwell Haigler

*North Carolina State University, USA*

This article investigates issues of social injustice experienced by various oppressed groups in SARS outbreaks in 2003, paying particular attention to medical care workers in Canada and Singapore, with many of them being immigrants from East Asia and Southeast Asia. It identifies communication strategies employed by civic networks, especially nonprofit organizations, to help marginalized groups acquire institutional and literacy accesses so that they could respond more effectively to such injustices in complicated and multicultural contexts. Through combined use of Jost and Kay's work on the three types of social justice (2010), oppression (Young, 1990), and access (Porter, 1998), this study produces rich and multifaceted insights about issues of social injustice in SARS outbreaks. More importantly, it elaborates on the theoretical connections among the three social justice theories and shows possible entry points, particularly the conjunction between process control and informational justice, for professional communicators to produce constructive responses to social injustices and to promote social justice and access for marginalized groups.

**Keywords.** Epidemic control, Quarantine, Social justice, Professional communication, Health crisis management.



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International travelers, epicenters, masks, quarantines, and border screening. This list may remind one of SARS in 2003, H1N1 flu in 2009, or the Ebola outbreaks in 2015. Epidemics respect no boundaries, be it national, ethnic, professional, or economic. When emerging epidemics sweep across countries, however, epidemic control measures become deeply intertwined with human dynamics such as economic, political, and cultural forces, resulting too often in politics taking precedence over public health considerations. The history of epidemics is one of discrimination, stigmatization, and political and economic oppression because epidemic control measures, for instance, quarantine and isolation, were often used to marginalize and exploit the powerless groups such as ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged communities (Ding, 2014; Echenberg, 2007; Mohr, 2005). In other words, epidemics provide a convenient pretext to purge those who are considered socially unclean and morally evil in order to restore some presumed ideal political and economic order. Structural oppression is not the only form of social injustice, however; privileged communities and individuals also participate in the oppression of their fellow citizens for political, economic, and personal gain.

But how does social injustice exhibit itself in epidemic control and what communication strategies can be employed to promote more socially just policies and practices? This article provides preliminary responses to these questions by investigating issues of social injustice that medical care workers (MCWs) encountered in the SARS outbreaks in Canada and Singapore. We choose to examine issues of social injustice in Toronto and Singapore for three reasons. First, both epicenters were known for their ethnically diverse populations, with large numbers of immigrants from East Asia and Southeast Asia. This unique feature offers us an opportunity to examine how social injustice affects the Global South, even though we focus mostly on impacts on Asian immigrants in North America and Southeast Asian immigrants in Singapore. Second, focusing on these epicenters allows us to examine intercultural dynamics in epidemic control and the different ways the “Cultural Other” was excluded, neglected, or absorbed in national campaigns against epidemics. Finally, this analysis enables the

exploration of the different issues related to social injustice in North America and Asia and the interconnections among different theories of social justice.

Scholars such as Appadurai (1996), Grewal (2005), Ong (1999), and Starke-Meyerring (2005) called for the move from the use of nation-states as the unit of study in intercultural communication research and advocated for the study of the transcultural, which emphasizes flows of people and ideas as well as situated difference among cultures at different levels. This article shares their focus *on the cultural* and examines how social injustice impacted immigrants and foreign workers from the Global South who lived or worked in the Global North during the SARS outbreaks. We will start with a literature review of social justice and professional communication before moving on to analyze how social justice intersected epidemic control measures employed in SARS outbreaks in Canada and Singapore in 2003.

## **Social Justice and Professional Communication**

Frey et al. (1996) listed several features of social justice, i.e., “ethical concerns,” “structural analyses of ethical problems,” “activist orientation,” and “identification with others” (p. 111). Disenfranchised and marginalized groups, i.e., the poor, the unemployed/underemployed, and people of color are excluded from participating in the “process that creates their social worlds” and are “most in need of resources and advocacy” (p. 112). Leydens (2012) identifies two forms of thinking which are fundamental to definitions of social justice: contextual thinking, which investigates “the unique circumstances of each case and context,” and systemic thinking, which goes beyond individual ethical deliberation and focuses on “broad social, systemic—and thus often invisible—injustices” (p. 1). The “macro-ethical, systemic focus” afforded by social justice provides professional communication researchers with “language and a conceptual framework” to examine societal and policy applications of research findings (Leydens, 2012, p. 1). Leydens’ framework provides professional communicators with tools to analyze the systems, institutions, and practices that contribute to social injustice as well as possible strategies to invent constructive responses to such injustice.

Social justice is underdeveloped in the field of professional communication, because of both the absence of social justice in the formal training of professional communication researchers and the tendency for professional communication pedagogy to focus on preparing students for apolitical work in industry (Leydens, 2012). Professional communication research, however, offers great potential to inform efforts to promote social justice, because of its concerns about public interest in policy making processes (Ding, 2013; 2014b; Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Scott, 2003), civic engagement (Scott, 2009; Walton, 2013;), advocacy and activism (Agboka, 2013; Jones, 2012), and service learning (Crabtree & Sapp, 2005). While little scholarship in professional communication uses social justice as an explicit construct, Walton and Jones (2013) identified “the juncture of social justice, complex contexts, and communication” as a promising site for productive research and called for careful methodological, pedagogical, and critical work. This study investigates issues of social injustice experienced by various groups in epidemics and the communication strategies employed by communities to address such issues in complicated, multiethnic contexts. It is situated squarely in professional communication because of its focus on decision-making, advocacy and activism, and communication strategies.

### **Oppression, Access, Social Injustice, and Civic Infrastructure**

One of us (Ding, 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Ding & Pitts, 2013; Zhang & Ding, 2013) has been examining issues of risk communication, risk management, and public participation in global epidemics such as SARS, H1N1 flu, and HIV/AIDS. One little explored area in rhetoric of epidemics deals with power dynamics, access, social justice, and negotiations between authorities and various publics to mitigate impacts brought by epidemic control measures. To explore these issues, this project examines how *oppression* (Young 1990) operates in health crises and what communication strategies communities can employ to build *civic-based networks* (Schoch-Spana et al, 2007) to promote *access* (Porter, 1998) and thus *social justice* (Jost & Kay, 2010). To achieve this goal, we apply the four theoretical frameworks

mentioned above in our historical cases to fully investigate possible connections between communication and social justice. Our cases, in turn, give us the opportunity to synthesize the interconnections among these theoretical apparatuses and to highlight possible ways for professional communicators to help promote access and thus social justice for marginalized and powerless groups.

Young (1990) uses the term oppression to name unjust practices outside a distributive framework. She partitions sociocultural systematic—at the structural, cultural, or personal level—oppression into five categories, or faces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (p. 40). As an “unequal [group based and structurally persistent] distribution of wealth, income, and other resources,” **exploitation** “occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one group to benefit another” (Young, 1990, p. 50, 53). Young views the workplace as an important site of gender exploitation, where “women’s energies are expended in jobs that . . . comfort others” and the “gender-based labors” of nurses and other caretakers “often go unnoticed and undercompensated” (p. 51). **Marginalization** refers to the structural expulsion of “a whole category of people . . . from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (p. 53). As “the most dangerous form of oppression,” marginalization “involves both distributive injustice and the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction (p. 55).” Young emphasizes that racial oppression is a type of marginalization, not exploitation. **Powerlessness** refers to people, often nonprofessionals, who lack authority of power and “over whom power is exercised without their exercising it” (p. 57). Seeing division of labor as the cause, Young lists three types of injustices associated with powerlessness: “inhibition in the development of one’s capacities, lack of decision-making power in one’s working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies” (p. 58). **Cultural imperialism** refers to “a paradoxical oppression, [in which the culturally dominated] are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible” (p. 59). It is caused by the “establishment of a dominant group’s experience as the norm” and requires the creation of a “political space for such differences” (p. 61). Finally, **violence** refers to a systematic social practice

that renders “members of some groups [to] live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (p. 61). Also included in this category are “less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members” (p. 61). Young considers it sufficient to call a group oppressed if any of the five conditions mentioned above exists.

Two supplementary yet potentially useful theories are offered by Porter (1998) and Schoch-Spana et al. (2007). Porter (1998) defines three types of access: infrastructural (resources), educational (literacy, skills, and expertise), and social (community acceptance) in his analysis of the use of computer resources (pp. 102-105). Grabill and Simmons (1998) elaborated on the meaning of access in decision making about risk policies, stating, “Infrastructural access means access to the process of decision making within an institution, literacy means the discursive means to participate effectively, and acceptance refers to a ‘listening stance,’ or a commitment to collaborative decision making” (p. 427). Schoch-Spana et al. (2007) employ the term of “civic infrastructure” to describe the “dynamic assembly of interdependent people, voluntary associations, and social service organizations who can pool their collective wisdom, practical experience, specialized skills, social expectations, and material assets to work on behalf of constituent members . . . for a larger public good” (p. 11). They emphasize the unique capacities of civic-based networks to remedy disasters if authorities can effectively catalyze and integrate such networks into the risk management processes. These two theories work well together since communities and individuals have to acquire accesses to resources, literacy, and community acceptance before putting any civic-based networks together.

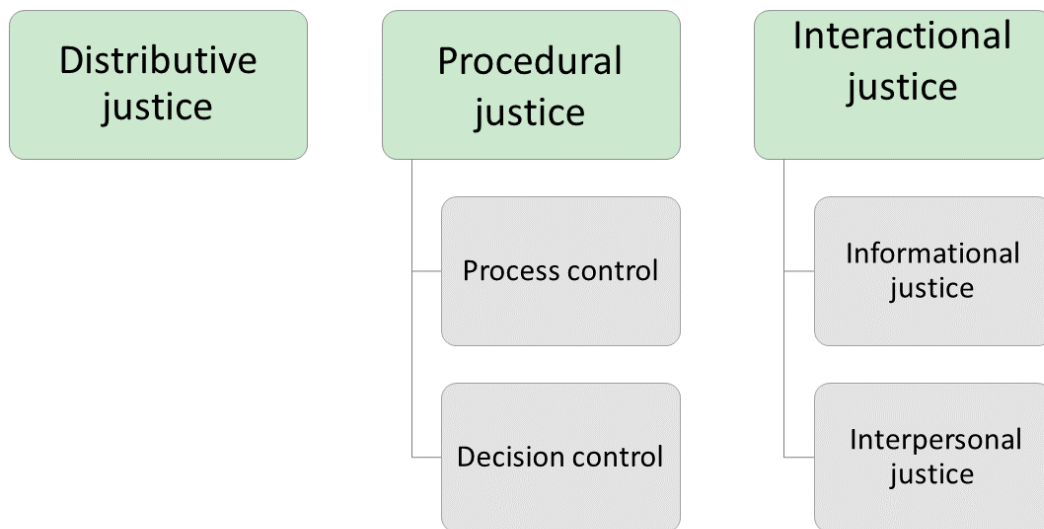
In order to continue and look forward into examining social and structural injustices, John Jost and Aaron Kay (2010) offered a three-part definition for social justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional. They assert that in a state of affairs that is socially just, (a) the benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle or set of principles; (b) procedures, norms, and rules that govern political and other forms of decision making preserve the basic rights, liberties, and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c)

human beings are treated with dignity and respect not only by authorities but also by other relevant social actors including fellow citizens (p. 1122). These three-part definitions are widely accepted in studies of social justice.

While the three types of social justice were not introduced by Jost and Kay (2010), their definition gives us a good starting point for our analysis. It should be emphasized that the three types of social justice can function at institutional, organizational, and communal levels and that they focus on different things. Distributive justice deals with the fairness of outcomes (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and “exists in all situations where individuals or groups enter into exchanges” (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997, p. 188; Deutsch, 1985). As our study will illuminate, while the dynamic of distributive justice is not intersecting as directly as procedural or interactional, when excessive burden was put on part-time MCWs without adequate reward or protection, the MCWs were forced to shoulder most of the SARS-related risks in Toronto. As a result, the principle for the allocation of benefits and burdens in Canada during SARS served to uphold an unjust social order. Procedural justice is characterized by the fairness of the process by which outcomes are determined (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and it emphasizes both *process control*, namely, the opportunity for people to present their own side before any decision is made, and *decision control*, namely, the influence people have on “the actual rendering of a decision” (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1140; see Figure 1, p. 28). Injustices of this type occurred throughout our cases, more prevalently in the Toronto case, when nurses who worked most closely with patients encountered various forms of structural oppression, i.e., marginalization and powerlessness when trying to participate in risk decision-making processes. Finally, focusing on interpersonal behaviors, interactional justice can be broken down into “*informational justice*, which emphasizes communicative aspects, such as truthfulness and justification (adequate explanation), and *interpersonal justice*, which guarantees sensitive, respectful, and appropriate treatment” (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1143; see also Bies, 2005; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1993). The informality of the final type of justice can make it more difficult to tangibly identify ways to introduce structural improvements. However, MCWs encountered interactional injustice in their daily encounters with discrimination and stigma-

**Figure 1**

*Three Types of Social Justice and their Components*



tization from neighbors, colleagues, and strangers, which reveals the important roles professional communicators can play to explore ways to cultivate community acceptance and support from fellow citizens.

It is generally agreed that these three types of social justice are “strongly related, yet distinct constructs” (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001, p. 307). Constituting two important aspects of “fairness of treatment” (Van den Bos, 2005), procedural justice and interactional justice “overlap and correlate,” for instance, because they deal respectively with formal injustices directed at systems, or governing norms of the law or institution, and informal injustice “directed at human actors” who can be representatives of the system (Jost & Kay, 2010, pp. 1143-1144). Theoretical elaboration about the three types of social justice clearly shows the central role that communication plays in promoting social justice. While process control advances procedural justice in granting communities participatory access to decision making on the policies that affect them, interactional justice touches up the qualities of such communication practices by emphasizing the need for adequate and truthful information (informational justice) as well as respectful sharing of such information (interpersonal justice).



Our study aims to expand existing knowledge about social justice and professional communication in epidemic control by *looking at both the macroethical (i.e., systemic) and microlevel (i.e., contextual) issues* posed by SARS to affected communities as well as by *examining issues related to the quality of information and interaction in health risk communication endeavors* about quarantines (Leydens, 2012). At the end of this study, we synthesize and speculate on our findings in depth, regarding the relationships among the three social justice theories discussed above, and suggest possible strategies that organizations, communities, and professional communicators can use to put together civic-based networks that promote social justice in future health crises.

## **Social Justice and SARS Outbreaks in Canada and Singapore**

This section analyzes how Canada and Singapore negotiated about rights and duties of medical care workers in SARS wards and about those quarantined or treated for SARS. Jacobs (2011) listed three types of potential rights concerns raised by quarantines, which include “the historical legacy of quarantine as a discriminatory practice . . . the confinement quarantine involves and the degree to which the burdens quarantine imposes are unfair in their distribution” (p. 89). We start with a survey of the SARS situations in those two countries before studying more closely the discourses surrounding those affected by SARS.

### **SARS Cases and Quarantines**

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2003) reported that globally a total of 8,422 people were infected with SARS, which resulted in 916 deaths, a fatality rate of 11 percent. Singapore had 238 SARS cases, with 97 (41%) medical care workers (MCWs) and 141 non-MCWs. Many MCWs, with one out of three nurses in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, were foreign. Of the 225 cases Canada recorded in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), MCWs accounted for 39% (88), almost twice as many as SARS patients (49). Two nurses and a doctor, all being

foreign, were among the 44 people who died from SARS in Canada (Nicolle et al., 2008). In Toronto, out of a population of approximately 3 million, about 30,000 people got quarantined (Naylor, 2003; Rothstein et al., 2003) and 39.5% of those quarantined were MCWs, in contrast with 41% in Singapore (DiGiovanni et al., 2004). While nurses counted for 46.4% of all MCWs in Canada, almost half of them were employed as contingent labor, holding two to three jobs to “make up full-time hours [and] working without benefits, or disability income protection” (Ontario Nurses’ Association, 2003). It is worth noticing that a large proportion of MCWs fighting in the frontline in Canada were female ethnic minorities or foreign workers.

### **Medical Care Workers, Nurses, and SARS Repercussions**

Two groups that were particularly hit by SARS were medical care workers and paramedics who took care of SARS patients. We will explore two areas in which MCWs and people quarantined after exposure to SARS patients might encounter unjust treatments, namely, appropriate protection of MCWs fighting in the frontline against SARS and financial compensation offered to MCWs and those under quarantine from authorities and the wider public. While most MCWs were praised for their altruism and bravery, in Canada, nurses were often exposed to SARS patients without appropriate infection control measures as well as widespread discrimination and social avoidance. In addition, Canada relied on official compensation, which was not offered until late May 2003, whereas Singapore mobilized the public to demonstrate nationwide support for MCWs fighting in the frontline.

### **SARS, MCWs, Home and Work Quarantines, and Social Justice in Canada**

Toronto witnessed two phases of SARS, which we will refer to as SARS I and SARS II below. In mid-February of 2003, a “superspreader” event in Metropole Hotel, Hong Kong sent ripples of infection to multiple countries. This incident

was referred to as “the gateway to horror” in Canada’s *SARS Commission Report* (2003, p. 43). Among the infected guests and visitors was Mrs. K, one 78-year-old Canadian woman, who travelled back to Toronto on February 23, 2003, developed symptoms of fever and a dry cough in two days, and died at home with a large family around her on March 5, 2003 (Campbell, 2006). The old woman’s son infected his physician and three nurses at Scarborough Grace Hospital before he passed away on March 13, 2003. Scarborough Grace later became the epicenter in Toronto.

On March 15, WHO issued a rare emergency travel advisory warning of the “worldwide health threat” and included Toronto in its list of areas with recent transmission (WHO). Ontario declared SARS as a provincial emergency on March 26 and all hospitals were required to create units to care for SARS patients. On March 29, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care ordered all hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area to activate their “Code Orange” emergency plans which required hospitals to establish isolation units for potential SARS cases, implement around-the-clock infection control measures, suspend nonessential services, limit visitors, and provide protective clothing such as gowns, masks, and goggles to exposed staff (*Learning from SARS*, p. 28). On April 23, 2003, WHO listed Toronto, along with Beijing and Inner Mongolia, as areas where nonessential travel should be postponed. Toronto was removed from WHO’s travel advisory, however, one week later due to immense political pressure from Canada (see Ding, 2014b, pp. 210-215 for detailed analysis). Toronto reported its last transmission of SARS on April 19 (Galloway, 2003). SARS I was thought to be contained in early May and WHO removed Toronto from the list of areas with recent local transmissions on May 14. As a part of the political campaigns to remove Toronto from WHO’s advisory, infection control measures and workplace safety precautions in hospitals were relaxed on May 13 and the provincial emergency and Code Orange for hospitals were lifted on May 17. These politically driven decisions to relax safety precaution left MCWs feeling “betrayed by a system that expects them to care but does not adequately protect them as they do so” (RNAO, 2003, p. 10). As stated in our introduction, often epidemics provide an opportunity for those in positions of hegemonic power to

use subversive tactics to purge the “Cultural Other,” thus such decisions clearly show MCWs’ complete lack of process control and decision control in coping with health risks they confronted and thus the procedural injustice imposed upon them during the decision-making processes.

SARS II started when a cluster of five cases of acute respiratory illness was identified by health officials on May 20, 2003 and was reported to WHO on May 22. Investigations clearly showed that there was never a second separate SARS outbreak, but an ongoing, undetected outbreak simmering at North York General Hospital between April 20 and May 7 which then spread to other hospitals (National Advisory Committee on SARS and Public Health, 2003). Toronto was added back to WHO’s list of areas with ongoing SARS transmission on May 26 and was not removed until July 2. *The SARS Commission Executive Summary* raised the question whether MCWs were adequately protected during the two SARS outbreaks, and it answered with a firm “no”. In addition to the three deaths of MCWs in Canada, other health workers, “including paramedics, medical technicians and cleaners,” contracted SARS on the job and many of them unknowingly infected their families” (Campbell, 2003, p. 22). The continuous infection of health workers during SARS II reveals “the full extent of worker safety failings” and the tragic impacts of official decisions to relax precautions in all Toronto hospitals when SARS was simmering in North York in late April and early May (p. 22). As demonstrated below, individual whistleblowers and grassroots leaders in civic organizations played vital roles in communicating about such systemic issues of social injustice to authorities and the public. Their strategic entries into the power systems helped to advocate for basic interests of marginalized groups such as contingent MCWs and ethnic minorities, which in turn contributed to the promotion of social justice.

## **Responses from Professional Organizations to Issues of Injustice**

Toronto started to adopt quarantine measures on March 26 when over 25 health workers and staff from Scarborough were put in hospital isolation rooms, and

their family members were requested to have a 10-day home quarantine. Thousands of people who “set foot in Toronto's Scarborough Grace Hospital on March 16 or since then” were considered at risk of developing SARS and were required to place themselves under quarantine for ten days from the time of their visits (Abraham, 2003). Canadian media called these *voluntary quarantines*, which were officially requested. No official orders were issued, however, as in the case of Singapore, and no systematic efforts were made to track down and monitor individuals serving the ten-day quarantine except phone calls from health officials.

During SARS II, Canada started the so-called “*working quarantine*” for hospital staff members and Emergency Medical Services paramedics who worked in an institution with “evidence of recent transmission of SARS.” The working quarantine required the staff to “take full precaution by wearing masks, gowns and gloves while working in affected areas . . . [and] go into self-isolation [after returning home], wearing a mask in the presence of their families, using their own cutlery and utensils” (Talaga, 2003, p. A01). Staff relying on public transit to commute to work were asked to take a taxi instead, for which the hospitals would pay (Talaga & Powell, 2003). Hospital staff and paramedics were required to work during quarantines to ensure enough manpower to respond to emergencies when the workers only had “extremely low chance” to be “incubating SARS” (Talaga & Powell, 2003, p. A01). This working quarantine policy brought exhaustion, increased health risks, stigmatization, loss of privacy, and family challenges to MCWs and other supporting staff because of extended working hours and duration of separation from their families.

Support staff, including workers such as housekeeping, dietary and clerical staff were “the last to be informed and the last to be trained” during SARS despite their constant contact with patients (Service Employees International Union, 2003, p. 3). Housekeepers were sent to clean SARS-related isolation rooms without adequate risk communication, training, or protection. In one case, when a cleaner tried to understand the risks he would be exposed to, he was reprimanded in writing by his supervisor who stated, “it’s my expectation that when you are asked to do something, you will do it” (p. 14).

Professional organizations such as the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA), Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO), and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) took the lead in advocating for the basic rights of their members. These organizations delivered powerful presentations to the SARS Commission in public hearings held in September 2003. Compiling both focus group and interview data as well as personal narratives from thousands of nurses directly impacted by SARS, reports from ONA and RNAO discussed numerous problems faced by nurses: segregation, stigmatization, economic, and physical and emotional repercussions brought by SARS. RNAO (2003) reported nurses' strong emotional responses to their SARS experiences, which included "fear, anxiety and exhaustion; isolation and stigma [and] frustration and anger" (p. 16). While SARS I brought fear and anxiety, SARS II caused widespread panic among MCWs because of the "perceived secrecy [of government decisions] and the accumulated exhaustion [of MCWs]" (RNAO, 2003, p. 17). Many nurses felt like they were "in jail" and used the phrase "social pariah" to explain the isolation and stigma they experienced during SARS (RNAO, 2003, pp. 17, 18). Obviously both support staff and MCWs suffered from informational injustice because of the minimal risk information they obtained. In addition, they also confronted interpersonal injustice because of the disrespectful treatment they encountered when requesting such information.

Also identified were broader infrastructural systemic issues such as "insufficient infection control policies, unsafe practices, ineffective communications," nursing shortage, government underfunding, and shortage of personal protective equipment (Ontario Nurses' Association [ONA], 2003, p. 1). In addition, when nurses identified "a cluster of patients with SARS-like symptoms and reported it to management and the medical staff," their concerns were being "ignored and suppressed" (ONA, 2003, p. 5; RNAO, 2003, p. 18). Barb Wahl, President of ONA, urged for a proactive approach and criticized the lack of clear protocols to prevent the spread of SARS even in September, 2003. Wahl (2003) criticized the exclusion of nurses from the decision-making processes about patient care and urged for "respect and recognition [of nurses] as professionals and essential members of the health care team" (p. 6). Such dismissal

of nurses' practical knowledge suggests procedural injustice because nurse whistleblowers' lack of both process control and decision control in making decisions that would have impacts on their own health. It eventually led to the relaxed infection control policies and subsequently the second SARS outbreak in Toronto.

RNAO made active efforts to lobby politicians for a full public inquiry into the SARS outbreaks. Howard Hampton, a politician in Ontario, urged Premier Ernie Eves to consider nurses', particularly RNAO's request for a public inquiry into SARS II, saying, "They raised warnings with hospital administrators and other officials early on that SARS was reemerging in our hospitals, yet their concerns were ignored" (Di Costanzo, 2013). RNAO's board of directors held a press conference to request a full public inquiry and employed powerful rhetorical strategies to call attention to the issues surrounding the systemic disregard of nurses' expertise. Doris Grinspun, a key figure who worked with the president of RNAO to organize the event, wrote about their strategies in a reflective article published in the tenth anniversary of SARS:

We organized a media conference with nurses who were trying to blow the whistle on their workplaces and the disregard shown to nurses' concerns . . . The next morning, every major newspaper across the nation published the images of nurses at RNAO's press conference wearing masks that read: "muzzled," "silenced" and "ignored" (Grinspun, 2013, p. 6).

By obtaining extensive media access to the whistleblowers who were originally neglected and silenced, the press conference circumvented the institutional barriers that excluded nurses from deliberation processes about infection and epidemic policies at various levels. These high-profile lobbying efforts helped nurses to acquire infrastructural access to the system, which in turn promoted procedural justice in terms of process control and decision control by requesting independent evaluation of official responses to and MCWs' experiences in SARS. Such efforts eventually led to two full-scale investigations about the ways Toronto dealt with SARS in 2003 (Grinspun, 2013, p. 6).

## **Controversy Surrounding Official Compensation Packages**

Fear of loss of income was cited as the main reason for noncompliance among people advised to take voluntary quarantines (Jacobs, 2011). The provincial government had insisted that it saw no need to offer compensation packages to those in quarantine before April 24, 2003. Although the Premier promised to provide support so that “people will not have to choose between doing the right thing and putting food on the table” in late April, no real action was taken until May 27 when a \$190 million compensation package was provided for MCWs who had lost incomes due to SARS (Campbell, 2003, p. 34). Officials offered no “compensation allowance” for nonhealthcare workers who had missed work due to quarantine until June 13, 2003. The Ontario College of Family Physicians (2003), however, complained about the government’s unfulfilled promise to provide “adequate worker’s compensation and disability benefits” for physicians who became sick on the job (p. 8). This official offer “was never put in writing” and was “withdrawn without notification” when physicians were working in the SARS wards (p. 8).

The ONA’s report urged Canada to move beyond “run[ning] newspaper ads proclaiming that MCWs are ‘heroes’” even though such sentiment was appreciated. The report warned, “if nurses don’t get the respect and protection they deserve in their workplaces, all of these accolades mean nothing – and only add to their cynicism and frustration” (Ontario Nurses’ Association, 2003, p. 7). Without appropriate compensation and protection policies implemented for the frontline MCWs, symbolic official and public gestures of support carry little weight for those who confront viral threats to their survival on a daily basis. Even in September 2003, members of the ONA who contracted SARS or got quarantined because of SARS still did not receive compensation. Numerous presentations given by MCW organizations in the SARS Commission public hearings emphasized MCWs’ loss of trust in the system due to the poor responses and the lack of adequate support they experienced during the SARS outbreak.



## **SARS, MCWs, Home Quarantines, and Social Justice in Singapore**

MCWs attracted wide attention from the beginning of the SARS outbreak in Singapore, though with little attention to ethnicity, hiring status, or gender. From the very beginning, MCWs were exalted as the heroes fighting at the frontline and needing all-out support to continue defending Singapore from SARS. Meanwhile, rigorous infection control measures were taken from the beginning of the epidemic. Ding and Pitts (2013) examined how Singaporean authorities resorted to not only police forces and private security companies but also official compensation packages and community volunteers to implement its ten-day home quarantine orders for close contacts of SARS patients. Singapore's quarantine policies grew increasingly stringent as its outbreak spread, with the use of surveillance cameras and electronic tags for early quarantine breakers and hefty fines and imprisonment for continuous violation, which resulted in questions about human-rights violations from Western media. However, its quarantine policies were well received due to its consistent, frequent, and transparent communication practices, its repeated appeals to nationalism and patriotism, and its early policies to compensate those under home quarantines for their lost incomes.

### **Compensation and Courage Fund: Corporate, Personal, and Official Efforts**

Compensation in Singapore took an interesting turn because of the early involvement of civic networks. Instead of relying on the government for support, professional organizations such as the Singapore Medical Association (SMA) and the Singapore Nurses Association (SNA) set up the SARS Relief Fund on April 2 to raise funds for victims and their families (Sim, 2003). On April 10, National Healthcare Group, Singapore Health Services, Singapore Medical Association, Singapore Nurses Association, and Singapore Press Holdings launched what was called the Courage Fund "in honor of Singapore's health-care workers, especially those who have fallen ill or suffered in their battle against the virus" (Courage

Fund, 2003). Dr. Lim Suet Wun, CEO of Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) and Chairman of the fund's working committee, applauded the heroism of MCWs who had made up over 50 percent of SARS victims by then, saying, "Health-care workers have to walk daily into wards, where they know there are SARS patients. There is no means for them to attack, there is only defense. And the defense is only things like thin little masks, the gowns and the gloves which they wear" (Sim, 2003). He emphasized that, despite exposure to daily health risks, MCWs had "come together to continue to serve the patients," with only two out of 3600 TTSH staff quitting their jobs (Sim, 2003).

Corporations and individuals quickly worked together to demonstrate their support for MCWs and people affected by quarantines. The *Straits Times* ran a total of 131 reports on Courage Fund between April and September 30, 2003, which showed a trend of quick growth of personal and corporate donations. On April 21, ten days after the launch of the fund, the public donation went over \$2 million, which was widely applauded as uplifting news for MCWs fighting in the frontline against SARS (Donations to SARS fund). Many advertisements were published in newspapers to thank frontline MCWs for their altruistic work. For instance, *Lianhe Zaobao*, a leading Chinese-language newspaper in Singapore, published a one-and-a-half-page long advertisement which was jointly funded by 205 Chinese nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, regional groups, and ethnic clans. Titled "Sincere appreciation," the advertisement thanked brave MCWs fighting around the clock against SARS for their devotion to patients and listed all parties that sponsored its appearance in *Lianhe Zaobao*. Such grassroots-sponsored advertisements demonstrated both the efforts actively made by ethnic groups and the integral roles played by civic organizations to contribute to the national battle against SARS.

On April 17, the government of Singapore donated \$1 million to the Courage Fund and matched, dollar for dollar, all donations made to the fund. In addition, it pledged tax deductions for donors, doubling the amount of their donations. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced the plan in a press conference, emphasizing the sacrifice made by MCWs who risked their lives to defend Singapore from SARS: "It's a war and we are in battle, and on the front

line are health-care workers . . . So we set up this fund to help the victims and health-care workers. We hope through this, we can show how we feel and perhaps give a useful boost to our health-care workers” (“\$1m Boost”). The first compensation package was issued on April 20 and the fund would give up to \$70 a day to those who had to be quarantined at home or warded for observation or treatment (Lian, 2003).

Singapore provided financial assistance not only to individuals affected by SARS and its quarantine policies but also to industries and small businesses suffering business losses due to SARS. On April 17, Singapore offered a \$230 million aid package for industries hardest hit by the virus outbreak, with \$155 million dedicated to tourism-related industries (Kong, 2003). In addition, cost reduction, fee waivers, and tax rebates were provided for commercial properties, aircrafts, cruise ships, and taxi.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Access, Communication, and Social Justice in Singapore and Toronto**

Our analysis of MCWs’ experiences in Singapore demonstrates the importance of access in ensuring social justice: MCWs had constant access to infrastructure, literacy, and community acceptance, which in turn promoted Singapore’s national battle against SARS. To begin with, appeals to patriotism were made at the very beginning to launch an all-out war and to mobilize all parties in contract tracing by taking voluntary or mandatory home quarantines (Ding & Pitts, 2013). People from all walks of life actively expressed their appreciation of MCWs’ sacrifices by publishing thank-you advertisements in newspapers, supporting fundraising efforts, providing food delivery services, and sending thank-you cards and letters. Such extensive grassroots participation demonstrates widespread community acceptance and moral support that MCWs received in Singapore’s SARS outbreak. Meanwhile, authorities employed transparent risk communication,

aggressive training procedures, and rigorous infection control measures to proactively prevent in-hospital transmission. Such efforts provided MCWs with excellent access to resources and education, which in turn greatly facilitated Singapore's national battle against SARS. In addition, the early release of official compensation packages for MCWs and people serving quarantine orders demonstrates Singapore authorities' determination to ensure the fair distribution of benefits and burdens for those who contributed to its national anti-SARS campaign through either professional heroism or compliance with quarantine orders.

While the experiences of MCWs in Singapore posed fewer challenges related to social justice, the experiences of their counterparts in Canada were much more problematic. The problems MCWs and other supporting staff encountered correspond with both the three types of social justice and Young's constructs of marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. To start with, when excessive burden was put on part-time MCWs without adequate reward or protection, it posed issues of distributive injustice and exploitation. While MCWs shouldered most of the burdens in fighting against SARS, they faced the additional burdens of "unequal distribution of benefits [and risks]" because they had to suffer financially due to their inability to work multiple jobs after being put on work quarantine in one hospital and their lack of access to health or disability insurance if they contracted SARS on the job. In addition, nurses who worked most closely with patients encountered structural oppression, i.e., marginalization and powerlessness when trying to participate in risk decision-making processes. They had no voice in making decisions about ways to contain local outbreaks even though they were the ones taking care of suspected SARS patients and raising concerns about possible clusters that led to SARS II. Often working on several jobs to make ends meet, nurses and supporting staff suffered from inadequate access to infrastructural resources such as protective gear or disability benefits and to literacy resources to stay informed of latest infection control measures and to protect themselves against possible infection. Finally, the discrimination and stigmatization from neighbors, colleagues, and strangers in daily encounters reveals their lack of access to community acceptance and the subsequent interpersonal injustice, for MCWs had to constantly cope with

disrespect, isolation, and social avoidance from fellow citizens. It also suggests cultural imperialism because nurses and supporting staff were both made invisible in institutional hierarchies and subject to stereotypes as possible sources of infection to the larger community.

Because of all these issues with social justice, professional organizations such as Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) and Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO) actively sought to protect their members against unfair treatment. As civic-based, nursing advocacy networks, they fought hard to obtain infrastructural and educational access for the marginalized nurses and supporting staff by conducting extensive qualitative research on MCWs' individual experiences with SARS. They also produced highly rhetorical reports about the lack of worker health and safety protection in Canada's health-care facilities and about the devastating impacts of these conditions on frontline MCWs. In addition, these civic organizations managed to gain institutional access to represent the collective interests of their members in public hearings held by the SARS Commission and thus brought their concerns to public platforms. Their presentations exposed not only the hardships MCWs experienced, but, more importantly, the systemic challenges Canada's public health system faced because of its continuous efforts to streamline the system. Therefore, they proposed system-wide solutions, including hiring more full-time nurses, implementing better infection control mechanism, and adopting more transparent and effective risk communication approaches. Finally, ONA filed a lawsuit on behalf of 53 nurses who contracted SARS to protest against negligence in officials' handling of SARS and the lack of worker health and safety in healthcare facilities ("SARS Outbreak," 2009). These acts of advocacy promoted procedural justice by earning both process control and decision control for nurses in post-SARS investigations and in decision-making processes about compensation for MCWs contracting SARS.

### **Use of Civic Infrastructure and Communication Strategies to Promote Social Justice**

Our study clearly points to the need for participation from both authorities and fellow citizens to ensure social justice in epidemics. Authorities should work at the

early stage of epidemics to ensure the fair and clear distribution of benefits and burdens among professions and stakeholders fighting against and affected by epidemics. Moreover, protecting the basic rights of the wider public plays an essential role in facilitating interactional justice, namely, community acceptance of and support for those who sacrifice their own interests to protect the wellbeing of the wider community.

Our findings show that Singapore managed to mobilize its civic infrastructure by encouraging organizations and individuals to contribute actively to the Courage Fund. While it relied on police and contract security companies to carry out its quarantine orders, it encouraged individual citizens to comply with quarantine policies through the use of rhetoric of nationalism. Singapore did not fully mobilize its civic-based networks in the implementation of quarantine orders, as was achieved in Mainland China through the active involvement of neighborhood committees and other grassroots organizations (Ding, 2013; Ding, 2014a). Civic infrastructure seems to have played a minimal role in Canada's battle against SARS, and only in a retrospective manner, when various professional nurse organizations started to protest against the lack of appropriate protection of and compensation for nurses and other health professionals. This sharp contrast in the ways civic infrastructure functioned in Singapore and Canada suggests that, in future epidemics, authorities, MCWs, communities, and individual citizens should equally shoulder this public responsibility and collaborate in mobilizing civic infrastructure. Only by doing so can they achieve the shared goals to ensure better surveillance, to implement good risk reduction measures, to take better care of affected communities and individuals, and to take viral bodies out of circulation. Participating actively in policy making processes, civic-based networks will also help to promote procedural justice and interactional justice by giving process and decision controls to marginalized communities. Such processes will also promote transparent communication, namely, informational justice, and fair treatment, namely, interpersonal justice.

It should be emphasized that SARS marked the transformational moments when civic organizations such as RNAO and ONA started to fight aggressively for the basic rights of their marginalized members. In 2006, RNAO

published a booklet titled “Lobbying Senior Administrators and Politicians,” which offered a systematic approach to advocacy for nurses. It described in great detail three types of advocacy game plans, namely, low profile strategy, medium profile strategy, and high profile strategy, which aim to “build alliance” rather than creating antagonism. Starting with the low-profile strategy of letter writing, the advocacy game plans quickly move on to medium profile strategies such as arranging meeting with officials and public meetings in the Minister’s riding as well as high profile strategies, i.e., organizing demonstrations, releasing news briefs, having news conferences, and obtaining “a group occupy in the Minister’s constituency office” (Lobbying, 2006, pp. 6-7). The booklet also provides detailed instruction on the creation of key documents such as letters and submissions to federal, municipal, and local authorities. Its emphasis on advocacy and high-impact genres suggests RNAO’s attempt to gain institutional access for its members, which in turn leads to educational and social access by developing media skills and inviting community acceptance. Professional organizations that support civic participation, such as the RNAO and ONA, developed the ability to participate effectively in political negotiations through their active advocacy efforts during the SARS outbreak, which in turn forced others in more powerful positions to listen to their arguments. This newly acquired rhetorical capacity clearly marked them as participants in the civic infrastructure that worked to empower marginalized groups and to address systematic injustices by gaining a seat in the negotiating table.

### **Theoretical Speculation: Connection among Social Justice, Oppression, and Access**

Our study allows us to speculate a little here on the interconnectedness of the three types of social justice, oppression (Young, 1990), and access (Porter, 1998). Our analysis shows that distributive, procedural, and interactional justices are closely related, and sometimes slightly overlapping, in epidemic control settings. For instance, when Toronto decided to relax infection control measures in hospitals, the policy was imposed in a top-down manner on hospital authorities

and frontline MCWs. This practice reveals issues related to both procedural injustice because of the closed-door decision-making process and distributive justice because of the sudden exposure of MCWs to unnecessary health hazards. When frontline staff raised questions about such practices, their challenges were quickly dismissed and they were told simply to follow rules without asking questions. The official dismissal that MCWs encountered both suggests informational injustice and interpersonal injustice. It can be also interpreted as procedural injustice because in such encounters, the MCWs' basic rights to health were neglected by authorities and the frontline workers had no power to intervene in the decision-making process, thus losing both process control and decision control. While distributive justice and procedural justice often require access to infrastructure, access to literacy may help to promote procedural justice and interactional justice. Finally, access to community acceptance plays a vital role in interactional justice (see Figure 2, p. 45).

Young (1990) emphasized that oppression focuses on systematic institutional processes that prevent people from learning skills or communicating effectively with others. In the five faces of oppression, exploitation deals mostly with distributive injustice and marginalization is more related to procedural injustice. Powerlessness and cultural imperialism seem related to both procedural injustice and interactional injustice, though the former is more procedural while the latter is more interactional. Finally, we wonder whether violence brings injustice in distribution and interaction because of its attacks on persons and properties (see Figure 3, p. 45).

## **Implications for Professional Communication**

The combined use of the three different frameworks, namely, Jost and Kay (2010), Young (1990), and Porter (1998), helps to produce rich and multifaceted insights about issues of social injustice in SARS outbreaks. Our study reveals that social injustice and oppression operated in covert manners in SARS and was more procedural and interactional than distributive. It also shows possible entry points for professional communicators to produce constructive responses to social unjust-



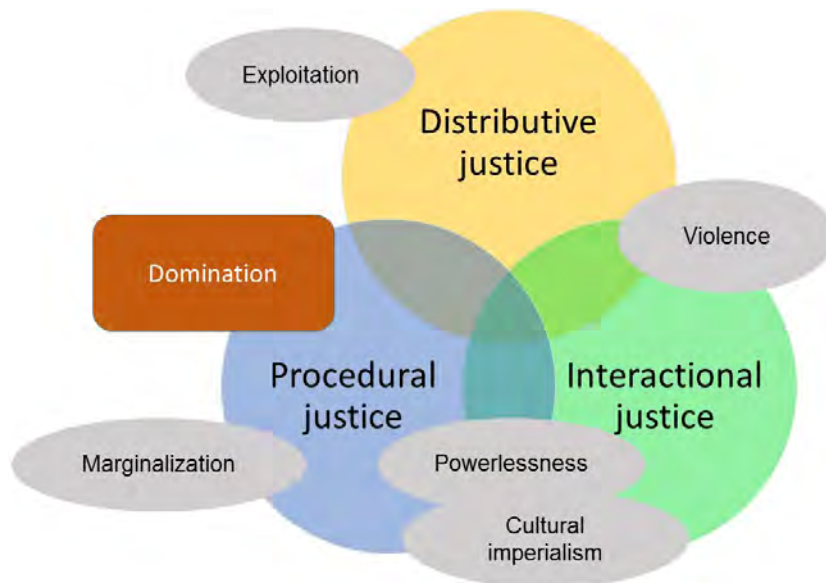
**Figure 2**

*Connections between social justice and Porter's Framework of Access*



**Figure 3**

*Connections between social justice and Young's Framework of Oppression*

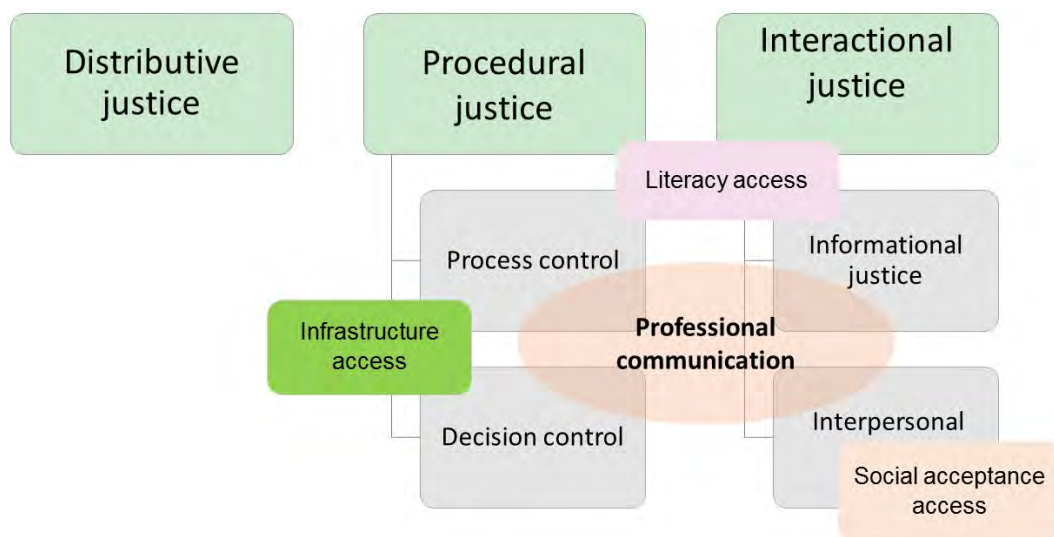


ices and participate in the negotiation processes to promote social justice and access for the marginalized and powerless groups. One of the key areas for such entrance is the conjunction between procedural justice and interactional justice, particularly that between process control and informational justice. As demonstrated by RNAO's advocacy game plan, by enhancing communities' literacy access, civic organizations can improve process control in decision-making processes, which often leads to better decision control and thus more procedural justice. Enhanced literacy access also improves informational justice provided to parties involved in such processes (see Figure 4). These goals can be achieved by advocating for the inclusion of communal and individual stakeholders in the deliberating processes and by pushing for open and sufficient information. They require knowledge about ways to obtain access to institutional and media resources and the rhetorical capacity to create powerful messages that lead to access to such resources.

Professional communication scholars and practitioners can play pivotal roles in efforts to promote process control and informational justice in risk

**Figure 4**

*Connections among access, social justice, and professional communication*



communication efforts in health crises by cultivating students' rhetorical and critical thinking skills in the classroom. Achieving this pedagogical goal requires us to move beyond the traditional service role that our field plays in industry since professional communicators such as leaders of RNAO often have to fight against the power apparatuses to promote social justice for the marginalized groups. It also requires our renewed commitment to service courses in professional communication so that we can better reach out to and influence future professionals. Only by doing so can we help to "educate and produce more critical and conscientious professionals with the knowledge and skills to act ethically in difficult communicative situations" (Ding, 2014b, p. 245). Such conscientious professionals, with their critical rhetorical skills and attention to civic matters, have the potential to become future leaders of civic organizations and to employ strong professional communication skills to help marginalized groups to acquire all three kinds of access to combat issues of social injustice inflicted upon them and others.

It should be emphasized that our analysis of social injustice in epidemics here is exploratory and more studies should be conducted to examine how social justice, oppression, access, and civic infrastructure function in other health crises. As suggested by our cases, only when individuals affected by epidemic control measures are treated with respect and care will they fully participate in and contribute to anti-epidemic campaigns. To enlist domestic citizens and transnational sojourners in the national campaigns against emerging epidemics requires respect and socially just treatment for all individuals, provision of access to resources, education, and community acceptance, and mobilization of civic-based networks so that everyone can participate in the battle to contain and eradicate old or new epidemics. ■

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## About the authors

Huiling Ding is an associate professor of technical communication and director of the MS program in Technical Communication at North Carolina State University. She has published in areas of health communication, intercultural professional communication, medical rhetoric, scientific communication, comparative rhetoric, writing in the disciplines, and workplace communication.

**Email.** [hding@ncsu.edu](mailto:hding@ncsu.edu)

**URL.** [http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/faculty\\_staff/hding](http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/faculty_staff/hding)

**Contact.**

North Carolina State University  
Department of English  
221 Tompkins Hall  
Campus Box 8105  
Raleigh, NC 27695-8105  
USA

Xiaoli Li is an assistant professor of professional and technical writing at University of Dayton. She teaches Professional and Technical Writing in Global Contexts, Writing for the Web, Technical Communication, and Business Communication. She also teaches those courses in China and Germany when she leads the UD Study Abroad programs.

**Email.** [xli002@udayton.edu](mailto:xli002@udayton.edu)

**URL.** [https://www.udayton.edu/directory/artssciences/english/li\\_xiaoli.php](https://www.udayton.edu/directory/artssciences/english/li_xiaoli.php)

**Contact.**

University of Dayton  
Department of English

300 College Park Ave  
Dayton, OH 45469  
USA

Austin Caldwell Haigler is currently a second year graduate student at North Carolina State University in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program. His main areas of interest are political philosophy, philosophy of mind and nonordinary states of consciousness, social moral epistemology, social justice, ethics, and ideology critique.

**Email.** [achaigle@ncsu.edu](mailto:achaigle@ncsu.edu)

**Contact.**

North Carolina State University  
Department of English  
3428 Wade Avenue  
Raleigh, NC 27607  
USA

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# ~~WHAT'S WRONG HERE?~~ WHAT'S RIGHT HERE?

## Introducing the positive deviance approach to community-based work

Lucía Durá

*The University of Texas at El Paso, USA*

This article introduces positive deviance (PD) to the field of professional communication. Traditionally, in problem-solving situations we examine barriers to be overcome or import best practices from other contexts. PD instead meets people where they are. An asset-based, participatory approach, it values and amplifies what people are doing right without outside help. PD responds to calls for community-based work that is inquiry-driven, participatory, reciprocal, sustainable, critical, reflexive and therefore, more socially just. Through data from an instrumental case study on the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda, this article illustrates PD's process of rhetorical, intercultural inquiry. The article shows how flipping the deficit-based paradigm through PD creates new narratives and offers an alternative research framework or interventional methodology for professional communicators. The article ends with a discussion of the implications and limitations of PD in the contexts of ethics, social justice, and pedagogy.

**Keywords.** Community-based work, Participatory design, Asset-based, sustainability, Local knowledge, Social justice, Critical, reflexive, intercultural, rhetorical inquiry.

It takes eight hours to get from Kampala to the district of Pader in Northern Uganda. As our small 4X4 vehicle traversed the red dirt moguls, A.P., the local Save the Children in Uganda (SCiU) PD lead coordinator, briefed us on the setting, the history of the civil conflict, and the positive deviance (PD) project. Upon reaching the first internally displaced persons' (IDP) camp where we would conduct a participatory impact assessment, we were greeted by a large group of



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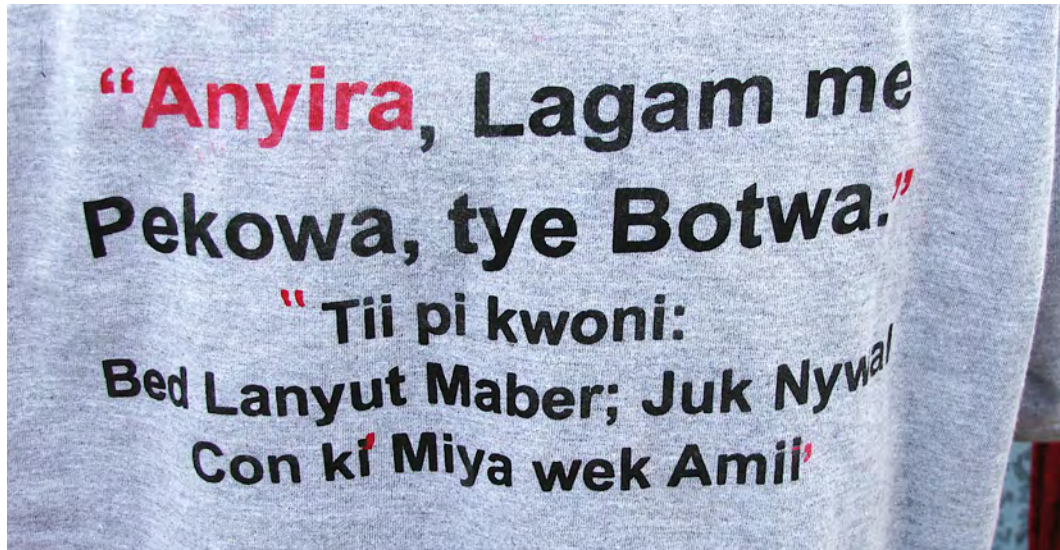
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**Figure 1.**

T-shirts designed by “PD girls” for public awareness about being a role model and averting “transactional sex”



girls singing a joyous welcome song. They wore heather gray t-shirts with a message on the back: “Girls, the answers to our problems are within us./Work for your life: Be a role model; stop early pregnancy, and no give and take (transactional sex).” This was our first encounter with the “PD girls.”

In spite of surviving the hardships of abduction, serving as soldiers, porters, and sex slaves, and being treated as pariahs by members of their communities, PD girls deviated from the norm in a positive way. They averted isolation, violence, and transactional sex—sex in exchange for goods, places to sleep, or food. Instead, they practiced *simple* and *uncommon* behaviors that made a big difference in their successful reintegration. What were they doing differently?

PD girls work harder and smarter by practicing a variety of behaviors. Jane, one of the PD girls, [explained], ‘After finishing work in my garden, I work in other community members’ fields to earn extra money.’ . . . Grace, a mentor noted, ‘When they go fetch firewood some girls bring back an extra load. One they use

for cooking, the other they sell for use the next day. One girl makes extra money by filling up an additional jerry-can of water at the hand pump, strapping it behind her bicycle and delivering it to a construction site.’ (Singhal & Dura, 2009a, p. 48)

PD girls also worked collaboratively to get more work done; alternating shifts with others allowed them to go to school, care for their children, and to socialize (Singhal & Dura, 2009a, p. 49).

This article introduces PD as a socially just framework for community-based work in professional communication. Traditional problem-solving and research identify barriers and import best practices from other contexts. PD takes a decidedly different approach. It focuses on what *is* working—*what people are doing right* without outside help. PD is a rhetorical framework used to facilitate inquiry and amplify asset-based narratives. In the sections that follow, I first describe the theoretical and conceptual perspectives that inform this research. I explain my methodology for an instrumental case study on the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda. Through this case study I describe the process of rhetorical, intercultural inquiry by which PD facilitates transformational research: (a) the discovery of statistical outliers who, based on the odds against them, are not supposed to be surviving or thriving; (b) their uncommon but replicable behaviors and practices; and (c) the design of an initiative or intervention based on local research findings. I then discuss how flipping the deficit-based paradigm through PD creates new possibilities for professional communicators, and I examine them in terms of implications and limitations in the contexts of ethics, social justice, and pedagogy.

## **A Need for Greater Emphasis on Social Justice in Professional Communication**

The term “community-based work” characterizes a variety of partnerships. Community-based work can occur in industry, government, and the nonprofit sector. It can be work with a research focus or with an action focus (e.g., action

research, participatory action research, service learning, instruction, consulting). It can be local or global. And it can be performed “in,” “on,” “for,” “about,” or “with” communities, which implies different logistical arrangements and ideological assumptions (Deans, 2000; Flower, 2008; Grabill, 2012). In their exploration of the role of researchers in professional communication action research, Blythe, Grabill, and Riley (2008) explained that the nuances in what we have come to know as action research<sup>1</sup> can be distinguished through “two hallmarks: (a) the researchers’ commitment to social justice and (b) the relationship between researchers and participants” (p. 274). More recently, in the introduction to *The public work of rhetoric*, Ackerman and Coogan (2010) reiterated the call for more just, democratic, and ethical frameworks to do public work: “to do rhetoric ‘out there’ requires a shedding of academic adornments, a different professional disposition, new participatory and analytic tools, and a more grounded conception of public need” (p. 1). Similarly, Savage and Agboka, editors for this special issue, reiterated calls for more socially conscious and just approaches to professional communication, especially in international contexts (Savage & Mattson, 2011; Yu & Savage, 2013; Agboka, 2013a and 2013b; Dura, Singhal, & Elias, 2013). In essence, what these scholars call for are “methodological revisions” (Grabill, 2012) that view (1) research as a transformational tool—not just as a means to write “on” or “about” communities; (2) participation, reciprocity, and sustainability as ethical ideals; and (3) our roles as professional communicators as imbricated in political, ethical, economic, and ideological networks where power dynamics tend to favor certain groups and marginalize others.

For over 20 years professional communication scholars with interests in literacy studies, intercultural rhetoric, participatory design, risk communication, and critical methodologies, have advocated consistently and increasingly for approaches and models to community-based work that:

1. Are inquiry-driven—even when action-focused;
2. Value local knowledge and meaningful relationships;
3. Can be sustained beyond a study or intervention; and
4. Are reflexive and critical.



We see this in Lather's (1991) democratized process of inquiry; Cushman's (1996) agent of social change and (1998) activist ethnography; Sullivan and Porter's (1997) critical research practices; Grabill's (2001) community-based literacy and (2012) stance; Powell & Takayoshi's (2003) ethic of reciprocity; Mathieu's (2005) tactical rhetoric; Simmons' (2007) participatory risk communication; Long's (2008) local publics; Flower's (2008) intercultural inquiry; Walton & DiRenzi's (2009) value-sensitive design; and Agboka's (2013a) participatory localization, among others.

In the subsections that follow, I unpack the attributes of inquiry, participation, sustainability, and critical awareness that have brought us closer to doing more socially just work as a field. They provide the theoretical foundation for my analysis and discussion of positive deviance as a socially just framework for rhetorical, intercultural inquiry and action.

## **Inquiry-Driven**

To say that scholars who engage in community-based work value inquiry may seem obvious. However, whether a project is primarily research-focused or is primarily action-focused, inquiry does not look the same to all people. The nature and quality of inquiry varies based on ideological dispositions, the type of work being performed, and other factors that intersect in the complexity of extrainstitutional collaborations (Cushman, 1996 and 1998; Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Deans, 2000; Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008; Flower, 2008; Grabill, 2001 and 2012). Furthermore, in some of our work, particularly in projects that are primarily service-oriented, we are so motivated by action and social change that we neglect inquiry all together: “[we] are prepared to act, when [we] really need to inquire” (Flower, 2008, p. 154). And we need to inquire because inquiry is transformational: it is an opportunity not only to help us understand the communities with which we are working more fully, but also to value their members' intellectual capacity and at the same time to contribute to building a research capacity.

## **Value Local Knowledge and Meaningful Partnerships**

“Community members typically exist as *participants* in social projects, not as *partners* with expertise who must be respected as agents in their own right” (Flower, 2008, p. 28). Our roles as professional communicators doing community-based work are generally dependent on logistics, i.e., the goals of the project, the setting, and our relationship to the partner community or organization. But in addition to logistics, which may or may not be under our direct control, are our assumptions about local knowledge. Just as inquiry does not look the same to all people, neither does participation. We are not likely to invite participation if we do not believe in a community’s ability or capacity to contribute. For some, studying and writing *about* a community can imply valuing that community’s knowledge by bringing it to the fore. Or, helping a community to disseminate its knowledge by legitimizing its ideas, lending community members’ status, and creating awareness around issues important to them can also imply valuing what they know. The problem with these positions is that they tend to privilege the researchers’ point of view, lens, or expertise (Cushman, 1996, 1998, & 2002; Flower & Heath, 2000; Flower, 2002 & 2008; Grabill, 2001; and Mathieu, 2005; Simmons, 2007; Long, 2008) and in the worst case scenario can go so far as “otherizing” or “recolonizing” the same people they intend to help (Agboka, 2013). This is not to say that community knowledge should preclude expert knowledge, but to give equal weight to a community’s agendas, assumptions, and interpretations, critical and reflexive scholars suggest models for engaging in participatory design as well as mutual inquiry and literate action (See for example Cushman 1996 and 1998; Grabill 2001 and 2012; Mathieu, 2005; Spinuzzi, 2005; Simmons, 2007; Flower & Heath, 2001; Flower, 2008; Long, 2008; Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008; Walton & DiRenzi, 2009; Evia & Patriarca, 2011; Agboka, 2013).

As researchers we have much to gain from the work we do with community partners (Cushman, 1998). It is our responsibility, through “self-critical, conscious navigation” (Cushman, 1996, p. 16) to define and redefine our relationships with partners and to ask and assess whether they are getting

something satisfactory out of the interaction (Powell & Takayoshi, 2003). According to Cushman (1998), “researchers and participants empower each other when they: (1) enable each other to achieve goals, (2) facilitate each other’s actions, and (3) lend to each other their respective social statuses” (p. 23). For this kind of reciprocity to be possible, researchers must invest in meaningful relationship-building. Grabill (2012) noted the difference between making research decisions through the filter of “our disciplines, our politics, or our methods,” e.g., as a qualitative researcher doing ethnography versus through the filter of relationships, e.g., “if maintaining the relationship is a priority, then many decisions during a research process will be informed by this principle” (p. 217). Although we will necessarily employ both filters, which one we prioritize will affect the process and outcomes of a project.

## **Sustainable**

Sustainability, for our purposes here, is the ability for a project’s process and/or outcomes to continue beyond the study or intervention with little guidance or outside resources. Ultimately, a community should be able to carry out its work independently of outside experts (Cushman, 2002; Grabill, 2007; Blythe, Grabill, & Riley, 2008). Sustainability is one of the most challenging aspects of community-based work. This can be because a majority of projects depend on external funding and commitment from institutional/organizational leadership (Shediac-Rizkalla & Bone, 1998). But it can also be because sustainability is most achievable when other aspects of socially just work described above are present, i.e., when the community is invested in the process—participation and reciprocity—and when a project centers on inquiry that is guided by community concerns (Cushman, 2002; Grabill, 2007). The link between the quality of researcher-community relationships and the depth of community participation has been well documented, especially in fields heavily involved in international community development (See for example Altman, 1995; Shediac-Rizkalla & Bone, 1998; Ofuoku, 2011). Perhaps less obvious is why research or inquiry would be a key component to sustainability since its primary purpose is often academic.

Research may be a less visible component to sustainability than community involvement and relationships, but it can have a transformational effect as a “lever” for capacity-building (Grabill, 2007).

## **Reflexive and Critical**

Our orientations toward research are as important as the methods we use. Critical approaches account for the local and the global—geographic, social, institutional; they foreground power relations, ethics, politics, economics, and other social, contextual factors (Sullivan & Porter, 2001; Simmons, 2007; Faber, 2007; Grabill, 2012; Agboka, 2013). In essence, critical rhetoric brings up “difference” (Flower, 2008) and is “committed to naming those differences that mark one as less powerful” (Grabill, 2001, p. 91). Grabill (2012) proposed through the concept of “stance” that community-based scholars reflect critically on whether inquiry is present, of what type, our role, and what we stand to gain or lose vis a vis the community’s role and what community members stand to gain or lose. To be critical is to acknowledge that even when we create spaces for those who are normally silenced or marginalized, it does not mean they will be able to participate equally or truly gain access (Grabill, 2001; Mathieu, 2005; Simmons, 2007; Flower, 2008). It is our role as professional communicators to “help tease out who is affected, who is participating, and who is left out” (Simmons, 2007, p. 117). Understanding and articulating stance is complex; our aspirations may not always be logistically within reach, or we might carry different assumptions about knowledge and participant relationships from one project to another.

## **An Overview of Positive Deviance**

While we have made great strides towards more socially just approaches in rhetoric and professional communication, it is difficult for any single approach to encompass all of the called for methodological revisions. PD combines the socially just attributes of different approaches into a single rhetorical framework. It offers a tested and concrete alternative research or intervention methodology centered

on asset-based inquiry and action. Further, PD presents an opportunity for professional communicators to contribute our accumulated disciplinary knowledge and techne in inquiry, communication, and critical reflexivity. To set up the case study and analysis of an iteration of PD in addressing reintegration in Northern Uganda, in this section, I give a brief overview of PD's history, process, and principles.

A quarter of a century ago, nutritionists from Tufts University, Zeitlin, Ghassemi, and Mansour, conducted a literature review of nutrition studies between 1967 and 1983 that focused on nutritional success, rather than malnutrition. They applied this research to their own work in Burma and found that studying the behaviors of healthy babies produced different results than studying the behaviors leading to malnutrition (Zeitlin, Ghassemi, & Mansour, 1990). PD pioneers Jerry and Monique Sternin operationalized this research lens as an interventional approach in Vietnam in the 1990s (See Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009). Since then PD has been used as both a research framework and as interventional methodology. PD has been applied in more than 40 countries. In education it has been used to address girls' access, improve student achievement, reduce high school drop-out rates, absenteeism, and disruptive behavior; in healthcare it has been used to improve hand hygiene compliance, reconciliation of medications, and end-of-life quality of life; in public health it has been used in interventions focusing on HIV/AIDS, malaria, maternal and newborn care, mental health, public housing senior care, polio, reproductive health, female genital mutilation, smoking prevention and cessation; and in other, various sectors it has been used for child protection, public extortion, agricultural development, and corporate sales (See [www.positivedeviance.org](http://www.positivedeviance.org) for published work on PD in these sectors).

PD is an asset-based approach to social change. At its core is the focus on statistical outliers. Instead of looking for what is not working or what is causing a problem, PD asks, what *is* working? And what is working when it *shouldn't* be working? For instance, in the Vietnam cornerstone case, traditional problem-solving would have had us look for malnourished children. If we were to plot them on a map, we would plot them as red dots. And perhaps we would analyze

their “red dot” behaviors and relationships or patterns between the dots. Instead, the PD team in Vietnam, comprising PD facilitators and community members, mapped the *green* dots: those thriving against all odds. And they analyzed their behaviors based on (1) accessibility/adoptability by others as well as (2) how uncommon they are for the local culture. Only those behaviors that were immediately actionable by anyone in the community were selected. This part of the PD process is known as the PD Inquiry. PD is generally carried out in two phases: the PD Inquiry and the PD Intervention. The PD Inquiry phase is the research or data-gathering phase, while the PD Intervention is the action or implementation phase. The two phases are explained in Table 1 below and then again in greater detail in the Uganda case study.

During the PD Inquiry phase, the PD team in Vietnam found that caregivers of nourished children were feeding them six instead of three times a day; they were adding tiny shrimp they found in the rice paddies to porridges; and they were feeding children deliberately, face to face—as opposed to carrying them on their backs or multitasking. During the PD Intervention phase, caregivers of nourished and undernourished children alike, were invited to host cooking sessions where participants could “act their way” into the PD behaviors by bringing PD foods and demonstrating/practicing cooking and feeding techniques. This action-based interventional design was a radical departure from the more prevalent communication artifacts such as leaflets or posters publicizing effective nutritional behaviors. It was so effective that malnutrition decreased by 85 percent and the project was replicated with more than 50,000 children and their families nationwide (Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009). The Vietnam case showed that beyond its applicability as a research framework, when PD was participatory—the more participatory the better—and followed by an intervention—the more action-based the better—it had a greater chance of sustainability and spread. Thus, in addition to inquiry, participation and action became two ideals for PD worldwide.

**Table 1.**

*How PD Works: The “6 Ds” of PD and Guiding Principles*

	<b>6 “Ds” of PD</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Principles</b>
PD Inquiry	<b>1. Define the Problem</b>	- Establish a baseline: find existing statistics about a local problem and codify the problem with the community	- Go slow to go fast: invest in relationship-building - Nothing about me without me: who else should be a part of this conversation?
	<b>2. Determine Existence of Statistical Outliers</b>	- Asset-mapping and community-based focus groups determine the existence of PD individuals or groups	- 180 degree flip: the PD question, what is working when it shouldn't be working?
	<b>3. Discover Uncommon but Replicable Behaviors and Practices</b>	- Conduct interviews and observations to identify PD behaviors	- What are PDs <i>doing</i> differently that is <i>replicable</i> and <i>uncommon</i> ?
PD Intervention	<b>4. Design Intervention</b>	- Amplify and operationalize PD behaviors for adoption by larger community	- It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting
	<b>5. Discern and 6. Disseminate</b>	- Implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation -Replication of process for other problems or in other communities	- Look for cultural beacons: culturally embedded, locally relevant measures and markers of change (See Dura, Felt, & Singhal, 2014)

## **Research Questions**

Professional communicators are poised to adopt and adapt PD and to make contributions on interdisciplinary PD teams. The instrumental case study and my analysis of it in subsequent sections aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does PD enable transformational research and in doing so respond to calls for socially just approaches to community-based work in professional communication?
2. What unique contributions might professional communicators make in interdisciplinary PD projects?

## **Instrumental Case Study**

To answer the research questions above I have constructed an instrumental case study of PD as it was used to address the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda. With an instrumental case study, “the case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case is often looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but because this helps us pursue the external interest” (Stake, 2005, p. 227). To construct this case I have drawn on published research, unpublished research for my dissertation, observational notes, and archival materials used with permission from Save the Children.<sup>2</sup> I have used the theoretical perspectives presented in the introduction to inform my analysis through which I critically assess PD’s rhetorical attributes, potential for socially just community-based work, and its implications and limitations.

## **PD to Address the Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda**

### **Background**

The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was formed in Northern Uganda in 1987 by rebel priestess Alice Lakwena as a religious military group that would undertake



civil purification through violence. A man in his mid 20s at the time, Joseph Kony, ran a parallel rebel movement that took Lakwena's beliefs and values to a more horrific level. Under Kony's rule, actions of torture, murder, rape, and mutilation against the Acholi people became commonplace. At the time of our assessment in 2008, Kony is said to have abducted between 40,000 and 100,000 youth from Northern Uganda. Children were abducted every night. Early in their abduction, many were forced to kill or torture family members or neighbors to show allegiance to LRA. 14% of households in Acholiland<sup>3</sup> had family members violently killed during the conflict, 13% of households had family members violently disappear, and 55% of households experienced serious crimes during the conflict (SLRC, 2014). Even after the conflict had ebbed and peace talks were in progress beginning in 2006, returned abductees who escaped or were rescued were not trusted. Thus, their reintegration depended on multiple factors, including their own resilience and the ability of community members and relatives to forgive them. Further, the return of children and young adults, many of them pregnant girls, into an already acutely impoverished, survivalist society was a problem.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2008 I participated as a research associate in an impact assessment of two PD child protection projects. One addressed the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda and the other the trafficking of girls in East Java Indonesia. The projects were implemented by international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Save the Children with funding from the Oak Foundation. This instrumental case study details some of the findings from the assessment of the project: *Life after the LRA: Piloting Positive Deviance with Child Mothers and Vulnerable Girl Survivors in Northern Uganda*. Its goal was to reduce engagement in transactional and commercial sex by formerly abducted and vulnerable girls by strengthening peer support networks, identifying sustainable reintegration strategies, and facilitating access to social services. While most international NGOs work to identify root causes, promote the adoption of best practices, or provide relief—and Save the Children is no exception—this project utilized PD as a participatory, asset-based approach to identify and amplify local outlier practices.

## **PD Inquiry: Define, Determine, Discover**

**Define.** To enter into conversations with community members in Northern Uganda local SCiU coordinators employed two principles of PD: “go slow to go fast” and “nothing about me without me” (See Table 1, page 67). This translates into investing time in building relationships and in continuously asking who else needs to be invited into conversations. From the start of a PD project, facilitators must become adept at accounting for contextual contingency, the process and principles of PD, and logistical issues, including institutional constraints like time, funding, and replication.

SCiU coordinators held a series of meetings over several weeks. They were strategic about balancing a spirit of open invitation and garnering the support of official and unofficial leaders. Some 80 people participated in the “kick-off” meeting, including local leaders, counselors, committee representatives, and community residents. The phrase “formerly abducted” as a label for former child soldiers was not easy for any of them to say; neither was “transactional sex.” These had become taboos, and abductees were seen as pariahs. Thus, SCiU coordinators facilitated conversations that got at the issue in indirect ways. The community named the following issues *around* reintegration: PTSD, fighting, isolation, movement in and out of camps, lack of market opportunities for local products. They agreed that these issues were the most pressing and if addressed, problems of reintegration would be minimized.

Concurrently with initial meetings SCiU coordinators worked with the community to establish baseline data. This is crucial to the definition of the problem because it helps to focus conversations—and controversies—around the problem using actual numbers. Initial data can be generated empirically or borrowed from existing data pools. Establishing a baseline in Northern Uganda was more complex as at the time of the intervention civil conflict-related data was linked mostly to food security and health, so SCiU relied on what empirical data they could secure along with community observations. Had they had the benefit of concrete numbers directly related to reintegration, such as malnutrition rates as the Sternins did in Vietnam, the process of problem definition, which is

ultimately linked to outcomes, would have been more straightforward or less subjective (A.P. 2007d).

**Determine.** SCiU coordinators and community volunteers formed a core PD team. The PD team determined that the greatest barriers to reintegration were poverty and issues of trust. Hence, they used these barriers to frame a carefully phrased PD question: *In the face of a diminished economy and with all of the trust issues implicated in the return of girls who had committed atrocities while in captivity or who bore children of LRA commanders, were there any girls who, without access to special resources, had been able to reestablish community ties and find acceptable sources of income?* The PD question contained the key variables for inclusion: (1) former abductee; (2) girl or teenager; (3) possibly pregnant or a young mother; (4) had reestablished relationships and trust; (5) did not engage in transactional sex; (6) and did not have access to special assistance or resources—human or capital that would give them an “edge” over other girls in similar circumstances.

To determine the existence of statistical outliers, two months after initial meetings, five subcounties covering a population of 55,561 engaged in asset mapping over the course of five days. The PD principles of “don’t talk about me without me” and “who else should be here?” were in full effect as formerly abducted and vulnerable girls themselves helped to identify peers and survivors. Mapping participants, comprising a total of 100 locals, also included government officials, counselors, women concerned with children’s issues, and volunteers. The PD team briefed all participants ahead of time through letters and meetings. The purpose of mapping activities was to identify and locate:

- Primary communal structural features, e.g., means of livelihood distribution, local community groups, health services distribution, education.
- Contextual features related to risk, e.g., social gathering points, night clubs, bars, shops, and video halls.
- Locations of survivors and vulnerable girls.

- Positive deviants, i.e., survivors and vulnerable girls who were able to work in the local markets and who were socially accepted—against the norm, which involved resorting to transactional sex, violence, and isolation (A.P. 2007b).

Participants drew the maps on the ground using sticks and ash. The PD team then transferred the maps onto poster-sized paper (See Figure 2). As with other meetings, related issues were identified—migration due to lack of employment opportunities, sexual abuse of girls, sexually transmitted diseases, male-to-female sexual harassment and sexual violence. 190 girls met the initial requirements for PD based on certain criteria: age, young mother, head of household or living with

**Figure 2.**

*Community map indicating schools, churches, health services, social gathering points and their proximity to PD girls*



elderly/disabled family members, formerly abducted, and school drop-out. In a manner akin to snowball sampling, through those girls, other girls were identified for a total of 330. The community then determined whether any of them had access to special resources, for instance girls whose families gave them a house or girls who had a wealthier family member who took care of them had certain advantages that were not replicable or accessible to others. After going through this process of determining special resources about 300 girls were left.

**Discover.** To identify PD behaviors and strategies, the community engaged in a rapid, qualitative study conducted using individual interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Doing this in teams allows “vetting” of PD status and of behaviors and strategies. This process happened in three rounds. The first round yielded interesting discussion around income generation and psychosocial coping but not concrete behaviors and practices that could be amplified and replicated by others. Having to do this in multiple iterations can be frustrating for facilitators needing to meet deadlines. However, it is common with first time practitioners as concrete practices and behaviors require very deliberate language and framing. Repeating parts of the process that do not go as envisioned required facilitators in Uganda to revisit the “go slow to go fast principle.” After the two additional rounds SCiU staff documented the following PD behaviors and strategies:

- **Engaging in crop-growing, selling, and other income-generating activities:** mixes seeds to grow multiple seasonal crops; looks for other forms of income such as selling small fish or clothes.
- **Working harder and longer than others:** picks up an extra load of firewood or a jerry-can of water to sell; works an extra hour or two in the field.
- **Working collaboratively to grow and sell crops:** rotates fieldwork with her friends and is able to be more efficient in managing farm work, childcare, and buying and selling.

- **Exhibiting self-respect and polite interpersonal behaviors:** shows respect to “aunties,” parents, and elders and seeks their advice and in turn builds trust.
- **Saving money and reinvesting it in productive enterprises:** uses money to buy farm animals to sell later or a bicycle to make her travel time between the field, home, and school more efficient.
- **Attending school and participating in social activities:** makes time for school and socializes or plays netball—similar to volleyball—to keep her mind busy and to stay involved. (Singhal & Dura, 2009a and Singhal & Dura, 2009b)

### **PD Intervention: Design, Discern, Disseminate**

**Design.** PD flips the script of conventional logics about change. While many believe that changed knowledge leads to changed practices, PD starts with the belief that changed practices lead to changed knowledge. The KAP model for behavior change proposes that increased knowledge (K) leads to a change in attitudes (A) and consequently to a change in practice (P). This model prevails in awareness campaigns. In addition to flipping the PD question by focusing on existing solutions, PD proposes that practicing new behaviors can change attitudes and those changes become new knowledge, i.e., it follows a PAK model (Refer to “Design” in Table 1). PD projects aim to create the conditions for communities to “act their way into a new way of thinking.”

To amplify and operationalize PD behaviors and practices, and to generate new ideas, SCiU formed 15 peer groups—3 groups per subcounty—and selected 20 mentors. PD behaviors and the girls’ interests drove content for group discussions and meetings. Training meetings helped with capacity-building and income generation. They provided an opportunity for girls to share their tried and true practices and also to learn new ones through SCiU. Recreational meetings encouraged psychosocial coping and distraction, e.g., through socializing and playing sports. And sensitization meetings provided a forum to discuss the dangers of transactional sex and ways to avoid it. Meetings were held at least once

a week, and in addition to peers and mentors, counselors and local officials were invited to participate, promoting accountability and support. In between meetings, the girls practiced new behaviors.

**Discern.** Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are essential to ensure projects meet funding goals and objectives. PD projects add one more layer to M&E practices. As part of M&E efforts, PD facilitators encourage self-monitoring and learn about what counts for community stakeholders, i.e., what are their cultural beacons? Cultural beacons are culturally-embedded, locally-relevant signs of change (Dura, Felt, & Singhal, 2014). They are easy for outsiders and “experts” to overlook. For example, on one of our walks to the fields where PD girls were growing crops, we pointed out a couple of g-nuts (peanuts) on the ground. A member of the SCiU local team pointed out that during the peak of conflict due to the scarcity of food, you would have never seen peanuts on the ground or birds flying over the IDP camps. Peanuts on the ground then, were a cultural beacon.

So, to fulfill institutional M&E requirements, SCiU requested internal reports from staff to monitor progress, conducted a survey, and employed external evaluators (our team). Additionally, facilitators, mentors, community leaders, and peer leaders also gauged success based on attendance and participation and appropriate utilization of livelihood support, and visible signs. But to encourage self-monitoring and evaluation, the implementation team asked community members to set standards for success and track their progress on an ongoing basis. To do this, participants reported their progress at weekly meetings. Cultural beacons that participants noted included an increase in garden (field) sizes as well as in crop production and yield, continual weeding, and unexpected group formations, e.g., in addition to sensitization and recreation groups some girls and their mentors gathered to talk about appropriate child care practices, e.g., nutrition and feeding (A.P. 2007g).

**Disseminate.** Postproject research findings indicate that PD project participants exhibited higher levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy, sustained psychosocial practices, educational participation, and income generation (Singhal & Dura,

2009a). A year and a half from the start of the pilot, 75 community members, with the help of SCiU staff, conducted a second mapping activity to track movement from main IDP camps to satellite camps and identify new potential participants as a means of scaling up the project to 550. The PD project continued as long as funding continued.<sup>5</sup>

## **An Alternative for Socially Just Community-Based Work**

In the previous section I presented an instrumental case study with the aim of describing how the PD process can be applied in a Global South context. Here, I analyze the case of Northern Uganda through a rhetorical lens to answer the questions: (1) How does PD enable transformational research and in doing so respond to calls for socially just approaches to community-based work? And, (2) what unique contributions might professional communicators make in interdisciplinary PD projects?

### **A Rhetorical Flip with a Focus on Action**

PD asks *What's right here? What's working when it shouldn't be working?* Asking the PD question is the first step towards rewriting community narratives from the perspective of assets or from the inside out. It is, I contend, PD's most salient social justice attribute, and a contribution to previous work in organizational narratives and identity (See Bazerman, 1999 and Faber 2002). Asking a different question yields different answers and is immediately accessible to anyone. If we accept Grabill's (2001, 2007, 2011) proposition that we construct communities as we work, that is, symbolically, PD creates a community around assets. By promoting asset-based, participatory inquiry, PD fosters a sense of alterity—of getting to know the self through others “just like me,” and this changes the narrative of what is possible. In Northern Uganda, by foregrounding tacit knowledge and witnessing each other's successes, participants began to replace their negative self-perception with a positive self-perception at both the individual and collective levels.



PD is based on the premise that solutions can be anywhere—not just among traditional experts. In Northern Uganda solutions to reintegration lurked amongst the least likely suspects: formerly abducted and vulnerable girls. One of the greatest challenges of participatory community-based work is for facilitators to let go of assumptions and truly *believe* in grassroots expertise (Dura, Singhal, & Elias, 2013). For instance, a PD practitioner must be comfortable with the fact that in a hospital expertise can reside with cleaning staff, patient transporters, and patients themselves—not just with physicians or administrators (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2014). Because invitation and inclusion are built into PD’s rhetorical framing, and because relationships are critical to PD, participation and reciprocity are more likely, or at least available. PD’s principles of invitational rhetoric (Greiner & Singhal, 2009), for each step of the inquiry and of the intervention, such as “don’t talk about me without me” and “who else needs to be here?” can be helpful guideposts, but they are challenging to enact, especially within hierarchical structures.

There is also an important capacity-building aspect to PD’s participatory, asset-based inquiry. PD as it was carried out in Northern Uganda involved community members from volunteers to local officials in mixed methods research. They used quantitative data to codefine a problem and to establish the existence of outliers, and they used observations, focus groups, and interviews to identify PD behaviors. Ideally, they would be in a position to apply these methods to other issues. Once a community has experience with the process, its members can transfer the procedural knowledge they have gained to other situations. Since we do not have longitudinal data on this subject, the actual occurrence of this is impossible to determine. This type of transfer or horizontal scaling has been noted in some applications of PD but has yet to be tested and theorized further (See Singhal & Dura, 2009a; Dura, Singhal, & Felt, 2014).

Another socially just aspect of PD is its strong emphasis on “doing” both in the identification of concrete PD behaviors and practices and in their implementation. PD favors “acting our way into a new way of thinking” (PAK) as opposed to the more typical “thinking our way into a new way of acting” (KAP). This carries an ontological dimension of “rewriting” our sense of who we are in

the world through material practices. In Northern Uganda the PD Inquiry enabled girls to see themselves through the mirror of their peers. PD practices provided concrete anchors for this mirroring process as the behaviors selected were available to anyone in the community—the girls could see themselves putting them into practice easily and immediately. Girls “acted their way” into persuasion, and the meetings and workshops held during the intervention stage provided spaces for feedback and support. Thus, regular action and meetings helped feed into the sense of alterity established in the discovery stage of PD.

### **Closing the Gap between Participatory Theory and Practice**

Jones and Walton (forthcoming) posited that in professional communication socially just work explores ways to “amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically underresourced.” While PD can certainly strengthen individual and collective agency through asset-based, participatory inquiry and action, critical and reflexive praxis is needed to bring about PD’s fullest potential. Professional communicators can help ensure critical praxis of PD by relying on theoretical and conceptual knowledge accumulated by the field. We are in a position not only to adopt PD, but to adapt it. In doing so, we can address theory-to-practice gaps in socially just community-based work while simultaneously contributing to a more ethical practice of PD. I see this happening in at least three ways.

First, as a professional communicator who takes a rhetorical approach, there exist immediate applications for disciplinary concepts such as stasis and rhetorical listening in PD projects. Stasis offers a systematic way of fostering clarity during problem definition and qualitative data gathering. It can be a very appealing and pragmatic tool for PD practitioners. Rhetorical listening might be less tangible or more subjective to enact, but it can help to close the theory to practice gap in facilitating grassroots knowledge, especially during the relationship-building process, which takes time. Ratcliffe (2005) described rhetorical listening as a way of “standing under” others as a way to understand them. This notion of standing under and listening with intent helps position

practitioners, who are used to leading or being the experts, as learners. Such is not a small shift. Community members not only hold valuable, tacit knowledge, i.e., PD practices, they also know if behaviors are replicable and if they are uncommon. The more grassroots knowledge drives a PD project, the more likely it is to be sustained. So while stasis can be used in an outward way, rhetorical listening can be used to do the inner work invited by PD.

Second, professional communicators can engage in PD critically and reflexively. For example, we cannot assume that PD in and of itself furthers social justice. PD can be used in the private sector, as was the case in Mexico where it was used to increase pharmaceutical sales (Merck Mexico Team, 2006)—arguably not a socially just cause. PD can also be misused or corrupted. Even with the best intentions a PD intervention can go awry. For instance, it can be top-down imperative for people to “buy into” disguised as a participatory, bottom-up approach. In this sense it is crucial for professional communicators to approach PD critically and be alert to coercive language and practices (Grabill, 2001).

Critical scholars might also argue that addressing systemic issues is an ethical imperative of socially just work. One of PD’s greatest strengths, its focus on assets, can be perceived as its greatest limitation. If PD ignores systemic issues and root causes, its quest for change can be myopic. Take for example the PD practice of working longer and harder noted in the case of Northern Uganda. How is working longer and harder a good thing? Although I agree that going the extra mile can be regarded in a positive way, PD adopters are well served by a critical stance. This said, I would argue that the purpose of PD is not to address systemic issues or root causes directly—in fact, PD is valuable *because* it does not wait for root causes to be addressed. In a sense, PD “hacks” around them. There is no reason issues of policy cannot be designed into PD research or PD interventions, especially when local governments are involved. In nutritional interventions that used PD in Indonesia, work with local and national government officials was tantamount (Singhal & Dura, 2009a). By keeping in mind root causes and systemic issues, professional communicators can find creative ways to ensure the process is empowering and sustainable beyond a single study or intervention.

Lastly, there is much room for scholarship on PD. My involvement in Northern Uganda was limited to an impact assessment. In line with the spirit of PD, our team utilized participatory sketching and narration activities (Singhal & Dura, 2009) to elicit cultural beacons, visible signs of change as they were perceived by program participants. As communication specialists, we each engaged in the intercultural rhetorical practices that we felt would suit the context best. Other than that, we did not have any part in the PD inquiry or intervention. Nonetheless, a good amount of publishable research has come from our experience as evaluators, such as the emergence of the concept of cultural beacons described in the “Discern” section of the case study. Beyond direct involvement in PD projects, professional communicators can engage in scholarship and theory-building around PD. We can look at ways that inquiry and capacity-building can be improved upon for greater sustainability. Unless capacity-building happens systematically and is articulated explicitly as such, the procedural knowledge community members gain by engaging in PD may not be valued or may be lost. Professional communicators who engage in transfer research and pedagogy, may be able to contribute to the sustainability and replication challenges of PD. We can also delve deeper into other aspects of PD, such as the ways PD challenges the KAP paradigm by proposing that material practices can create knowledge.<sup>6</sup> All in all, our involvement with PD can be quite reciprocal!

## **Conclusion**

PD offers professional communicators—students, researchers, and practitioners—an alternative framework for socially just community-based work both in Global South contexts and beyond. It flips our paradigms: from deficit-based to asset-based, from action to inquiry, from textual practices to material practices. In this sense, PD has strong pedagogical potential. It not only offers students of professional communication an alternative framework for research or methodology for applied work, it carries implications for the intellectual work of teaching and learning as it challenges current paradigms by asking the PD question and focusing on action. The rhetorical and intercultural work of and

around PD is just beginning. Future directions can examine the ways professional communicators put PD—or parts of it—into practice, the challenges they face, such as rhetorical framing for top-down and bottom-up support, and the rhetorical applications or insights, e.g., in invitational rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, risk communication. I invite other professional communicators to join me on this PD journey and to carve out new paths. ■

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Grabill (2007) made the following connection about community-based work and participatory action research: “Community-based researchers share with participatory action researchers a concern—supported by considerable evidence—that traditional research simply relocated to the community can be useless and even violent.”
- <sup>2</sup> The results of the study have been published as a monograph, a case study, and a journal article (See Singhal & Dura, 2009a; Singhal & Dura, 2009b; and Dura & Singhal, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> This is just one region in Northern Uganda. Each region was affected similarly but to different extents. The Advisory Consortium on Conflict Sensitivity (2013)

reported in its Northern Uganda Conflict Analysis (Retrieved from [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACCS\\_Northern\\_Uganda\\_Conflict\\_Analysis\\_Report.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ACCS_Northern_Uganda_Conflict_Analysis_Report.pdf)) that the Acholi region carries with it historic perceptions of neglect. It comprises one of the smallest yet poorest segments of Uganda's population. Postconflict, the region continues to deal with major issues such as unequal distribution of development, land disputes, sexual and gender-based violence, youth unemployment and crime, difficulties in reintegration.

- <sup>4</sup> There are heuristic tools for this, such as the “Discovery and Action Dialogue” (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/10-discovery-action-dialogue/>), which reframes participant responses around “problems” by asking them if there are any exceptions to the problems and/or to probe on the basis of what they are specifically “doing” differently and whether they can describe those behaviors. PD facilitators also resort to creative techniques such as improvisation.
- <sup>5</sup> I have kept in touch with A.P. from SCiU, and through informal conversations over Skype have learned that since the end of the funding cycle (in late 2008 or early 2009) A.P. has been working with different organizations. Nonetheless, as a resident of the local area she has kept in touch with project participants and has said that over the years she has observed or received news that some of the PD girls and their mentors continue to thrive.
- <sup>6</sup> Recently, PD scholars and practitioners in various disciplines, particularly communication and public health, are taking PD in new directions and experimenting with KAP approaches at the intervention stage. They are using PD as a research lens and using the PD data to inform awareness campaigns that utilize creative mass media methods such as Entertainment-Education and Transmedia Storytelling (See Bouman, Lubjuhn, & Singhal, 2014; Dura, Kallman, Diaz, Boyd, Molinar, Ayala, & Singhal, 2015). Rather than taking the PAK approach to behavior change described in the case of Northern Uganda, these scholars and practitioners propose that while we learn by doing, we also learn vicariously through entertaining and educational media, which relies on carefully crafted, relatable narratives for persuasion (See Bandura, 1971; Slater, M.D., 2002 and Singhal, Sharma, Papa, & Witte, 2004). Pairing PD Inquiries with more KAP-based interventions is less common but makes sense in different circumstances, e.g., in larger scale projects. So although the PAK component is unique and promotes ownership and participation, professional communicators can adapt the approach for different contexts.

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## **About the author**

Lucía Durá is assistant professor of rhetoric and composition at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Her work on positive deviance has yielded numerous publications, presentations, and a few awards. Her research focuses primarily on risk communication and vulnerable populations.

**Email.** ldura@utep.edu

**Contact.**

Department of English  
500 W. University Avenue  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
El Paso, Texas 79968  
USA

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# **BRANDING AUTHENTICITY, GLOBAL-LOCALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY**

## **Thematic analysis of two West Bengal urban-rural handicrafts NPO websites**

Ishani Mukherjee

*University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*

Maggie Griffith Williams

*Northeastern University, USA*

In a developing economy it is important for organizations from the Global South to stake claim on their unique positions in the international marketplace. India's handicrafts industry is an integral part of the national economy and claims a place of pride as a marker of regional culture and heritage. For localized handicraft nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that want to reach global consumers, branding their products is critical to their long-term sustainability and success. Today, the most common way for organizations to reach aesthetically eclectic, global—not to mention, urban—consumers is through the Internet. How an NPO creates and negotiates its digital identity and product branding are important considerations within the domains of technical, professional, and intercultural communication, particularly when establishing a digital presence to reach desired consumers. Creating an aura of authenticity around the products, their representations, and their artisans is an important element of digital branding of handicrafts. Heightened global-local encounters (Wherry, 2006) and intercultural technical communication research adopting a cross-cultural focus on social justice, economic inequities and globalization (Agboka, 2014) provide the context of this research. We performed a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian) handicraft NPOs' websites focusing on handicraft authenticity, global-local tensions, and digital presentation. Three themes organize our findings: authenticity of place and production, desire for global reach, and socioeconomic consciousness. Our analysis highlights the



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key role of digital technology in marketing authenticity, contemporizing traditional arts, while balancing organizational commitment to social justice. As our analysis indicates, visually and textually establishing handicraft authenticity is easily accomplished in an online environment, but taking advantage of online marketing to achieve global reach still seems a struggle for these NPOs.

**Keywords.** Global South NPOs, Handicraft authenticity, Digital branding, Global-localization, ITC and social justice, Thematic analysis.

The Indian handicrafts industry is an integral part of the cultural tapestry of traditional Indian heritage (Ministry of Textiles, 2013). Handicrafts are defined as “items made exclusively by hand often with the help of tools to give it both a decorative and utilitarian value” (as cited in Ministry of Textiles, 2014, para. 6). This industry has for some time been facing a threat of extinction and, as such, has become a focal point for nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and economic development entrepreneurs. Several nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations that are active in developing social and economic sectors, do so to represent, intermediate and/or lend voice to economically and technologically dispossessed communities (Gajjala, Yartey & Birzescu, 2012; von Broembsen, 2011). Handicrafts produced by rural artisans in postglobalized West Bengal (Bengal), a culturally and intellectually rich state on the eastern seaboard of India, are no exception to the trend. The involvement of small-scale NPOs in this area is becoming more complex, particularly with the rise of a digitally native, urban clientele who have “ascribed craft and the handmade, with ethical, environmental and socio-cultural value” (Wood, 2011, p. 2), altruistic values that constituents believe should also be digitally reiterated by nonprofits, as would make sense in a technologically-saturated, post-Web 2.0 society.

Online spaces, like NPO websites, can act as professionally networked “nodes at which various locals connect and disconnect in the production of the global” (Gajjala, 2012, p. 2). The desire of rural craft NPOs in developing sociopolitical contexts to not fall behind in the race to inhabit the online global marketplace, exposes their part-innate, part-learned tendencies to become, “both



– global audiences and located/situated producers – in varying degrees” (Gajjala, 2012, p. 2). Neoliberal economic globalization has produced a form of individualized labor, often involving “individual workers uprooted culturally, materially and socially—and oftentimes even physically—from within local economies made nonfunctional through the direct and indirect effects of globalization” (Gajjala, 2012, p. 4). Moreover, the positioning of traditional handicrafts as stuff that rural Bengal is made of, adds to the anachronistic romanticization of an industry that is in actuality very much on par with the demands of a neoliberal global economy. Yet, as McCracken (1988) has observed, “One of the most important ways in which cultural categories are substantiated is through the material objects of a culture . . . [that are] created according to the blueprint of culture” (p. 74).

It is within this context of heightened global–local encounters (Wherry, 2006) that we performed a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian), handicraft NPOs’ websites in relation to handicraft authenticity, global–local tensions and intercultural technical communication. We begin by reviewing key literature that forms our conceptual framework. Then, we provide background on the handicrafts sector in India and on the NPOs analyzed, followed by a brief overview of our method. After establishing this background, we move into the thematic analysis of the two websites and our findings. We found that while these two nonprofits promote respectable social justice initiatives to uplift artisans and preserve authenticity of their handicrafts, the two organizations analyzed here minimize the artisans’ agency and voices. The online presentations’ disconnect from the artisans, who are crucial to the artworks’ authenticity, ultimately takes away from the authentic presentation the organizations have worked to create. Intercultural technical communication scholars and other stakeholders for Global South handicrafts NPOs ought to construct online presentations that give voice and agency to those artists that they seek to uplift.

## Conceptual Framework

### **Authenticity, cultural branding and handicrafts**

Given that this research focuses on two organizations that support traditional arts and preserving Bengali culture, it is important to define what we mean by culture. We take our understanding of culture from Stuart Hall (1986) who conceptualized it as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society . . . [including] the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life” (p. 26). Culture has to do with how people “make sense of the world” but those meanings that are created are not simply “out there;” rather, they are generated through signs” (Barker, 2012, p. 7). Artwork is a cultural symbol that helps to produce meaning, and thus a sense of culture. The way an artwork is produced and the stories that it may tell also contribute to the development and understanding of culture. Handicrafts like textiles and sculptures can be understood to be authentic representations of the cultures from which they emerge. They are a kind of material culture, the commodification, consumption and trade of which are “eminently social, relational, and active” (Appadurai, 1986, p. 31).

This commodification of culture is a concern for some critical scholars (cf. Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) because they fear a loss of individuality and authenticity. So much so that critics of cultural saleability have often lamented that “the commodification of tradition automatically spelled the end of cultural authenticity and meaningful social relations” (Howes, 1996, p. 2) that were ritually fostered by the indigenous nature of production and consumption of cultural artifacts. If, then, our cultural products lack authenticity and originality, how can they carry meanings that help us construct our sense of cultural identity?

As Wherry (2006) points out, to say that a handicraft either *is* or *is not* authentic is an oversimplification and a misrepresentation of the concept. Notions of authenticity are subject to personal interpretations, experiences, and social contexts (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). People need a means to survive, and for

some that method is handicrafts production, wherever those products may fall along the in/authenticity continuum. In fact, the authentic/inauthentic dialectic has come under criticism, and some scholars have argued for a more nuanced understanding of authenticity. Consumer researchers have agreed that the 'authentic-inauthentic' dialectic has been "one of modern marketing's central themes," a branding tension that over the last hundred years "has been intensified by technological advances, which have facilitated the effective simulation of authenticity" (Benjamin, 1969; Brown, 2001; Grayson & Martinec, 2004, p. 296; Halliday, 2001; Orvell, 1989). Authenticity, then, is an important part of establishing brand appeal, particularly at a time when it is technologically easy to create simulated works (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). At a time of intense global-local encounters, originality is rare, but "to go global is not to forsake authenticity" (Wherry, 2006, p. 28).

In an effort to develop more refined understandings of authenticity, Wherry (2006) outlines four types of authenticity in the context of handicraft and tourist arts: reactive authenticity, reluctant authenticity, complicit appropriation, and transcendental appropriation. We focus on *reluctant authenticity*, which refers to when an artisan "reluctantly" engages in commercial trade of their artworks despite fear and uncertainty about the possibility of losing power and authority over their work. Yet, this reluctance makes their artwork scarce and thus more valuable. Moreover, these reluctant artists often use "pre-modern equipment and techniques" to make the artwork by hand in traditional ways, and often proudly display these tools and production practices as indicators of their work's authenticity (Wherry, 2006, p. 22). We draw on Wherry's (2006) theorization of reluctant authenticity, which signifies how the *reluctantly globalized artisans* in developing economies partner with those who have the means of spatial, social and monetary capital in order to have negotiated control over the form, cultural meanings and profit shares of the 'authentic' crafts they create.

In a global marketplace, authenticity (of whatever kind) is a necessary branding strategy for success. The American Marketing Association has defined a brand as, "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (Brand, 2009).

Selling art is a unique kind of transaction among artists, buyers, and others—i.e., organizations, galleries—that blends commerce, social relations, emotion, history, and culture (Quensenberry & Sykes, 2008). For local handicraft arts, establishing authenticity in terms of history, artisans, production processes, and/or place of production are what distinguish one artist's or group's work from another. In an online environment where a physical connection to the artwork is missing, authenticity of place, production, and people may become a significant part of an online presentation and product marketing plan.

### **Globalization and digital presentation in intercultural technical communication**

Globalization has been culturally defined as a process of “complex connectivity” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2) that “affects people’s sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, [and] shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 20). With the emergence of globalization, time, space and place have separated, leading to people and communities being increasingly affected by physically distant forces (Williams, 2012). Some scholars have expressed concerns that a “delocalization” of places under the forces of globalization may lead to a destruction of local cultures (Escobar, 1999, p. 36). Yet, place and local culture, as we will show, can be valuable in a global marketplace and may contribute to the saving and uplifting of local cultures. In fact, the area of intercultural technical communication is indebted to the social, cultural, political, economic and ideological implications of globalization and “shares responsibility for globalization’s effects, whether good or ill” (Savage & Mattson, 2011, p. 5). Scholars of professional and technical communication are increasingly turning their attention to intercultural, international and transnational spaces of interaction where issues of power, language, global–local identity, lack of economic opportunities, social justice initiatives, cultural nuances and uneven digital access—in many cases, a lack of it—are replete. As such, it is imperative that the field adopts a more pedagogically inclusive, complex and

intersectional scope, practice and ideology (Agboka, 2013; Bokor, 2011). One way to address this gap in intercultural technical communication within the context of globalization and cultural displacement has been to turn to more participatory, social justice-focused and activist forms of research, both online and face-to-face, that seek to humanize participants and adopt rhetorical and decolonial approaches to study race, critical-cultural and technological narratives within cross-border professional contexts (Agboka, 2014; Crabtree, 1998; Grabill, 2000; Haas, 2012).

In online interactions where audiences are potentially global and quite diverse, establishing authenticity is important for organizational credibility. Locally-based and locally-focused NPOs, such as the ones analyzed here, face a challenge in their online presentations to transnational audiences in their need to highlight their placed-ness in, and deep connection to, rural Bengal. Yet, their digital representation needs to balance their local-global identity and social justice and economic initiatives (Agboka, 2013; Bokor, 2011) with their need to reach ethically aware global consumers (Wood, 2011). In fact, both NPOs' local roots are their selling points in the globalized marketplace.

Presentation and representation in online environments are much studied topics. Using Goffman's (1959) work on self presentation, a number of new media scholars have explored the topic of online representation—from personal homepages (e.g., Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002), to personal video blogs (e.g., Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010), to online dating profiles (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011) among others. Goffman (1959) used theatrical metaphor to understand social interaction, arguing that performances are always rooted in people's understanding of the audience with whom they are interacting. As research in the field has demonstrated (e.g., Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011; Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002), when it comes to online interactions, the metaphor still holds. In particular, when faced with "context collapse" that is common on social network sites, wherein audiences from many contexts converge, users must make strategic decisions about their imagined audiences in order to maintain an authentic online presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 122).

Understanding the audience influences what constitutes an authentic presentation. How an organization understands its audience, then, will also shape its online presentation. When it comes to the exchange of artworks, online interactions bring the benefit of raising awareness and generating interest from potential buyers, but may lack the appeal that experiencing an artwork in person may offer certain buyers (Quensenberry & Sykes, 2008). However, online presentations may bring the benefit of giving artists the opportunity to influence buyers' interpretations of authenticity. For example, Felker, Hammond, Schaaf, and Stevenson (2013) show that online presentations of Native American art offered artists the opportunity to express their "relationship to their materials, spiritual values, work ethic, self-respect and connections to the Pueblo community and the greater world" (p. 106), thereby influencing buyers' understandings of what is considered authentic artwork.

## **Background on NPOs and Indian handicrafts industry**

The handicrafts industry is crucial to India's national culture and economy, with the government having offices dedicated to supporting these industries. The Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) and the Ministry of Textiles are two such offices. The handicrafts industry itself is unorganized and decentralized, largely deriving from household activities (Ministry of Textiles, 2011). This disorganization is perceived as problematic in terms of expanding the industry. The latest Annual Report from the Ministry of Textiles (2013) reiterates that this sector "has . . . suffered due to its being unorganized, with the additional constraints of lack of education, low capital, poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, and a poor institutional framework" (p. 117). How best to address these issues is unclear.

There are conflicting messages about the future of handicrafts in India coming from the government and other organizations. On the one hand, there are efforts to protect authentic handicraft production practices. For example, the Handlooms Act of 1985 that promises, among other things, the "protection of interests of persons engaged in the handloom industry and the need for the

continued maintenance of the industry,” in part by reserving specific traditional textiles, such as sarees, to be produced solely by handloom (Government of India, The Handlooms Act, 1985, p. 2). Unfortunately, some preservation attempts, like the use of vegetable dyes for textiles, meant that “knowledge that had been firmly in the domain of the artisans now was converted into textual information, shifting ownership of this knowledge into the hands of those who study rather than ‘do’” (Mamidipudi & Gajjala, 2008, p. 237). Artisans have become disconnected from—though not unaware of—the market, and part of many NPOs’ goals is to help build these connections and ensure amenability to the artisans (Mamidipudi & Gajjala, 2008).

On the other hand, there is a push to expand the handicrafts sector, possibly at the expense of preserving authentic production practices. For example, the Ministry of Textiles (2011) has advocated to expand the industry and to increase India’s share of the world’s handicrafts exports. Some of the factors identified in 2011 as constraining the industry’s growth are its decentralized nature, lack of access to resources for artisans who are often from low-income sectors of society, and a reluctance among artisans to adopt new technologies for production (Ministry of Textiles, 2011). In the context of such pressure, it may be unsurprising to learn that changes are being considered to the Handlooms Act of 1985. Changes up for consideration include allowing power looms to produce sarees—a proposal, which critics of these changes argue potentially endangers the livelihoods of traditional weavers (Jaitly & Mohanrao, 2015; TNN, 2015).

It is in the context of these conflicting demands to expand the handicrafts industry but also preserve authentic production methods that many handicrafts-social justice-focused NPOs operate. The two NPOs analyzed here are based in the state of Bengal in eastern India. Self Help Enterprises (SHE) India specializes in one type of handicraft (*kantha*) and Mrittika Foundation Trust<sup>1</sup> focuses on several kinds of traditional handicrafts. We selected these two organizations because they represent NPOs at different stages of organizational development: SHE is a known, established and successful organization while Mrittika is newer, lesser known, and has been struggling to survive. Both NPOs, however, have a strong commitment to authentic handicrafts and social justice.

SHE India is spearheaded by Shamlu Dudeja, who has been working since the 1980s to study, preserve, and promote *kantha* (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). *Kantha* is a form of embroidery with deep roots in the Bengal region's traditions. The word *kantha* means "rags" in Sanskrit (Radhakrishna, 2014), which makes sense given the handicraft's history. Traditionally, women would recycle old sarees, dhotis and other fabrics to weave together and create quilts (Reuse & Recycle; Radhakrishna, 2014; LS Desk, 2014). The cloths woven together indicated "family unity" and it was a "collective occupation" facilitating "social participation as the women told each other stories as they went along" (Radhakrishna, 2014). *Kantha* has experienced a revival, particularly with Dudeja's vision, and has been transformed into fashionable clothing and home furnishings that appeal to socially conscious global consumers (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). In addition to the embroidery's beauty, these consumers also appreciate how *kantha* can empower "daughters of rural Bengal from weaker sections of society to lead a dignified existence" (Reuse & Recycle, 2010).

Dudeja formed Self Help Enterprise Trust in 1998, following which SHE was officially registered with the West Bengal government in 2004 (Reuse & Recycle, 2010). The organization has team leaders that support rural women with the *kantha* work, for example, by delivering textiles and patterns to the artists' homes so that they do not need to travel for the materials (Reuse & Recycle, 2010; Flanigan, 2010). In exchange for their artwork, the women are paid and also receive support through education and healthcare (Flanigan, 2010). As of 2013, Dudeja is quoted as saying that SHE had "more than 1300 women on our rolls" (Reddy, 2013).

While SHE specializes in one form of Bengali handicraft, Mrityika Foundation Trust supports artists who produce several different kinds of Bengal-based artwork, including *kantha*. Dulal Mukherjee, a Bengal-based architect and entrepreneur, established the Trust<sup>2</sup> in 2006, to revive and preserve rural Bengal handicrafts (Adhikary, 2008). The Foundation is based out of a farmhouse in rural Bengal, in a village called Badu in the region of Madhyamgram. The word "Mrityika" is a feminine name that means "Mother earth" in Bengali, which is fitting, given the Foundation's focus on preserving rural arts unique to Bengal.



The Badu campus houses many of its artisans and provides a source of contract-based, part-time employment to local, rural craftspeople. The works Mrittika artists produce include: Bengal terracotta pottery; ceramics; *dhurries* (woven jute rugs); woven wall hangings; *dokra* (an ancient folk form of metal sculpture); handloom-spun cotton, cotton-silk and silk textiles (*tant* saris and yardages); *kantha*; and most recently a venture into organic farming. Mukherjee's eldest daughter, Malini Mandal, led the organization from abstract concept to the trend-setting handicrafts organization that it has become. Tragically, Mandal lost a long battle with cancer in 2012 and Mrittika has been struggling to regain its footing ever since.

The daily wages for Mrittika Foundation artisans was around Rupees 250.00 as of 2008 (approx. \$5.00 as per the average dollar-to-rupees exchange rate in 2008) (Adhikary, 2008), which was substantially more than what full-time artisans were paid at the time in most state-sponsored, profit and nonprofit handicraft organizations in Bengal or other Indian states (Jena, 2008; Ministry of Textiles, 2013). *Objects d'art*, 'lifestyle products,' and fashion wear are created by artisans at the Badu workshop, many of which are exhibited under the brand name 'Leela,' which alludes to the concept of feminine creation or play, owing its origin to Hindu cultural history and religious mythology. The products are geared toward a select urban, aesthetically-aware intelligentsia. These "connoisseurs," according to Mandal, are the ideal consumer base for the Foundation, who she believed "don't mind the [higher] price because they acknowledge the skill and hard work going behind these objects of art," and also seem conscientious that "the money is ploughed back to the artisans" (Adhikary 2008).

## METHODS

Inspired by Grayson's and Martinec's (2004) and Wherry's (2006) theorization of authenticity, and to better understand the role technology plays in marketing authenticity to negotiate local-global challenges that urban-rural handicraft NPOs of the Global South tackle, we asked these research questions:

- 1) What are the visual and textual cues that appear on each website that communicate authenticity of location/place? b. What kind(s) of authenticity are communicated?
- 2) What role does technology play to brand as “contemporary” both Mrittika Foundation and She India NPOs’ authentic handicrafts for the global market?
- 3) What opportunities for communicating authenticity are these NPOs utilizing and/or potentially missing?

In order to answer these questions, we conducted a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on creating meanings and “tends to lead to a more macro explanation where individual codes can cross-reference multiple themes” (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 112). A latent thematic analysis, which is the specific method of inquiry that this study follows, dissects the latent meanings embedded in the data and arranges common patterns of implicit and explicit themes that help researchers explain the layered phenomena under exploration (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a frequently used social science method, thematic analysis helps us to obtain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, communal, behavioral, political and economic contexts of the topic under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Mukherjee, 2013; Riessman, 2002; Roulston, 2001). Latent thematic analysis builds on a *constructionist model of knowledge* (Burr, 1995) where emergent themes are identified using critical interpretation that is grounded in supporting theory/ies. Thematic analysis has also been an effective qualitative research method used within professional communication to analyze the “changing climate in the workforce in organizations” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vi). In particular, organizational communication content—emails, websites, memos, social network sites used for business and educational networking, etc.—have been analyzed by scholars and found to be much more than fact-based information (Cain & Policastri, 2011; Conaway & Wardrope, 2010). Rather, using grounded theory approaches, themes that were considered repositories of “embedded cultural attributes” and critical reflections of public opinion, attitudes, common concerns, brand loyalty—or lack of it—and rhetorical appeals have

emerged from a selective body of business and technical communication research using constructionist forms of thematic analyses (Conaway & Wardrope, 2010, p. 141). Thus the latent, constructionist approach, where “broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings are theorised as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85) seems well suited to this study’s goal, which is to explore visual and textual cues of branded authenticity that may be present in the two sampled handicraft NPO websites of the Global South to understand technical communication spaces as cultural sites of struggle.

This study follows a rough methodical rendition of Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six steps of performing a thematic analysis, including:

- i. *data familiarization*, where the researchers conducted close visual observations and textual readings of SHE India and Mrittika Foundation websites based on their prior knowledge of the study’s research questions and guiding theories;
- ii. *initial code generation*, where data from the two NPO websites were categorized into primary codes that referred to both the semantic and latent content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006);
- iii. *searching for themes*, where we analyzed the codes and began to identify the individual themes, some of which became principal themes and others became secondary themes;
- iv. *reviewing themes*, where the primary themes were reviewed again to ensure ‘accurate representation’ that was guided by the current study’s research goals (Braun & Clarke, 2006);
- v. *defining and naming themes*, where the principal themes were further refined and appropriately named, defined and substantiated using representative instances from the data; and
- vi. *reporting the analysis*, where the thematic findings were critically reported using a “coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 96-97).

## Thematic Findings and Analysis

After several close readings and observations, visual and textual data from the two Bengal handicraft NPO websites were identified and analyzed for exploring “the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). However, before exploring the emergent themes it seems imperative to have a basic understanding of the structural layout and visual elements comprising the official websites of Mrittika Foundation Trust and SHE India. It should be noted that since the time of data collection, the SHE India website has been redesigned and the Mrittika Foundation website is down for maintenance.<sup>3</sup>

### Brief descriptions of NPO websites

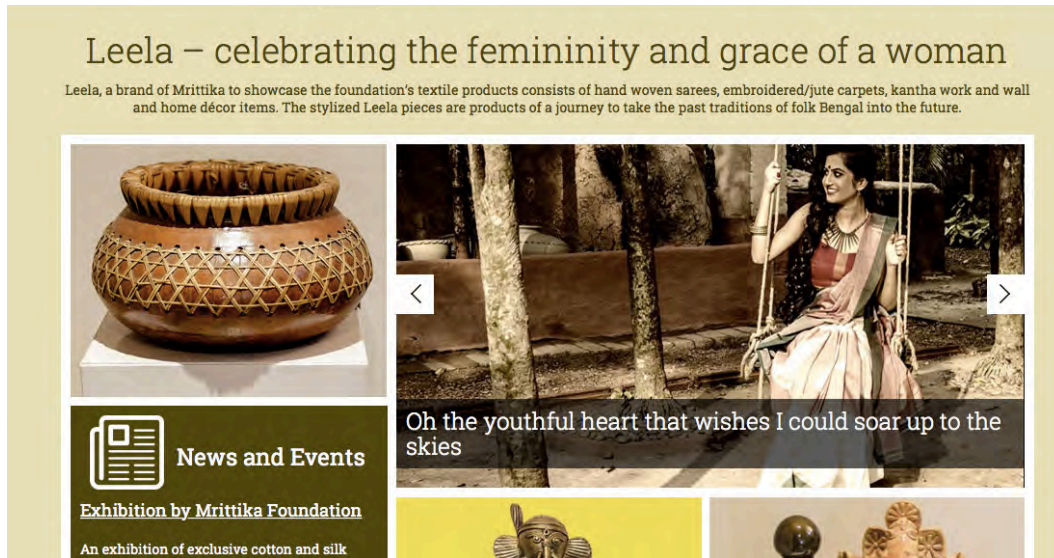
The Mrittika Foundation homepage has been created by a Kolkata-based digital marketing agency. The entire website has a modern, clean and geometrical appeal (Figure 1 on p. 105). The homepage sports the logo of the Foundation represented by the Bengali equivalent of the alphabet ‘M,’ rendered urban-eclectic in style (Figure 2 on p. 105).

Tabs linked to the *About Us*, *Creations*, *News/Events*, *Recognition*, *Support Us*, *Blog* and *Contact* can be found on the splash page. Other than images of certain craft products created by Mrittika artisans, latests news/event feeds and professionally taken fashion photographs of models in Mrittika saris/fabrics, the element that is most discernible, indeed interesting, on the home webpage is the catchline, “Leela – celebrating the femininity and grace of a woman,” followed by a summary of the brand and its products (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Images of artisans at work in the rural farm venue that houses Mrittika Foundation are used sparingly in the website, with most images displaying their range of products.

The SHE India homepage begins with an introduction that displays animated “stitching” that forms the shape of the state of West Bengal in India, followed by four images (within the Bengal-shaped stitching) and sets of text accompanying each image (Figures 3-6 on pp. 106-107).

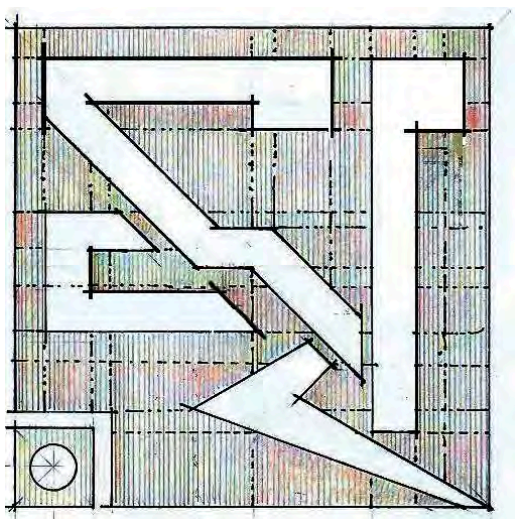
## Figure 1

The homepage of the Mrittika Foundation website that features the major brand name 'Leela' for many of its handcrafted products.



## Figure 2

Bengali letter spelling 'Mri', a stylistically rendered logo along with the NPO's name below it that reads 'Mrittika Foundation.'



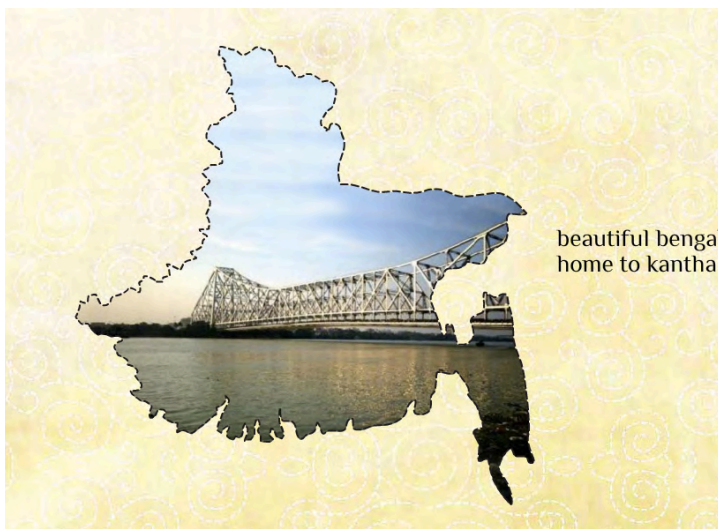
**Figure 3.**

*The word “Kantha” appears in English and three other Indian vernacular languages, including Bengali and Hindi (Devanagari), with a close-up image of a kantha designed fabric.*



**Figure 4.**

*The image is of Howrah Bridge, an iconic urban landmark in the city of Kolkata with accompanying text that says, “beautiful bengal / home to kantha” (sic).*





**Figure 5.**

*A close up of kantha stitching (a design that looks similar to the one in Figure 3, p. 106) with text that says, “kantha / the cultural heritage / of rural Bengal”*



**Figure 6.**

*The fourth introductory image is a medium shot of two women—Shamlu Dudeja, the entrepreneur and philanthropist behind SHE India, is the one explaining the kantha design to the other woman sitting further below, who is intently examining the stitching. In the background there is a pile of colorful fabrics and other rural women working on stitches. The text reads: “self help enterprises / (she) -- / for empowerment of rural / women promotion of kantha”*



**Figure 7.**

*The logo of SHE India (Self Help Enterprise) as seen on their website.*



**Figure 8**

*Balancing rural production and urban consumption in their online presentations: Rural Bengali women employed by SHE (i) working on kantha designs in her village home and (ii) being felicitated by SHE's primary patron and client, His Excellency Shri M. K. Narayana, ex-Governor of West Bengal, in the city of Kolkata.*



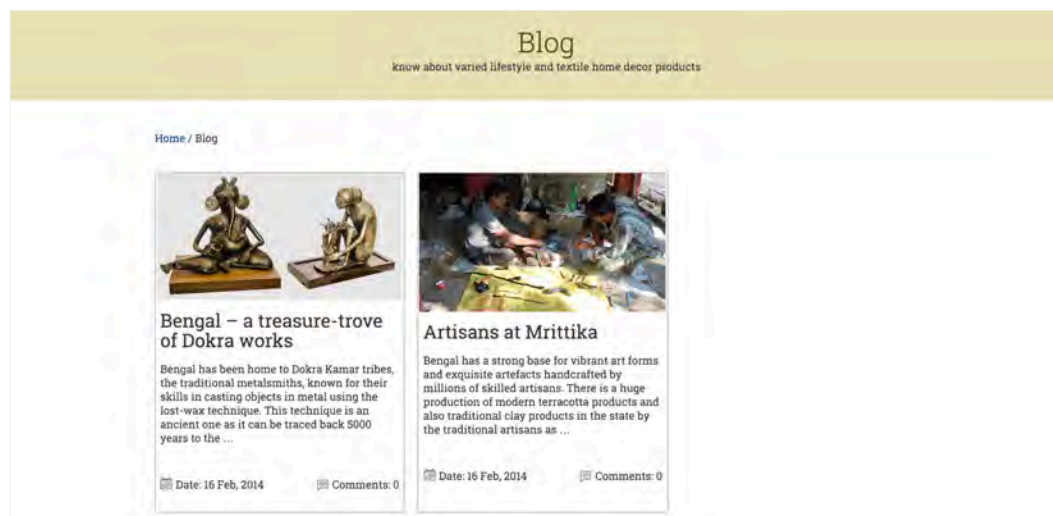
On the main website, the splash page sports a simulated hand-drawn logo of a butterfly spreading its wings, overlapping a conservative 'She' written in a serif font (Figure 8). In addition to standard navigation tabs (*Home, About Us,*



*Collections, Feedback, News and Events, Affiliations, and Contact Us*), the splash page also features quickly dissolving and partially juxtaposed images that depict SHE’s philanthropic activities, craft exhibitions, *kantha* products, rural producers, urban clients and models wearing outfits embroidered by SHE artisans, as well as a brief summary of SHE’s social justice philosophy and organizational history. Perhaps, what is most striking on the homepage and all of the other linked pages of the SHE India website is the varied choice of messages that accompany each set of dissolving image sets. For instance, stylistic slogans such as “home of *kantha*/labour of creativity and ingenuity,” “home of *kantha*/a labour of love and devotion,” “Self Help Enterprise (SHE)/creating self worth and empowerment” (Figure 9) and “*kantha*/providing economic independence to rural women,” etc. seem to work well to authenticate their brand image as a “Self Help Enterprise” that helps to empower and formally train economically and socially impoverished rural women, who are already skilled in the art of quilting embroidery.

**Figure 9.**

*The blog section of the Mrittika Foundation website that features two posts from February, 2014 showcasing some of their handcrafted products and dokra artisans.*



## Thematic analysis

Three themes emerged during our analysis: (1) authenticity of place and production, (2) desire for global reach and role of technology, and (3) socioeconomic consciousness. The themes categorized here are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlapped while coding the data.

**1. Authenticity of place and production.** The first theme explores the two NPO websites' visual and textual efforts to highlight their handicrafts' authenticity in terms of both place and also production methods. Both online presentations establish a connection to place and localness through their handicraft producers' and products' deep connection to rural Bengal as well as through the adherence to traditional production methods. The following thematic content addresses both parts of research question 1, which ask about the visual and textual cues on each website that communicate authenticity, and the kinds of authenticity indicated. Although we do not know, based on our data, to what extent the artisans are "reluctant" (Wherry, 2006, p. 18), we can infer from the websites that there is pride in their locality and traditional production methods, at least on the part of the organizations supporting the artists.

As noted above, Mrittika's "M" logo design visually and linguistically connects the organization to Bengal. The *Blog* (Figure 9) embedded in the website has two entries from February 2014, one of which features a photograph of two nameless artisans crafting *dokra* figurines in the workshop. The supporting blog narrative "Artisans at Mrittika" talks about the place of Bengal and Bengali artisans in the Indian handicraft industry and their "finished handicrafts, intrinsic to the soul of rural Bengal" that the Trust hopes will soon garner global recognition (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).

One of Mrittika's selling points is its connection to Badu, to the people there and to certain indigenous technologies (pottery wheels, looms, clay kilns etc.). They describe the handicraft workshop as being "Located in a lush farmhouse in Badu, Madhyamgram, where the soul of rural Bengal touches a chord through the rich pieces of craft on display" (Mrittika Foundation *About Us*,

2014). A sense of place in the world is necessary to highlight in an online presentation of their work and the organization. At the same time, there needs to be a sense of fluidity about a time and place where these products can be used and appreciated. Mrittika Foundation's Blog post about *dokra*, one of the handicrafts indigenous to Bengal, delineates the NPO's attempt to remain true to the historical and locational significance of the craft, while remaining realistic about the demands of contemporary consumers' global, urban taste:

*Dokra* is slowly becoming a dying art as a result of the setting-in of modern tastes and likings and also the rising cost of raw materials involved.

At Mrittika, the artisans are aided to work with newer and more contemporary design forms so as to cater to modern tastes . . . The result is the creation of stylized pieces that can blend in with the modern layout and furnishing of living rooms in present-day settings (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).

Place and local-ness are relevant factors in many organizations' online presentations and interactions, despite their (potentially) global reach. SHE India's connection to Bengal is visually and textually clear from the very first encounter with the website, as evident from the animated images. *Kantha* and Bengal are intertwined on SHE's website—codependent and acting as each other's brand identity. Place, specifically ruralness, is also digitally entrenched on SHE India's website, in the *About Us* section, where they discuss working with village women:

Trained seamstresses go to the villages and look for women with sewing skills, and a little time to spare everyday. The inherent needlework skill of these women are honed, till they are able to vary the simple common garden running stitch with stunning results (SHE India, 2011).

Authenticity of production methods is also crucial for both organizations' brand identity, based on their web presentations. Mrittika highlights their production methods and place throughout the website, particularly on the *About Us* page with an image of a weaver at work at a handloom and on the blog post titled,

“Artisans at Mrittika,” which includes an image of two artisans making creations in the workshop. This post also briefly describes the artisans’ lives at the Mrittika campus in Badu, where, “potters craft innovative pots at the wheel, while *dokra* artists give shape to human figures. Weavers on looms are busy translating designs into yardages, as *kaantha* artists produce intricate embroidery” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). The post also showcases how the handicrafts produced there become the output of a creative ethic that uses authentic methods, as well as natural (thus, authentic) extensions of their rural locality.

However, even as the audience is digitally transported to a romanticized locality of production, Mrittika’s online presentation of the artisans lacks a sense of individuality and unique narratives that likely each artist contributes to the organization. This abstraction, though likely unintentional, “points towards the critical view of becoming ‘the other’ in a normative setting” (Knudsen, 2006, p. 62). Further, this digital othering is indicative of the intersection of sociopolitical, cultural, gendered and economic complexities (Mukherjee, 2013) that lie at the heart of the artisans’ offline, abstracted locations and the NPO’s online global representation. Making globalization an undeniably complex process of connectivity, this uncomfortable intersection of the global and the local is the result of the “uneven balance of (cultural) forces” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 62) that creates dichotomous power relations in the workings of urban–rural handicraft sectors in the developing Global South.

Authenticity in the case of SHE India is also located in the place and methods of production. The website, most clearly on the *Methodology* page, displays a specific focus on oral traditions, historical mythologies and the aesthetic quilting skills of women in Bengal from generations past inspiring SHE India’s current methods. *Kantha* is an historically feminine and locationally authentic form of handiwork that has been transformed into an empowering feminist practice of artistically mediated economic-self sustenance for rural women. For example, SHE India’s *home* page explains how “Kantha was used to sew several layers of old cotton tatters (using old handloom saris or dhotis) together to make quilts, centuries ago. Women created their own patterns inspired by the environment and the epics, and sewed these on to the wads<sup>4</sup>, using their inherent

artistry. What began here hundreds of years ago is today the fashion diktat world-over, thanks to the efforts of SHE” (SHE India, 2011).

The philosophy behind SHE India’s methods advocates the continuity of the craft as a home-based activity and the maintenance of its legacy as a community ritual that brought rural women together over leisure and conversations. This practice becomes the mantra underlying its brand identity, and their production method is said to be “the key to the high standard of work and authenticity” of their artworks (SHE India, 2011). In keeping with the authenticity of “how it was meant to be,” the SHE India website also espouses the spirit of *kantha* as a leisure-craft and one that would give the women substantial spatial and temporal flexibility in terms of where and when they choose to complete their designated embroidery projects:

The women under SHE, work at their own will to make their lives more meaning full [*sic*] while earning some extra money. It also helps sustain their family. They collect the material and get their briefing as regards design and colour scheme, and then return home to work at leisure. There are no deadlines and they work at a comfortable pace between various household chores (SHE India, 2011).

Local, rural authenticity is what the NPOs in question use to brand their artworks for global, urban consumers, but as the field of material culture studies has pointed out, “when goods cross borders, then the culture they ‘substantiate’ is no longer the culture in which they circulate” (Howes, 1996, p. 2). The product becomes invariably distanced from its producer and context of production, but closer, in effect, to the global consumer. Current research in intercultural technical communication involving NPOs that represent the disenfranchised and their need for recognition, social justice, and professional equity, has reiterated how important it is to be critically interpretive and understand the many effects of globalization, including improved technological and communication opportunities that have brought people across-geographies into closer and more fluid spaces of interaction (Agboka, 2014; Mutua & Swadener, 2004). It is as a result of this *local labor–global product* distance that neoliberal market economics have created

in the Global South that these two organizations aspire to modernize tradition through contemporized design intervention, which is undoubtedly digitized through their web presence, while simultaneously attempting to brand authenticity rooted in local-ness for near extinct crafts.

## **2. Desire for global reach and role of technology**

This theme explores the two websites' visual and textual presentation of their efforts to reach a global market by modernizing their indigenous products to appeal to urban aesthetic sensibilities and by their desire to create awareness of near-extinct local handicrafts. Here we address the second research question, which asks what role digital technology plays to modernize the brand identity of both NPOs' authentic handicrafts for the global market. Both websites include: product descriptions that tell audiences how to incorporate the artworks into a modern lifestyle; information about the organizations' respective efforts at keeping these arts alive; narratives about improving socioeconomic conditions for the artists; and evidence of desired global reach. However, both websites lack online stores where global consumers can purchase products.

The Mrittika Foundation homepage, for example, promises a “journey to take the past traditions of folk Bengal into the future” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), attempting to refashion and globalize Bengal folk crafts that have held their own for centuries in local and social history. The range of Leela-branded wall art products speaks of this connection between tradition and modernity, “which either bring out the vibrancy of the Indian motifs, stories and colours or epitomize the abstract boldness of the design patterns. Having these art pieces in your living room can soften the hard lines of furniture and electronic equipment” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). This blending of urban–rural sensibilities has been a growing trend over the last two decades, with official websites of many Indian fashion houses showcasing the theme of reviving lost Indian handicrafts and repurposing them for a conscientious urban, global clientele (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004).

The Mrittika website corroborates their global branding mantra that is rooted in tradition and rural livelihood. It paints a picture of the “serene ambience

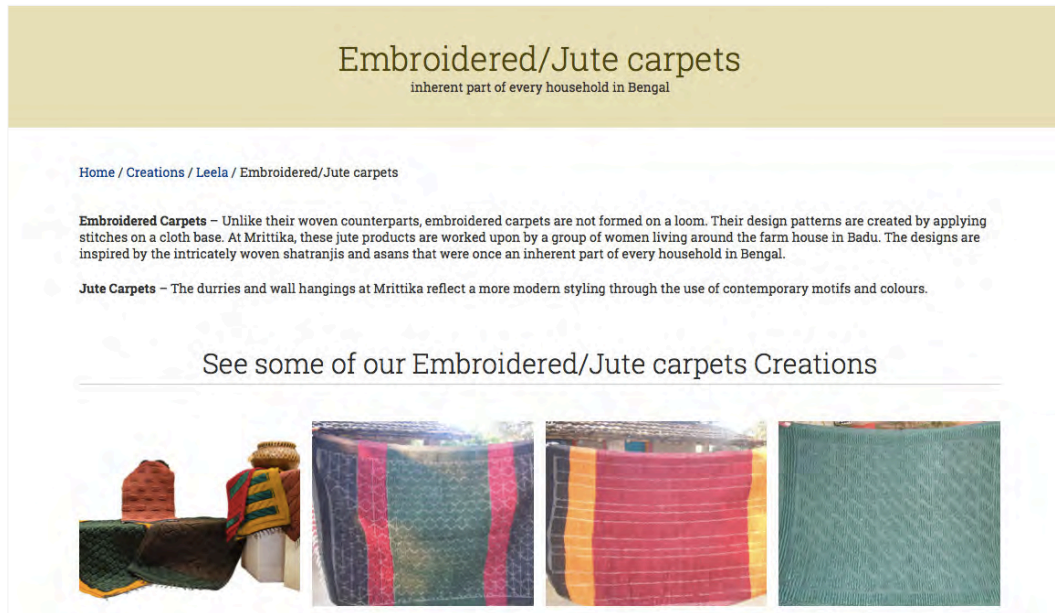
at Mrittika [that] forms an iconic backdrop to the creative gush of its proficient artisans for whom the platform has become a medium of expression and recognition for their art form” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Mrittika's reluctant artisans give up the sense of ownership for the crafted end-products that then sell under the Foundation's brand name, yet ironically lend greater authenticity to their art by virtue of this reluctance (Wherry, 2006). This reluctant authenticity becomes a crucial part of their urbanized brand identity aided by technology that helps simulate Mrittika's indigenous artifacts on their digital platform (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity is subjectively performed by handicraft NPOs where the connection between their traditional artifacts, their location, and processes of production are socially conditioned within the context of “intense global–local encounters” (Wherry, 2006, p. 28). Indeed, to aspire for global market reach doesn't mean one has to “forsake authenticity” (Wherry, 2006, p. 28).

While Mrittika does acknowledge that their traditional Bengali handicrafts “will occupy pride of place in the world of fashion and lifestyle” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), their website lacks an online store or other online presence (e.g., Etsy) where such consumers who are not in India can buy these products. Having an online store would help address the push from the Ministry of Textiles (2011) to increase India's share of exports in the global handicraft market. What Mrittika Foundation and the industry as a whole need are consumers to buy these products, and so they need to convince ethically aware (Wood, 2011) global consumers how a certain sari, *dokra* figurine, or terracotta bowl can transcend rural Badu and fit into a modern urban lifestyle. As such, the ability of the Foundation and their products to be incorporated into the fluidity of the global marketplace is currently limited.

The handicraft revival efforts of Mrittika Foundation, however, must also be considered in the context of the local, rural economy it enriches. The website asserts that the “vision of Mrittika to catapult these artisans and their art in the global diaspora has given a new lease of life and hope to these skilled workers who were ceasing to garner the attention they deserved due to neglect and want of a market” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). This disclaimer makes apparent the holistic

**Figure 10.**

*Mrittika Foundation reinforcing place-ness by locating the handcrafted shatranjjs and asans (embroidered and/or jute carpets meant for casual sitting or worshipping) as an “inherent part of every household in Bengal” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014).*



approach with which Mrittika is trying to support the dying rural arts, its underappreciated and underpaid artisans, and its place in the urban and global aesthetic marketplace. However, we find an underrepresentation of its artisans and an affective labor-product abstraction on the Mrittika website. This seems to be an unwitting byproduct of the Trust's commitment to maintain a weighted balance between local production sensibilities hinged on a somewhat culturally immobile understanding of “authentic” branding. This oversight may also be a byproduct of its aspiration for global consumption possibilities inspired by an “eclectic” understanding of traditional aesthetics (Mrittika Foundation, 2014), an aesthetic dialectic that seems for now to be an impracticality given its struggling condition.



**Figure 11.**

*A statue of preindependent Indian political leader Mahatma Gandhi, on display in an exhibition hall in the US, alongside kantha products from SHE India (SHE India, 2011).*



For its part, the SHE India website boasts of several product exhibitions the world over, including in the US and the UK, which have helped the NPO establish “a well-deserved place for *Kantha* in the world of folk-art, internationally” (SHE India, 2011). Yet, an obvious display of Mahatma Gandhi’s statue in a handicraft exhibition center in the US, placed as part of SHE’s *kantha* products, becomes the website’s visually-marketed effort for “authenticating” traditional Bengali-ness (and, Indian-ness) for a globally situated marketplace. In fact, the “activities” section of the SHE India web presence announces how “*Kantha*, has recently been catapulted to the hall of fame in the international ethnic textile industry by being the only hand-stitched quilt at the International Quilt Week in Yokohama, Japan” (SHE India, 2011), and the “affiliations” page

lists sponsors from around the world, including the UK, France, Australia and the US.

Moreover, even though *kantha*, the artists, and their production practices are all firmly placed in rural Bengal, SHE India helps artists innovate their artworks for modern tastes and helps global consumers understand how to integrate these artworks into their lifestyles, ultimately building connections between the artists and consumers with the hope that this “exquisite stitch, suitable for outfits and home furnishings” will be appropriated the world over. In the “collections” page, there are links to products for sale, listed in U.S. dollars (at least on our computers based in the US), but after clicking “buy now” the user is taken to the “feedback” page rather than an actual online store. Similar to *Mrittika*, the lack of a functional online store limits SHE India’s opportunities for global reach as well as the nation’s handicrafts export presence in global markets.

Nevertheless, SHE India’s placed-ness in Bengal contributes to the artworks’ authenticity. Additionally, the organization establishes authenticity and credibility as an NPO through their organizational, grassroots level activities described on the website, such as “spearheading training programmes in *Kantha*, natural dyes and other related activities to rural women in various districts of

## Figure 12.

*The role of technology in marketing authenticity in a local–global context is apparent through SHE India website’s narrativization of this Global South NPO’s craft methodology that maintains the leisure-bound nature of kantha as “an income generating tea break” for its rural female artisans (SHE India, 2011).*



Bengal,” as well as arranging educational, health-related and home-purchasing loans for its rural artisans, and mobilizing “training in literacy and primary arithmetic to women and children, whenever possible,” in association with other literacy-advocating NPOs (SHE India, 2011). While textually and visually stressing the need for global recognition, a need that SHE India has fulfilled to quite an extent, its web presence reiterates the importance of globalization as a personal experience that is rooted as much in place, rural community, and local identity (Williams, 2012), as it is in its efforts of “creating *kantha* for the global community” (SHE India, 2011).

**3. Socioeconomic consciousness.** Here we explore the two websites’ visual and textual presentations of the NPOs’ efforts to uphold their goals of social justice, relative to their location in the developing Global South, local handicraft revival initiatives, and the rural Bengal artisans they support and represent. The following thematic content addresses research question three, which asks about opportunities taken and missed for communicating authenticity. In addition to place and production, social justice is part of both organizations’ brand identities as communicated online, and is, presumably, part of their appeal for conscientious global consumers.

The *About Us* section of the Mrittika website, subtitled “provided shelter to village artisans,” talks about the cofounder’s conscious commitment to create a “little corner [that] has provided shelter to village artisans who practise traditional arts . . . The highlight of this endeavour is to revive these traditional arts through stylized and more contemporary designs and concepts” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). There is an effort to highlight that their “handicrafts are now being patronised by connoisseurs and celebrities who acknowledge the skill and hard work going behind these objects of art. And the money is ploughed back to the artisans in deference to their skill and labour” (Mrittika Foundation, 2014). Yet, what does not get transcribed online is their artisans’ agency and self-

empowerment initiatives, an explication of their awareness of the fast-changing demands of the global–local craft market and how fluidly they can master their creative labor within the developing economy of the Global South. Such narratives should find voice on their website so that the uneven socioeconomic power differentials that are often found within the ‘producer–product–marketer’ triad does not reproduce itself online. Indeed, an organization that seeks to uplift underprivileged groups ought to avoid reproducing “power–politics of exclusion” that may socioeconomically infiltrate professional urban–rural partnerships in their online presentations (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 89).

To communicate ‘authenticity’ as their primary product brand and to perform economic and social philanthropy that they are committed to, the SHE India website highlights its local handicraft revival initiatives, stating that *kantha* “was a dying village craft in the wake of printing” until Dudeja and her daughter “began marketing Kantha in a big way” (SHE India, 2011). The fact that SHE India has built its nonprofit identity and craftwork ethic on the “social conditions of production” (Wherry, 2006) that take into account the working conditions and domestic responsibilities of rural women is evident in the socioeconomically empowering disclaimer, “When it started out there were just a handful of people and today it helps hundreds of women sustain their livelihood” (SHE India, 2011).

### Figure 13.

*Multiple images showing the organizational representatives of SHE India reaching out to rural Bengali women with basic necessities, such as food, clean water and medical checkups.*



While SHE India gives the artists more identity online than Mrittika by including numerous images of them at work and taking advantage of the educational and health services offered, the site lacks information about individual women. The site visitor learns about the founder, Dudeja, but very little about the individual artisans. Thus, SHE India's online presentation appears to fall prey to a similarly unconscious "power-politics of exclusion" (Mukherjee, 2013, p. 89) as Mrittika.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically speaking, SHE India and Mrittika Foundation fit the mold of reluctant authenticity, where Global South artisans partner with NPOs that have an urban stronghold to handle the production, sociocultural interpretations and financial returns of the traditional handicrafts they help create and brand as authentic through their web presence. The major difference we found lies in the degree to which each NPO communicates its products' authenticity and the resultant branding opportunities they capitalize on or overlook.

Both organizations effectively communicate their deep roots in rural Bengal and its people, their preservation of traditional production methods, and their commitments to social justice. They also both express a desire for global reach and their efforts at contemporizing these traditional crafts helps them connect with modern, global consumers. Using visual and textual branding tools on their websites, both organizations communicate the authenticity of their products, people, and production methods. Notions of authenticity are subject to personal interpretations, experiences, and social contexts and the online environment offers these organizations flexibility in presenting their artworks for a variety of audiences, indeed perhaps even encouraging a reconsideration, for some consumers, of what constitutes an authentic artwork.

Unfortunately, both organizations miss the commerce opportunities that abound online, for neither one has an online store. In their roles as mediators between rural artisans and global consumers, both organizations have room for improvement. Finally, both Mrittika and SHE India present their social justice

goals and achievements on their websites—which also feed into their authenticity branding efforts—but they lack narratives and information about the individual artisans. Thus they inadvertently minimize the underprivileged artisans’ identities and agency—at least from the perspective of a global audience member looking at their websites—while at the same time highlighting them as artists and recipients of the socioeconomic advantages each organization offers them.

Going forward, more action-based research is needed to understand the artists’ thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on their collaboration with NPOs such as Mrittika and SHE India. We also believe that the field of intercultural technical communication would be able to effectively explore intersections of power, production, inequities, and social justice in global, cultural sites when future research is more mindful of local contexts. In this context, that would translate to representing the artists’ points of view in future research to help us better understand notions of authenticity when it comes to traditional handicrafts, particularly when selling them online. Moreover, to understand their degree of reluctant engagement in the entire craft creation-branding-consumption process, it will be beneficial to know more about how the artists communicate with the organizations, with each other, if/how they communicate with consumers, and to what extent authenticity of place and production is important to them. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to mention that the authors of this article are currently on the advisory board of Mrittika Foundation Trust.
- <sup>2</sup> In India, a trust is an NPO with distinct philanthropic goals. Thus, we use the terms “trust” and “NPO” interchangeably in this article.
- <sup>3</sup> Since the data for this study has been collected more than a year ago, the websites for SHE India and Mrittika Foundation have been/are being redesigned. This is common given the dynamics of online data and the perpetually evolving nature of globally-engaged entrepreneurial nonprofits.

- <sup>4</sup> A wad here refers to layers of soft cloth sewn together with simple garden running stitches and often used as a canvas for colorful embroidery on hand-drawn designs.

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## About the Authors

Ishani Mukherjee earned her PhD in Communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2013. She is currently a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Communication at UIC. Her research interests include digital advocacy, gender and social justice, globalization and professional communication.

**Email.** [imukhe2@uic.edu](mailto:imukhe2@uic.edu)

**URL.** <http://comm.uic.edu/comm/people/visiting-faculty/ishani-mukherjee>

### Contact.

University of Illinois at Chicago  
Department of Communication  
BSB 1163, MC 132  
1007 W. Harrison Street, Chicago IL 60607  
USA

Maggie Griffith Williams earned her PhD in Communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2012. She is a postdoctoral teaching associate in the Communication Studies Department at Northeastern University in Boston. Her research focuses on mobile media and communication, new media, mass media, globalization, and social justice.

**Email.** mar.williams@neu.edu

**URL.** <http://www.northeastern.edu/camd/commstudies/people/maggie-williams/>

**Contact.**

Northeastern University  
204 Lake Hall  
360 Huntington Avenue  
Boston, MA 02115  
USA

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# **Do Women Win?**

## **Transnational development NGOs, discourses of empowerment, and cross-cultural technology initiatives in the Global South**

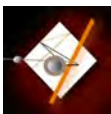
Dawn Opel

*Arizona State University, USA*

Paulette Stevenson

*Arizona State University, USA*

The Global North now accepts the cultural logic of “The Girl Effect,” or the notion that aid to girls in the Global South is economically impactful. It is in this context that NGOs take residence in the Global South to train girls in digital technology. We examine the ethical and social justice implications of the cross-cultural communication in these initiatives through a case study of *Women Win*, a transnational NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project. In this qualitative case study, we analyze 37 DST videos, coding recurring discursive themes in both their language and visual iconography and examining the ownership rights, authorship, and sharing practices of these videos. The results suggest that the girls in the DST project labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that circumscribes them as postfeminist development subjects, replicating themes and terms originating in feminism of the Global North. From this inquiry, we conclude that the concept of participatory culture does not travel neatly from the Global North to the Global South. We suggest that professional and technical communication scholars further scrutinize the complexities of cross-cultural communication in global development initiatives, through what this case study reveals about “large culture” ideologies and the political economy of affective labor in technology training. We conclude with a call to action for international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western narratives by creating dialogic, localized design processes for training materials.



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**Keywords.** Digital storytelling project, Transnational development, “The Girl Effect,” Technology training, NGOs, Ethics, Participatory culture.

The Global North now accepts the cultural logic of “The Girl Effect,” or the notion that aid to girls in the Global South is economically impactful. This cultural logic relies on data-driven communication that presents said impact; in essence, numbers rendered visually and verbally, through narrative, compellingly communicate both effect and affect to Western donors. Evidence of girls-in-need and girls-doing-for-themselves incites the emotions of those in the Global North, and, as a result, continuous addition of affective stories, visuals, and animations adds to the economic properties of The Girl Effect (Murphy, 2013). It is in this context that many transnational development NGOs initiate programs that train girls in the Global South in digital technology in order to produce their own narratives through digital storytelling projects.

In this article, we examine the ethical and social justice implications of the cross-cultural communication in these initiatives through a case study of one transnational development NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project. *Women Win* partners with large multinational corporations (donors/investors) and then regrants to local, grassroots NGOs in the Global South for strategic projects; here, training girls to make their own digital media narratives. This qualitative case study involves two components. First, we examine the 37 videos in the DST project, coding recurring discursive themes in both their language and visual iconography. After consideration of the videos’ contents, we analyze the economic context for this DST project, specifically, looking at how *Women Win* controls the ownership rights, authorship, and sharing practices of the *Women Win* videos.

The results of this study indicate that the girls in the DST project labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that ultimately communicates their positions narrowly as postfeminist development subjects, using the language of empowerment (as imported from the feminism of the Global North) in the service of development initiatives. These new positive images “confirm neoliberal



narrative in which the empowerment of the developing world's women via the market is the solution" (Wilson, 2011, p. 323). Constructions of the empowered agent in digital media culture do not translate as democratic representation when they operate in transnational contexts. The concept of participatory culture does not happily travel from the Global North to the Global South, especially in the context of development organizations and NGOs. The DST projects, then, reflect "large culture" ideologies in its intercultural communication rather than microcultural factors, despite their perceived reliance on individual stories (Agboka, 2012). As a result, we call upon professional and technical communication scholars to take a deeper look into the complexities of cross-cultural communication in transnational development, through what it reveals about "large culture" ideologies and the political economy of affective labor in technology training initiatives. We also issue a call to action for international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western narratives by creating dialogic, localized design processes for training materials.

## **Literature Review**

The Girl Effect and its website serve as a starting point for discussion of how The Girl Effect is promoted by its data-driven communication to the Global North. In an article on that website, Posada (2012) argued that good data is critical to further programs for girls. "Girls need unique, targeted programmes, centred around them. But if we haven't got the right kind of data to prove this, those programmes don't get funding - and therefore they don't happen" (para. 2). Posada represented the data as instrumental to programming and funding: The Girl Effect created through the discourse of aid to girls is just "smart economics" (Revenge & Shetty, 2012). While the data is meant to help policymakers eliminate wasteful spending and intensify their impact, this way of thinking simultaneously positions the data itself as altruistic.

In tracing the discursive history of *The Girl Effect*, Murphy (2013) made the case that data has a representative property, arguing that “The Girl is animated as a colorful circle, a pulsing pie chart, a blooming flower, or a stop-motion, living marionette—all constituted in an overdetermined vortex of statistical studies that correlate girlness with either extremes of poverty and abjection or compliant and community beneficial forms of waged and unwaged labor” (para. 8). The evidence of girls in need and their stories—in poverty, unaware of their rights, dominated by controlling parents and backwards, cultural norms—incite the emotions of viewers from the Global North. The addition of affective stories, visuals, and animations adds to the economic properties of *The Girl Effect* by purposefully hailing sympathetic audiences to support a girl.

### **“The Girl Effect” and programming of transnational development NGOs**

Critiques of the *The Girl Effect* are beginning to emerge. Wilson (2011) argued that *The Girl Effect* emerges from a new representational regime in which female subjects from the Global South are represented through positive imagery of empowerment and agency. However, these positive images conform to neoliberal globalization that ultimately obscures exploitative relationships. In the discourse celebrating feminist ideas travelling to the Global South, the context in which these feminist ideas are employed gets lost. Koffman and Gill (2013) questioned the imposition of feminist ideas in the Global South by asking if *The Girl Effect* is about “global sisterhood and/or cultural imperialism” (p. 87). In Switzer’s (2013) assessment, the feminist ideas portrayed by the girls from the Global South do more to hail a Northern audience than to help girls in “need” (p. 347). Murphy (2013) called attention to the creation of *The Girl Effect* through discourses of feminism and finance by claiming that “The Girl is not a subject effect, but rather a subject figure—a stereotyped representation of a subject figured out of a matrix of social science correlations and financial probabilities” (para. 8). These critiques of *The Girl Effect* question representations that

continue to produce these girls and women as passive subjects for a neoliberal economy.

By looking at the representational regimes operating in *The Girl Effect*, scholars have created space for further study of how *The Girl Effect* operates discursively in certain contexts. As Switzer (2013) argued, “Discourse is a social project; representations become real inside institutions that enable certain interventions and prevent others” (p. 357). Critiques of *The Girl Effect* as a discursive regime highlight the limitations placed on the ability for transformation. A girl must be taken out of context to thrive (Switzer, 2013). As *The Girl Effect* shapes specific development programs, there is an exigency for further study of how empowerment, self-reliance, and agency may be reproduced by development organizations through their cross-cultural DST projects.

### **Problematizing participatory culture in cross-cultural technology training initiatives**

Additionally complicating cross-cultural technology training initiatives such as the DST project is the Western-focused concept of digital media in participatory culture. Jenkins et al. (2006) defined participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (p. 3). This type of creation and sharing aligns with a bottom-up control of the creative process and an empowered digital citizen.

Jenkins (2013) favorably portrayed what he calls participatory culture in the context of globalization and web 2.0, stating:

Spreadable practices offer them [non-Westerners] perhaps the most effective means to achieve this expanded communication practice [transnational media]. In a world where everyday citizens may help select and circulate media content, playing active roles in building links between dispersed communities, there are

new ways of working around the entrenched interests of traditional gatekeepers and in allegiance with others who may spread their content (p. 288).

Jenkins set up an us/them binary, and the “them” of Jenkins’ examples are individuals and small local media companies in the Global South. These projects, Jenkins (2013) argued, help spread cultural awareness that flows from the bottom up (meaning from the Global South to the Global North). In the case of media produced for projects like *Women Win*, the purposes, production, and distribution of that media are different. While the girls do produce their digital stories, they do it under the training and support of the NGO; thus, the claim that this media is democratic, free flowing, or bottom-up (Baym, 2010; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Lessig, 2009; Shirky, 2009), is problematic.

Jenkins’ positive assessment of transnational media fails to assess media created contexts. In the DST project of *Women Win*, while the media is created from what seems like enthusiastic desire on the girls’ part, the influence on and control of the media by an NGO from the Global North mires the claims of democracy. The girls are not creating the media solely from their own minds (they are trained in storytelling) and they are not sharing the stories themselves (the NGO copyrights and owns them). Claims of participatory culture in the context of transnational media need to be further assessed. Transnational feminist thought complicates Jenkins’ bottom-up, linear flow of information from the Global South to the Global North, by questioning linearity and uncritical assessments of power in flows of information across borders. Mediation may actually increase the distance between individuals (Rajagopal, 2001). The teaching of culture that Jenkins assumes in exchanges between the Global South and the Global North does not actually close cultural gaps or make differing nations closer; rather, Rajagopal argued that media produced through globalization actually creates the façade of closeness and contact. Hedge (2013) suggested that “the global is performed, reproduced, and contested” through the collision of cultures with new media practices (p. 6). Dingo (2011) argued that “transnational feminist rhetorical analytic is necessary to show how . . . rhetorical acts relate to one another and how they change as they cross national developmental borders”

(p. 15). Transnational feminist scholars answer Jenkins' concept of transnational media flow with an analytic in which media flows must be questioned in terms of power dynamic, location, and cultural work. In terms of the DST project, these questions complicate the notion that digital media produced by the girls simply gives them the agency to help themselves and their community.

## **The political economy of affective labor in digital media projects**

Scholars have also begun to address the question of affective or immaterial labor in participatory digital culture. This affective “immaterial labour involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labour in the bodily mode” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 293). For autonomist Marxist scholar Lazzarato (1996), immaterial labor refers to the actual “activity that produces the cultural content” (p. 137). Examples of this include “the fixing of cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (p. 133). These definitions and considerations explain the emotional, cultural work that this labor performs.

Current scholarship tends to view affective labor as nonexploitative, overall accepting that laborers in this political economy control their means of production. For example, in her study on the immaterial labor of “tweens,” Pybus (2011) contended that although tweens' habits and information are mined in order to intensify the tween market, the relationship is ultimately productive in the sense that the tween has some agency in creating their own subjectivity that marketers will use to hail them. For Pybus and others, the immaterial labor in digital media creation is not always exploitative.

We must consider the context of these studies. Specifically, the relevant scholarship, which claims that digital media and the Internet are free and democratic, looks at these technologies solely as they operate in the Global North. Questioning the power dynamics behind technology, Alzouma (2005) critiqued the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as solutions for development problems in Africa, skeptical that implementation of ICTs will send

African nations into full-scale modernity and “solve quality of life problems” (p. 344). Alzouma aptly questioned the amount of agency Africans will have over their subjectivities with the full-scale adoption of ICTs that flow from the Global North to the Global South. This is an issue that those who celebrate the positive outcomes of immaterial labor and digital media fail to fully consider.

In a similar vein, we should consider how girls producing DST projects in the context of training in the Global North are positioned as subjects. In the context of global development initiatives, subjectivities presented through digital media must be investigated so as to understand what regimes of truth they uphold about individuals from the Global South. Although branding and creating a self through digital media “involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 61), this type of work, when performed in *direct* service of global development initiatives must be questioned in terms of who is benefiting from this work.

DST projects that involve girls often present these girls as postfeminist development subjects (Switzer, 2013). Switzer used what she calls “(post)feminist development fables” to describe the false binary of “durable schoolgirl subject” and the “pregnant child-bride” created through the instillation of mythic postfeminist stories in the Global South (p. 347). To be a postfeminist development subject (not agent) means to use the language of empowerment as imported from the feminism of the Global North in the context of development. Yet, as McRobbie noted, this seemingly positive empowered subject position actually serves as “re-colonizing mechanism . . . [that] re-instates racial hierarchies within the field of femininity by invoking, across the visual field, a norm of nostalgic whiteness” (p. 43). These girls—empowered agents of change—present their stories of fighting their way out of oppressive families and local cultures, stories that take into account a feminism from the Global North. With cross-cultural technology training initiatives such as a DST project, we must look at the cause each girl works for and whether it is directly in service of the outcomes authored by development institutions from the Global North.

## **Women Win Case Study and Methods**

It is through the representational properties of data discussed above that *Women Win*, a regranting and leadership training NGO, created its digital storytelling (DST) project for women and girls. The mission of the *Women Win* initiative overall is “to equip adolescent girls to exercise their rights through sport” and is currently supported financially by sponsors from the Global North as varied as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, the Human Dignity Foundation, Nike, and DLA Piper (“About Us,” 2013, para. 1). Through stories-as-evidence, *Women Win*’s DST project highlights “stories of girls’ sport achievement and impact.” Girls participating in DST travel to different locales (Amsterdam, Killifi, and Nairobi) to take part in a 2-5 day workshop where they learn both narrative and technical skills to tell their stories in digital video formats. While *Women Win* facilitates the training, during the workshop, the girls create, produce, record, and edit their own videos. The training and development workshops included in the DST project claims to give “storytellers’ ultimate control over the medium—words, images and audio—so stories are told by those who lived the experience” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 1).

*Women Win* indicates that both the process and the product of the DST project benefit the girls. The website explains that “Once a young woman learns the skills needed to share her story through DST, it becomes her task and responsibility to share those skills with members of her organization, capturing more stories and multiplying the effect of the tool. Born out of this approach, our ultimate goal with DST is to strengthen our partners’ capacities to build girls’ leadership and communicate the impact of the work they do locally and globally” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 3). Yet, these two claims—the girls’ control over their stories and the ways in which DST benefits the girls—construct a narrative around the DST project. The narrative constructed here aligns with two discourses: participatory culture in digital media and The Girl Effect. The DST project uses the language and grammar of The Girl Effect and replicates subject positions offered by The Girl Effect but produces them through real narratives and the digital means and claims of participatory culture.

To further study this practice, we conducted a qualitative case study of the videos produced in the DST project of *Women Win* from February 2013 to March 2014. We designed this study to analyze how the stories of *Women Win*'s DST project, told through the discourse of participatory culture in digital media, may operate through The Girl Effect. We applied for and received our institution's IRB exemption for this study. The data collection and analysis had two major components. First, we viewed and coded by hand in Excel all 37 videos (all videos in the project as of December 2014) using attributive coding (or coding for metadata such as video and girls' names, origin locations, local NGOs, date video produced, and location video produced) and descriptive coding and subsequent thematic analysis of these codes. With these, we focused on recurring elements in the narrative and visual representations and iconography in the videos. Through our descriptive coding procedure, we quantified if, when, and how a narrative of empowerment appeared in the girls' stories. Then, we examined the visual components of the video, analyzing how each girl's story presents visually.

In the second portion of our study, we examine the economics of *Women Win* by looking at the ownership and sharing of these DST videos. We closely attend to the means of production of each video, thinking about the technologies used and how those technologies position the girls as creators. We also consider the author, the ownership, and creative commons license of each video. Through this analysis, we conclude that the girls selected to participate in *Women Win* labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win*. This evidence ultimately circumscribes their subject positions very narrowly as postfeminist development subjects and positions *Women Win* as a successful training and regranting NGO.

## **Results and Discussion:**

### ***Women Win* and the Flattening of the Global South**

To better understand the *Women Win* DST project and the cultural logic of The Girl Effect in cross-cultural technology training initiatives, we first analyze the *Women Win* website, which serves as the primary vehicle for the circulation of this cultural logic and the frame for the DST project. We begin with the results of



this analysis, followed by the results and discussion of the video content. Finally, we present an economic analysis of the *Women Win* DST project, with specific focus on the ownership and sharing practices of the videos.

### **Framing the DST project: the *Women Win* website**

The *Women Win* website provides background information for the DST project, a synopsis of the training program, and an introductory video about DST. This information constructs the discursive frame through which viewers are meant to consider the project. Each piece of information constructs a narrative of *Women Win* as a facilitator of the girls' stories, defining the project in line with both participatory culture and Girl Effect discourses. A web audience from the Global North may draw parallels of these videos with other types of media created through the framework of participatory culture, such as Kickstarter campaigns. Viewers also see a repetitive offering of the The Girl Effect mantra: invest in a girl and she will do the rest. Through an analysis of major elements of the website, the frame that *Women Win* creates in order to condition viewers' experiences becomes legible.

Under "Stories," the DST tab of the *Women Win* website features an introduction video called "Girls are Leaders. Girls are Storytellers." The video uses the visual and verbal language of empowerment to position the sporting girl as a worthy investment to northern donors. The girls represent positive affirmations of development through their engagement in sport. However, these positive representations do not directly represent these girls as agents. Rather, in light of a Northern donor audience, they are produced as subjects of development. The girls do not speak on their own behalf, rather, all the information about them comes directly from the narrator. The video opens with close-up shots of brown-skinned girls and moves to photos of them participating in sports. The narrative voice defines "girl" through the language of empowerment. As the narrator moves through a monologue that begins with "Girls are leaders," words like "abilities," "potential," "active," "goals," "leadership," "voice," "right," "action," and "agent of change" accompany photos of girls participating in sports. Viewers are positioned

as voyeurs in the sense that they are meant to derive pleasure from watching the stills of empowered girls participate in sport. Donors see that their investments are secure in the images of the hardworking women of sports. The narrator uses the collective “we” to frame and define the potential of girls. “We” are meant to see empowered girls, and by watching and supporting these girls, “we” are involved directly by activating winning girls. While the narrator articulates girls as agents-of-change in the video it is only through the narrative voice, the “we,” that girls are allowed this agency.

As *Women Win* presents its leadership program (a program by which girls become agents-of-change), the narrative frame reproduces the power of the Northern donor as the ultimate agent of development. The images are purposefully positive to stay consistent with “current neoliberal development consensus which . . . portrays an intensification of labour applied by women in the South as the ‘solution’ to poverty as well as gender inequality” (Wilson, 2011, p. 328). This video hails Northern donors through positive images that elicit a narrative in which these girls are “deserving” subjects.

About halfway through the video, the images of girls transform into racialized, geometric figures on graph paper. The video visually abstracts the girls—moving them from specific, visual subjects to geometric stand-ins. Through this abstraction, *Women Win* takes the audience from seeing specific girls to seeing all girls. The empowered, sporting girls take on more generalizable representations in the form of the empowered third world girl as the figures are literally positioned on stage speaking to an audience of black silhouettes. The narrator proclaims that speaking out “gives girls greater control over their bodies, their choice, their lives and eventually their communities” (“Girls are Leaders,” 2013). However, in this instance, the captive audience (presumably the “we” of the narration, the Northern donors) grants agency to the speaking subject. As a result, speaking out gives the girls a sense of agency without giving them actual agency. The Northern donor audience is always in control, and the girls’ voices merely provide the fodder for their experience with *Women Win*. As the visuals move again from abstraction to representative images of girls, the outcomes of development are placed with the collective “we.” The narrator charges the viewers

in that “by 2016 we are on the hook to help 1 million girls realize their leadership potential through sport” (“Girls are Leaders,” 2013). The narrator hails the “we,” the Northern donor audience, to help these girls become leaders. Even though the video represents girls as leaders, the video positions Northern donors as having the ultimate power in these girls’ future.

As an introduction to the DST project, “Girls are Leaders” sets the terms for what viewers should see in the DST videos produced by girls. It offers the promise to see empowered girls engaged in sports, hear stories of girls overcoming obstacles, and witness girls employed as leaders. However, *Women Win*’s decision to not let the girls speak for themselves positions girls as subjects in service of *Women Win* instead of women with agency.

The “About DST” page appears to suggest the girls’ complete narrative control, adherence to feminist methodology, a promise of ICT skill building, and access to affordable technology. This page does not just explain the theory behind the project; rather, it also discursively frames DST as a positive iteration of participatory culture. On the surface, the explanations and rationale for the project provided by *Women Win* mirror bottom-up creations of media (i.e. crowdfunding, self-presentation). Yet, thinking more contextually, the claims of bottom-up creation function as a façade. In terms of narrative control, *Women Win* naïvely suggests, “Participants actively construct and reconstruct themselves and their stories through the process of narration” (“About DST,” 2013, para. 5). In no way does this account for the ways in which participants are also *constructed* by already existing discourse—namely discourses of postfeminism and global development. While the girls have the power to say what they want to say, our analysis of the narratives themselves challenges this claim, for the narrative produced by the girls follow similar themes and use similar terminology.

This suggests that these narratives replicate regimes of truth that operate in the context of *Women Win* as a development program. In the terms of a feminist methodology, the DST project claims that through speaking out, these girls destabilize gendered hierarchies. Yet, these stories all take girls out of their local context and position them as leaders in development programs. The claim of destabilizing gendered hierarchies remains unrealized. Both the claims of ICT

skill building and access to technology suggest that just educating girls on using technology will give them skills they can take into the community. However, educating them uncritically (as the education does not involve the critique of these technologies) gives them a narrow conception of technology. Furthermore, the skills that these videos articulate are basic, so we must question at what level these girls are meant to produce media as autonomous agents. If the goal is to bring the skills back to their communities and their local NGOs, *Women Win* ill equips these girls technologically to fully produce dynamic media for consumption. Yet, these explanations of technology reproduce accounts of technology and storytelling through the lens of participatory culture. As we move into analyzing the DST videos themselves, we see how much the framing of these videos as participatory culture under the influence of The Girl Effect shape the videos themselves.

### **Discourses of empowerment in *Women Win's* DST videos**

The 37 videos that comprise the DST contain stories from girls from origin locations in Africa (Uganda, Zambia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Kenya), Cambodia, Colombia, and India. The girls worked with 21 local NGOs to produce the videos between 2013 and 2014. Despite the disparate geographic locations and NGOs, the narratives told in the videos follow a similar narrative structure. The introduction video itself establishes two types of stories: epic wins in sport, and the power of sport to overcome traumatic life events. Of the 37 videos, 16 included stories of a win in sport, and 30 included a resolution of a girl's gainful employment. 31 of 37 videos discuss or portray "rights" while 35 of 37 videos mention empowerment, in either explicit language or theme.

While there is no evidence that these narratives of empowerment are explicitly taught by *Women Win*, this data set suggests that *Women Win's* recruitment and training program (produced through postfeminist ideas of empowerment) aided the girls in reproducing postfeminist development regimes of truth. A majority of the stories explain how each girl rose from cultural oppression or economic impoverishment to take leadership roles with sports-in-

development NGOs. Other themes of empowerment articulated in these videos include overcoming obstacles such as lack of education, showing girls-as-potential, overcoming gender norms, learning to understand and wield “rights,” and participating in development initiatives (combating gender-based violence, child abuse, HIV, and seeking reproductive health). It is likely not a coincidence that these themes directly coincide with the goals of *Women Win*. While girls who participate in the DST projects may not be taught these discursive regimes explicitly, *Women Win* operates through The Girl Effect and its programming that circulate postfeminist regimes of truth. Contact with *Women Win* staff—who are trained themselves in the discourses of The Girl Effect—may contribute to this replication of narrative. The selection process of the specific girls who participate in the DST may also contribute to the recurrence of specific themes.

To focus even more closely on the discourses of empowerment circulating in these DST videos, we briefly analyze two representative videos, “Sport is an Amazing World” and “How Football Changed my Life,” as paradigmatic of the entire DST library to illustrate the replication of discursive regimes. In “Sport is an Amazing World” Pallavi Jaywant Gaikwad of Mumbai, India tells her story of empowerment and opportunity through sport in the third person. As the narrative begins, we learn that Pallavi’s teachers and family did not take her love of sport seriously, and instead of quitting, she became resourceful—making her own track pants from her uncle’s rope and finding sponsors on her own. Her involvement in sports eventually leads her to secondary education as well as finding employment in a local, sporting NGO, *The NAZ Foundation Trust*. The narrative leads us to see her drive and desire as directly aiding her in getting an education, finding employment, supporting her family, and challenging gender norms (i.e., becoming the first girl in her family to travel abroad alone). Pallavi’s story represents no complications or setbacks. Rather, the narrative progresses linearly from participation in sport to economic empowerment through employment. This narrative simplifies the lives of girls in the Global South to donors from the Global North by furthering the idea that investing in a girl is smart economics (Revenga & Shetty, 2012).

In “How Football Changed my Life,” Furaha Pascal Karimiko narrates her struggles coming from a polygamous family of 22 children. Raised in this environment, she explains that her community and family had few expectations of her because of her gender. Though her narration, Furaha represents her drive to do something greater. However, her family had no money for school fees. It is at this point that Furaha pauses and tells the audience directly, “I didn’t know I had rights.” The turning point in her story comes when she begins playing football. She explains, “I like feeling stronger than the boys despite all the discrimination from the community.” Being discovered by a coach, Furaha received a football scholarship, and she exclaims, “I will prove to my father that girls can do it.” Curiously, Furaha tells the audience that in school she learned reproductive health and rights (not just traditional math, science, humanities curriculum). Furaha tells us she is currently a coach, and from her salary she is able to take care of herself and her family. Also, because of her actions, Furaha’s younger sister now attends secondary school. Furaha’s story also linearly progresses from a portrayal of a backward culture to economic empowerment. The narrative suggests that she already possessed the means to challenge traditional gender norms—that this potential was something born inside of her. When she says, “I like feeling stronger than the boys despite all the discrimination from the community,” the audience is meant to see her as an empowered, postfeminist subject. This narrative creates an affective element by which donors audience can feel for these girls, get angered at their situations, and see these girls as animated characters (i.e. *real* people); thus, by replicating postfeminist regimes of truth. Furaha’s story provides Northern donors with a mirror (the feeling that these girls are “just like our girls”). This shared representation enables them to give the girls the gift of agency by helping them out of their Global Southern families and cultures.

The perceived realness and authenticity of these narratives created through the discursive frame of participatory culture helps uncritically circulate the postfeminist regimes of truth operating within these stories. While The Girl Effect discourse became persuasive through its combination of hailing narratives and political economy, the “realness” of the DST project furthers these regimes of truth by masquerading as authentic. Dingo (2011) argued that we must “look

carefully at policymaking practices through the lens of transnational networks so that we can identify the multiple strands of influences that give a policy argument clout and demonstrate how repetitive lore often circulated on a translocal scale, blending the local and the global across national or political boundaries” (p. 7). Representational practices need to be analyzed through a transnational lens, for these also dictate the terms of circulation. In the DST project, these narratives portray these girls as positive, postfeminist development subjects through the replication of themes operating in postfeminist regimes of truth (empowerment, education, employment, challenging gender norms, backwardness of local cultures). Furthermore, through the frame of participatory culture, the realness of each of these stories helps them circulate as true, uncritically. At stake here is the view of the Global South as backwards as well as the lack of agency allowed to the girls within this framework, for their stories perform the work of *Women Win*. Although employed and empowered by their local NGO, these girls are simultaneously exploited as representational labor through their digital storytelling.

### **Visually flattening the Global South**

The *Women Win* DST videos rely exclusively on the use of still images—effectively slideshows with voice-over audio—and this technique lends itself to a particular kind of representation of the girls and their lives. Through the use of still images, these “empowered” girls become visually immobilized. We coded the images used with the following categories: photos of the girls, their families, participation in sports, their schools, photos of the girls “employed,” and group pictures of girls (team or female community). We also coded for stock photos of objects and hand-drawn animation of “difficult” events. In the videos, 21 of 37 utilized stock photos in their videos, and nine used cartoons or drawings. These stock photos and drawings serve to fill in gaps in the narrative visually.

Through these images the audience is given a glimpse into these girls’ lives, akin to leafing through a scrapbook, but these images are not fully explained, as the voice-over narrative in the videos does not always match or elucidate the

images. In the majority of the videos (27 out of 37) there are instances when the image and the voice-over do not align, meaning that the narration does not describe what is shown in the still image. The viewers instead view these images through their preexisting discursive frames, or the discursive frames offered in the website itself, namely, Global Northern ideas of gender and the Global South. With this line of thinking, dirt fields signify cultural backwardness and poverty, photos of large families signify neglected girls, action shots of girls in both sport and education represent empowerment, and group shots of girls embody a supportive, female community. Through these stills, none of these discursive frames are challenged; rather, they are further upheld. In this way, *Women Win* must be questioned for its lack of attention to the politics of representation.

These still images further the limited agency of girls by representing them as visually immobile. In analyzing the positive images of female empowerment, Wilson (2011) argued that “agency, like empowerment, is projected as a gift to be granted by the consumer of images—and potential donor—implicitly reaffirming the civilizing mission” (p. 329). The relationship between donor and visual subject that Wilson describes is intensified through the stillness of DST’s images. In DST, the girls do not speak directly to the camera, and this contributes to the flattening of their subject positions. The audience does not see girls visually as participants and agents in their lives. The stills and voice-overs represent the girls as narrators of their lives in the past tense.

In this sense, the girls’ thankfulness and indebtedness to *Women Win* becomes intensified. In this discursive frame, donor audiences see these passive girls as needing their help. The representational choices made through the direction and production of the DST project—direction given by the *Women Win* training and production staff—directly impact the girls’ agency and positions them as subjects rather than agents of *Women Win*. The ramification of this is two-fold for intercultural professional communication. First, the training materials, training processes, and resulting direct involvement of these girls to produce the videos with *Women Win* all serve to flatten the girls’ own lived experiences into the shared discourses of The Girl Effect and participatory culture. Then, the product of these communications and actions, the videos,



transmit these discourses back to the Global North. This is in opposition to the dialogic intercultural communication practices advocated by many professional and technical communications teachers and scholars (see Agboka, 2013; Kent, 1993; and Weiss, 1993).

### **Sharing and ownership practices with DST videos**

While *Women Win's* DST defines its methods as in line with participatory culture, the sharing and ownership of the girls' videos complicates *Women Win's* full commitment to the girls' complete control over their videos. Returning to the question of exploitation in terms of the immaterial labor involved in digital media creation, the question of ownership complicates scholarship affirming affective labor of digital media as nonexploitative. While *Women Win* upholds the myth of the digital space as free space, these videos represent and sell *Women Win's* development programs through these girls' "self" produced stories. Furthermore, the Creative Commons licenses for each of these videos clearly articulates that *Women Win* owns these girls' videos. Creative Commons explains this particular license as the "most restrictive of our six main licenses, only allowing others to download your works and share them with others as long as they credit you, but they can't change them in any way or use them commercially" (Creative Commons, 2013). Because *Women Win* owns the license and hosts these videos on both their website and their *Vimeo* page, the "you" explained in the Creative Commons license refers to *Women Win*. The CC license would restrict the girls from sharing their own, self-produced videos without crediting *Women Win*.

With this sharing practice, the celebratory framing of participatory culture completely unravels and is exposed as a façade through which *Women Win* positioned their organization as a benevolent helper. As the owner of these videos, they directly profit from sharing these girls' videos in the financial marketplace by attracting donors. While the girls certainly see some benefits of their labor, the return on investment is diminished because it is funneled through both *Women Win* and their local NGO. As Rajan and Desai (2013) noted, "Women from the global South not only do a disproportionate part of the work of globalization, but

they are also caught in the chaotic, intended and unintended machinations of global forces” (p. 6). The paradox here is that while *Women Win* carefully constructs the girls as empowered, entrepreneurs of themselves, it is *Women Win* as an organization that benefits from these representations, not the girls, furthering the use of feminized labor in the process of globalization—even in spaces that seek to liberate women from the oppressive forces of globalization.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Intercultural Professional Communication**

As this article suggests, the marriage of global development programs, postfeminist subjectivity, and “democratic” digital media requires further scrutiny. Digital media’s democratic elements do not happily travel from the Global North to the Global South. Understanding both the regimes of truth operating in digital representations as well as the means of production helps to further contextualize and understand the political economy of affective labor. Through the case study of the *Women Win*’s DST project, unpacking subject positions of girls through Girl Effect programming and participatory culture enables us to see the hidden power dynamic operating between the girls and *Women Win*. In providing a critical case study of *Women Win*’s DST project, our hope is that future deployments of digital media in transnational contexts will interrogate the intricate layers of subjectivity and agency produced by both the representations themselves and the means of producing representations.

For scholars and practitioners of intercultural professional communication, the *Women Win* DST project is reflective of “large culture” ideologies, privileging the Global North’s postfeminist discourses of empowerment and The Girl Effect, as well as utopian perceptions of participatory, digital media culture, over the microcultural factors that shape the lives of the individual girls and their communities (Agboka, 2012). Despite the fact that the individual girls and their

communities are the subject of these DST videos, the prevailing narrative structure and the visual design reflects large culture ideologies. This case study serves as a cautionary tale to intercultural communicators in that transnational NGOs may wish to tell particular kinds of stories that reflect certain cultural norms, even with the stated purpose of aid to the Global South. When designing the communication for cross-cultural technology training initiatives, it is imperative to evaluate the ideologies that circulate in that training, and ensure that partners from the Global South are not solely in service of the political economy of affective labor for the Global North, rather than building locally desired and effective technological infrastructure in the Global South.

For international professional and technical communicators, this requires an intervention in the manner in which training materials for DST projects are created and used. If the videos create specific messages for an audience in the Global North, what might DST videos for a cross-cultural audience look like, and how might training materials scaffold their creation? As an example, Bennett, Eglash, and Krishnamoorthy (2011) used a Virtual Design Studio model to bridge cultural perspectives to create an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign in the Global South that would resonate with audiences in both the Global North and South. As the authors note, graphic design and technical communication research has shown that there is a “visual vernacular” of specific cultures (p. 189). Visual symbols and codes vary across culture, and as our analysis of the *Women Win* DST videos has shown, the visual iconography of these videos reflects Western ideologies, despite the fact that they tell stories about girls and women from the Global South. Technical communicators must work dialogically with partners in the Global South to design and create training materials for DST projects that allow for the visual vernacular of the culture in which the videos are made, and do not privilege Western visual and aural cues and resulting ideologies.

In the case of the *Women Win* trainings, the training program bifurcates “Storytelling Skill Building” and “Facilitation and Technical Skill Mastery.” This storytelling training names “the” digital storytelling methodology, which seems to suggest that this method may articulate a singular approach imbued with the Global Northern ideologies critiqued in this piece. We suggest that improved

training processes consist of new technical trainings that incorporate both storytelling and technical aspects of the work. This may include discussion of the visual vernacular and what specific images and sounds evoke in the locality in which they exist, so that the voice-over narration and the other video and audio, taken together, reflect the girls' and women's visual vernacular instead of Western ideologies.

A more localized approach in which NGO specialists and professional and technical communicators learn and listen in reciprocity with local communities would ensure that technology initiatives do not exist solely for the benefit of Western ideological purposes (Gajjala, 2004). The difficulty faced in a DST project such as *Women Win* is that the local stories and local digital labor serve as a guise so as to potentially look as though it is doing just that. What is necessary is to go beyond the superficial appearance of local stories and local digital labor in the project, and investigate how DST instructions and other training materials might be suggesting a Western visual vernacular rather than a local one.

As another step, international professional and technical communication researchers need to also work dialogically with communities in the Global South to fully examine the effects of this kind of cross-cultural technology initiative—beyond the videos themselves—to uncover whether the effect of DST projects such as *Women Win* moves beyond the creation of promotional videos for Western donations to NGOs. It is important to look beyond the participatory and collaborative veneer of the DST project and ask whether technology (or technology training) is the solution for a local problem (Gitau, Diga, Bidwell, & Marsden, 2010). It is only then that we may know if women and girls in the Global South are truly “winning.” ■

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## About the authors

Dawn Opel, JD, PhD, is postdoctoral research fellow with the IHR Nexus Lab for Digital Humanities and Transdisciplinary Informatics and Computational Innovation Group at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on user experience and design of communication, with emphasis on health and medical contexts. She teaches courses in technical communication, professional writing, and new media. She is a member of ATTW, CPTSC, and SIGDOC, and has recently published work in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* and *Transformative Works and Cultures*. (480-727-7264).

**Email.** Dawn.Opel@asu.edu

**URL.** <http://nexuslab.org/people/dawn-opel>

### Contact.

Arizona State University  
Nexus Lab c/o Institute for Humanities Research  
P.O. Box 876505  
Tempe, AZ 85287-6505  
USA

Paulette Stevenson is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric, Writing, and Literacies at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on sports for development projects, transnational feminism, and global iterations of Title IX. She teaches composition courses for ASU's Writing Programs. She presents at regional, national, and international conferences and is a member of CCC and NCTE. (480-965-3168).

**Email.** Paulette@asu.edu

**URL.** [paulettestevenson.com](http://paulettestevenson.com)



**Contact.**

Arizona State University  
Writing Programs  
P.O. Box 870302  
Tempe, AZ 85287-0302  
USA

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# MAKING EXPERTISE VISIBLE

## A disruptive workplace study with a social justice goal

Rebecca Walton

*Utah State University, USA*

Workplace studies in technical and professional communication primarily have focused on formalized workplaces in the Global North, a narrow scope that can lead to oppressive, normalizing assumptions regarding what on-the-ground practice of professional communication looks like. This article conveys how nonelite youth in Rwanda engage in technology-mediated communication to find and conduct work. This research highlights the legitimacy of participants' technological expertise within and for their professional and cultural contexts. Presenting pictures of work-relevant communication that occurs primarily outside of formalized organizations and that involves primarily short-term work, these findings broaden our field's understanding of what it means to use technology in professionally relevant ways.

**Keywords.** Workplace study, Social justice, Technology, Rwanda.

With their focus on the day-to-day practice of work and the communication facilitating it, workplace studies can yield valuable insights for the field of technical and professional communication (TPC). Unfortunately, workplace studies in TPC primarily have focused on formalized workplaces in the Global North, a narrow scope that can lead to oppressive, normalizing assumptions regarding what on-the-ground practice of professional communication looks like. The relation of this narrow scope to issues of social justice becomes clear when we note that many of the people whose work experiences and practices are underrepresented and whose expertise is underrecognized occupy positions of lesser privilege.



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Privilege is an unearned advantage related to a preferred status—such as being male or being able-bodied—that benefits those who are granted this status to the exclusion and detriment of those who are not (Black & Stone, 2005, p. 244). People who do not occupy positions of privilege encounter various forms and degrees of oppression, which has been defined as the inhibition of one’s ability to develop and engage one’s capacities and to express needs, feelings, and thoughts (Young, 2009, p. 55). Within the field of TPC, there is a growing body of work that engages with issues of social justice: i.e., that “investigates how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people” (Jones & Walton, forthcoming). One way to amplify agency is to explicitly recognize, to make visible, the expertise of oppressed people.

Making visible some of that underrecognized expertise, this article presents findings from an exploratory study of how nonelite youth in Kigali, Rwanda, use and perceive computers and cell phones in their everyday lives. One of the most prominent threads of data that emerged from this research involves how youth use communication technologies to find and perform paid work. Their technology usage occurs primarily outside of formalized organizations and involves primarily short-term work, reflecting norms that disrupt some of our field’s expectations regarding sites and contexts of workplace studies and regarding how people use technology for the world of work. Patterns of work-relevant technology usage shine light on the expert tactics of nonelite young people as they 1) earn money, 2) seek employment, and 3) risk harm in their pursuit of paid work. The findings from this exploratory research highlight the legitimacy of participants’ technological expertise within and for their professional and cultural contexts, expertise that can broaden our field’s understanding of what it means to use technology in professionally relevant ways.

## **Workplace Studies**

To understand the functions and improve the practice of professional communication, it is important to study not just static representations of communication such as texts but also the practices of which they are a part, the

broader contexts within which they function, and the technologies used to create and share them (Rude, 2009, p. 181). Workplace studies investigate day-to-day practices and challenges of work and the technology that facilitates it in complex environments (Heath & Luff, 2000, p. 8). By the end of the 1990s, workplace studies of practice had become common in our field (Zachry, 2000), with scholars studying the communication of professionals in areas such as engineering (Winsor, 1999), accounting (Devitt, 1991), and military research (Henderson, 1996). Research in the situated practice of workplace communication continues, with studies focusing on workers who do (e.g., McCarthy, Grabill, Hart-Davidson, McLeod, 2011) and do not (e.g., Jones, 2014) identify primarily as writers.

Typically, these studies have been situated within professional workplace organizations, but a variety of factors are calling into question dominant notions of what is considered “professional” and what is considered a “workplace.” Affecting the “place” of “workplace,” distributed work environments are becoming increasingly common, thanks to the rise of outsourcing, telecommuting, and virtual teams (Ware, 2002). Recent services such as coworking also shift notions of what constitutes a “workplace,” particularly for those involved in freelancing, independent contracting, and other extra- and cross-institutional work (Spinuzzi, 2012). Disrupting dominant notions of both “workplace” and “professional,” Petersen (2014) noted that professional identity is often linked with institutions but that ignoring extra-institutional professional practice is marginalizing to populations whose opportunities to earn income lie outside of institutions: “Their lack of legitimacy as professionals is a problem” (p. 278). This is especially true considering that, as Kimball (2006) pointed out, “more technical communication [is] happening outside, between, and through corporations and other institutions” (p. 67). The inadequacy of dominant notions of “professional” and “workplace” to account for this technical communication highlights gaps in the field’s body of workplace studies.

To address these gaps, we need more research that takes a critical approach to what traditionally has been an instrumental concern: effective use of technology to facilitate work practice. Contextualized, situated research

addressing a wide range of professional environments is important, as scholars have noted that social and cultural considerations at multiple levels—e.g., the organization, the professional field, the local community, the nation—are key to the effective practice of work and work-relevant communication (Agboka, 2013a; Dura, Singhal, & Elias, 2013; Jones, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2011; Walton, Mays, & Haselkorn, 2016). For example, McCarthy et al. (2011) found that social structures significantly affected how employees used communication tools and technologies to accomplish their work, Walton et al. (2016) found that change management must be informed by professional communication and practices that are congruent with organizational culture, and Agboka (2013a) found that linguistic translation did not result in useful, appropriate product information when unaccompanied by broader understandings of cultural context and norms. This research suggests, therefore, that instrumental considerations are insufficient to understand the relevance of technology to the world of work and that many, varied, local pictures of workplace practice are necessary to understand how technology facilitates and impedes work-relevant goals, communication, and practice.

## **Rwandan Context**

In Rwandan cultural and economic contexts, youth and technology are often linked. Reflecting this linkage, the Rwandan national ministries of Youth and of Information and Communication Technology were merged in 2012 into a single government ministry called MINICYOUTH, which focuses on supporting youth economic empowerment (Kanyesigye, 2012). Rwandan youth have been described as “the ultimate drivers of Rwanda’s development agenda” (Kanyesigye, 2012), and the Rwandan government has invested heavily in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, believing technology to be a vital investment in the country’s long-term development (Republic of Rwanda, 2000; National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2014). The country’s national budget is 30-40 percent development aid, and the investments in youth and technology

represent a major part of the nation's ambitious development agenda (World Bank, 2014; National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2014, p. 5).

However, for all the effort and investment in promoting ICTs in Rwanda, surprisingly little research has explored technology usage in Rwandan contexts. Researchers have investigated the use of mobile phones by Rwandan business owners (Donner, 2006) and differences among Rwandan mobile users in terms of gender and income (Blumenstock et al., 2010). One quantitative survey conducted at a Rwandan youth center found that youths' likelihood of computer usage increased with frequent access to computers and training programs, and that female youth involvement in the computer center was positively associated with employment of female instructors (Bandyopadhyay & Negash, 2009; Negash, 2012). But this research does not shed light on how Rwandan youth use ICTs, and even less is known about the effects of these technologies on their well-being—financial, professional, and otherwise. Generating this understanding of how youth use and think about technologies in their daily life is hugely important, considering not only the centrality of youth and technology to the government's economic goals but also the grim plight of nonelite Rwandan youth.

The 1994 genocide and the following HIV/AIDS epidemic orphaned hundreds of thousands of Rwandan children, separating them from the traditional care-giving structure of extended families (Ward & Eyber, 2009) and leading to what was a new social phenomenon in Rwanda: youth-headed households. Approximately 10 years postgenocide, there were an estimated 250,000-plus households headed by youth who lacked adult caregivers (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Rwandans who were children during the genocide have now become youth, defined in the Rwandan context as unmarried people 14 to 35 years old (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2014). Youth comprise more than half of the population in Kigali, the nation's capital (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2014, p. xix), and by 2012, youth-headed households were so common that more than 40 percent of male urban youth were the oldest person in their household, each of which had an average of three young people (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2014, p. 54).

Research revealed that youth heads of household are separated from extended families and communities (Thurman et al., 2006). Socially marginalized youth, who have weakened or severed family and social ties, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and drug use (Stevens, 1999). These nonelite youth face rigid social requirements to achieve adult status: young men must procure acceptable housing before proposing marriage, and female youth must marry and give birth to children to achieve social status as adult women. When socially acceptable standards of adulthood are too difficult to attain, youth becomes not a transition period between childhood and adulthood but a permanent period of limbo (Singerman, 2007, p. 6). This is the case for many Rwandan youth:

Severe manhood pressures—and, as a result, the strong chance that many male youth would never be recognized as men in society—emerged as the dominant theme of the research in Rwanda. The threat of failed masculinity in rural areas is having a kind of domino effect on Rwandan society, most particularly on female youth and increasing numbers of rural youth who are migrating to cities, especially Kigali. . . . Delayed adulthood for men means delayed adulthood for women. Marriage and giving birth to children are prerequisites of socially acceptable womanhood. (Sommers & Uvin, 2011, p. 3)

Failure to achieve adult social status is humiliating, creating emotional and financial pressure on nonelite youth and leading to further isolation (Sommers, 2012). A crux of this challenge is the difficulty of finding work; 42 percent of Rwandan youth are unemployed or underemployed (African Economic Outlook, 2012, p. 2). Considering this social and economic context, it is unsurprising that a major theme to emerge from exploratory research on nonelite youths' use of technology was its relevance to finding and performing paid work.

## **Methods**

The exploratory research study<sup>1</sup> investigated how nonelite youth in Kigali used and thought about ICTs such as mobile phones and computers. Eligibility for participation required meeting the following inclusion criteria: 1) 18–35 years old;



2) unmarried; 3) lacking an adult caregiver; 4) living, working, or going to school in Kigali; and 5) at least occasionally using communication technology such as computers and/or mobile phones. Potential participants were recruited through a peer-counseling organization with ties to local youth. Participants selected the methods in which they wanted to engage: participating solely in a semistructured interview or (1) drawing a map of a recent day and noting when and where they used ICTs, then participating in a subsequent interview and/or (2) creating a drawing or collage to represent their experiences with ICTs, also followed by an interview. Each participant who elected to create a collage was provided with a packet of 120 images that had been compiled according to the following criteria: (a) representing a broad range of subject matter to facilitate freedom of expression (Soucy, 2012) and (b) representing subject matter likely to be recognizable and relevant to participants. For example, building images were Kigali buildings and money images were Rwandan francs. Prior to data collection, leaders of the peer-counseling organization reviewed collage images to identify any that could be distressing to vulnerable youth participants. Based on their review, four of the 120 images were removed from packets before they were provided to participants.

A gender-balanced group of twenty participants conveyed their ICT experiences: two created maps; five created drawings; nine created collages; two created maps and collages; and two participated solely in semistructured interviews. Five participants spoke primarily English, and fifteen spoke Kinyarwanda. The same interpreter, a native of Kigali, was present for data collection with every participant, including English speakers. Interviews were documented through digital audio recordings and typed notes. Onsite in Kigali, interview notes were fleshed out in collaboration with the interpreter, who informed early analysis by culturally contextualizing the data.

The interviews—including those that followed visual methods—addressed the following topics: how participants perceived ICTs as beneficial or helpful, how they perceived ICTs as harmful or problematic, the types of ICT devices that participants used and why those devices, what participants used ICTs to do and why those kinds of uses, and where participants used ICTs. The Findings section presents a subset of what participants shared about these topics, focusing on the

relevance of ICTs to seeking and performing paid work. Findings were identified through iterative formal coding of interview notes and transcripts to identify patterns of meaning. The first round of coding noted all direct and indirect mention of work-relevant technology use, including use of words like “job” and “work,” as well as descriptions of how participants earn money. During this first round of coding, I created memos to note potential patterns and relationships among these patterns. Themes emerged through iterative reviews of the memos and data culled in the first round of coding. These themes included three relevant types of experiences:

- **Conducting Work:** How ICTs play a role in the various ways that youth earn money.
- **Seeking Work:** How youth use ICTs to find opportunities to earn money.
- **Risking Harm:** The types of harm that youth are at risk of experiencing in their efforts to find and conduct paid work.

## **Findings**

Work-relevant technology use was a prominent thread of data in this exploratory study, with nineteen of the twenty participants identifying this usage as a part of their day-to-day lives. Participants brought up work-relevant technology use when discussing their most important use of technology, problems that technology solves and causes, most frequent use of technology, and ways technology makes people happy. For example, one participant used the image on page 167 (Figure 1) in her collage.

She explained its meaning saying, “This person is laughing, and sometimes people call you and tell you something happy and you laugh.” Asked for an example, she replied that it makes her happy if someone calls to say that they have found her a short job.

Figure 1



The most frequently described work-relevant activities involved using mobile phones to call, text message, share photos, and enter appointments onto the phone's calendar. Several people explained that they prefer calling for work-relevant communication but will text when they lack the money to call. Computer use was not ubiquitous, but several participants described typing documents such as letters and reports and looking for images online (more detail in the Conducting Work section). A few participants said that their use of ICTs was solely focused on seeking or conducting work:

Interviewer: What I think I hear you saying is that your phone's only purpose now is to get you a job.

Participant: Yes. It helps to get my everyday food, to get a job, to get money for rent.

## **Conducting Work**

Participants' work varied widely: e.g., manual labor, sales, service, and office work. Manual labor included *ubuyede*, carrying away construction rubble; washing clothes; and bringing water. Even this type of work participants described as involving ICTs:

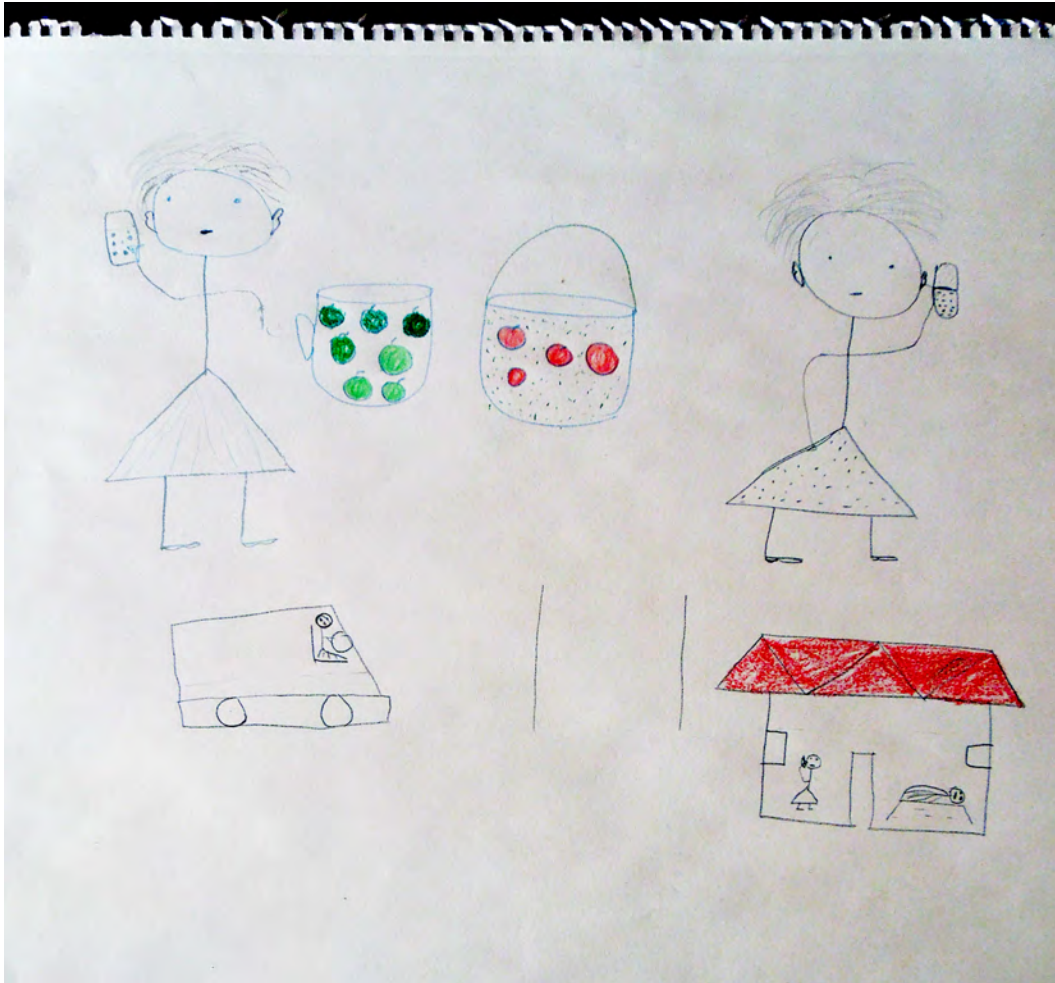
We are living with women neighbors, and there are some women who have my [cell phone] number, and they can call me and tell me that there is some job of bringing water and they tell me to be quick and I take the jerry can and I go.

Several participants described mobile phones as useful for selling products, such as fruit. One participant drew the image on page 169 (Figure 2) to represent her day-to-day experience of technology. She explained that she used to sell fruits by walking the streets carrying a basket on her head. But in Rwanda it is against the law to sell things on the street, especially in Kigali, and she was frequently caught and jailed by the national police:

They chase you and give you some trouble, and you can fall because you are a woman, and they can take your things which you are selling.

So for the past year, she engaged in a new work practice: buying fruit in the Nyabugogo market and using her cell phone to call clients and describe the fruit she had available. Her previous work practice was good, she said, because it allowed for a wider range of customers, but this way allows her to avoid arrest, confiscation of her wares, and associated fees. Her expertise in navigating constraints of the local context is reflected in this revised practice, which is

Figure 2



contingent upon sufficient distribution of technology—i.e., enough of her customers have mobile phones—and upon culturally accepted technology use—i.e., the local appropriateness of calling previous customers to initiate a sale. This practice serves as an example of what Kimball (2006), drawing from de Certeau, called tactical technical communication. Specifically, this participant engages in de Certeau’s tactic *bricolage* to earn her living: an illicit, creative misuse of tools and systems to achieve one’s own ends (as cited in Kimball, 2006, p. 72).

Regarding the service industry, a few participants worked as freelance designers, creating posters, signs, business cards, and other print materials for local businesses. Participants described using their phones to discuss clients' needs and then using the Internet—specifically Google—to search for pictures to use in the documents. At this point, practice varied. One participant described saving images to a flash drive, showing them to the client who selected images, and then going to a shop where people digitally modify images and describing the required changes for her client, paying to have the documents printed in A4 or A3 format, and delivering them to her client. Another participant performed desktop publishing himself:

Interviewer: What are some ways you use a computer in your life?

Participant: I am a designer. [He pulls a banner out of the bag he brought to the interview.] . . . First, you tell me what you want, what you sell in your shop. You can call me, talk face to face, or can send [text] message. You give me the name that you want to design. You give me what you want designed, and I go to research in Google and I search the photo and insert in a flash [drive] and start to access computer design, and I use Publisher, Photoshop, Illustrator.

This data suggests that the range of skills varies among freelance designers in Kigali. Knowledge of local resources, such as print shops that digitally modify images, can reduce the level of technological skill necessary to engage in professional design practice in this context. The most important professional skills for successful design work may not be expertise with design software but rather the ability to understand client needs and to apply locally available resources to ensure that documents meet those needs. Thus, what it means to work as a designer is a fluid concept influenced by local context and culture.

Participants who performed office work described using mobile phones to clarify instructions, to receive new tasks, and to inquire whether they should bring anything on the way to the office. Regarding computer use, participants typed reports and budgets, often using flash drives to move and share files:

You can share files with a flash and move data easily from computer to computer. You want to use a document that is in another computer, and instead of typing it fresh, you can save it on a flash drive, put it in your other computer and make modification without having to type it all over again. Instead of using email for sharing document, you can use flash. Sometimes you don't have Internet access, but flash is sharing directly without retyping.

Again, the importance of locally informed technological expertise is apparent. Circumventing the constraints of fluctuating Internet access, participants followed local norms by carrying flash drives to permit the sharing of files.

None of the participants said that they worked full time for a formal organization. Participants worked for themselves (e.g., as fruit sellers or freelance designers) or on an as-needed or seasonal basis (e.g., for local shops, neighbors, or construction gigs). Even office employment was almost exclusively short-time work, such as being hired to type some reports for a local judge, with the sole exception being a participant who worked as a full-time, unpaid volunteer for a local community organization.

## **Seeking Work**

Considering the prominence of short-term and freelance work, it makes sense that the second theme of work-relevant technology use involved seeking paid work. Mobile phones in particular were important, even necessary, for finding work: One participant expressed reluctance to use mobile phones but said, “. . . how can I get a job without using cell phone?” and another participant explained, “It [her mobile phone] helps me because if I don't have a mobile phone then I can't get *ikiraka* [a temporary job].” Another participant said that his only access to ICTs at present was the simple cell phone that someone had loaned him so that he could be available for calls about possible jobs, implying that he would otherwise be unable to find work. This perspective of mobile phones reflects an understanding of the local context, in which work is scarce, unemployed youth are

numerous, and the ability to earn money is often contingent upon being immediately accessible.

Youth used several types of phone features to pursue possible jobs: calling and texting to request information about possible opportunities, as well as listening to local news on their phones' radio feature for announcements regarding job openings. Again, this usage reflects important knowledge of the local context, in which radios are a common feature of even inexpensive mobile phones, job openings are announced on the news, and sending a job inquiry by text message is acceptable practice. Computer use also occasionally figured into participants' job-seeking strategies, for example, with one participant explaining that she had used a computer at an Internet café or borrowed from a friend to type her CV and application letters. A potential employer followed up to invite her to an interview, calling her mobile number, which was listed on her CV. Another participant explained that he used computers very briefly because of the cost of Internet cafés and the reluctance of friends to share computers for longer than a few minutes. When asked what he would do if he could use a computer as long as he liked, he replied:

Participant: The first thing I would do, because I am jobless and want to finish my studies, is I would look for a job.

Interviewer: How? Where would you look?

Participant: You can find on those websites informing people about jobs. There is a form which indicates the name of the company and a salary, and you can fill out concerning your knowledge, your domain. You can find out that the head company, its location is far away and you don't have a ticket [i.e., you cannot afford transportation], so you don't fill out the form and you leave the job opportunity.

Participants sometimes identified work opportunities they could refer to other youth. For example, one young man learned of an opening at a bar but would not accept the position due to, he implied, religious beliefs, so he referred a former



classmate. Another participant had trained as an electrician, which is work that requires more than one person, so when he finds a short-term job, he can recruit two or three friends. He used his mobile phone not only to learn of work opportunities and to contact additional people to hire but also to pay them using mobile banking. He explained that rather than having to physically visit each person's home in the evening to give them a cash payment, he could use mobile banking to receive and distribute the payment himself, or the person who hired him could pay each person directly using mobile money.

Even more than official channels of information such as radio news announcements, youth identified their social networks—neighbors, former school friends, friends from church, people with whom they had worked on previous short-term jobs—as vital to finding paid work:

The way we use [ICTs] in our everyday life, I cannot find work many times. I can find credit to put in my phone and can call someone to ask if they have some job for me, and they can tell me if there is or not, and if there is no job, I can think of another person who may have a job for me. That is the way I use a phone.

For participants, who lacked adult caregivers, these unofficial channels of information served as tactics—literally used “to survive” (Kimball, 2006, p. 71). Personal connections and referrals are vital resources for finding and securing work in Rwandan contexts: for example, one participant with a lower level of education characterized her disadvantage not in terms of limited skills but in terms of limited social networks. The types of information that participants sought from their social contacts included deadlines for submitting a CV, the going pay rates for certain types of work such as construction, how to get to a location with potential work opportunities, and the availability of formerly open positions. Thus, youth described spending much of their energy each day seeking short-term work, sharing their mobile number widely:

According to the washing of clothes, there are some times I will go with other women looking for a job. We will all stand at the gates and ask passersby if they

have a short job for us [like washing clothes or getting water]. . . . When we are going to ask for the job of washing clothes, they ask for your number and after I give it to them, if they find that the clothes I washed before were very clean, they can call me again.

You can find me working some construction jobs, and you give me your number. You could call me to offer such kind of work. Even when you find a job [an opportunity for work elsewhere], you can call me, and I will come and you tell me where the place is with the job and I will go there, using communication through mobile phone.

This strategy of sharing one's number not only with friends and acquaintances but also with any former or potential employer not only maximized youths' opportunities to learn of work but also their vulnerability to threats and disappointments.

## **Risking Harm**

The third theme involved harm that youth risked in their efforts to find paid work. These involved emotional threats, such as discouragement and despair, as well as physical threats, such as theft and assault. Previous research has described nonelite Rwandan youths' strategies for protecting their own mental and emotional wellbeing, for example accepting one's fate rather than hoping for what seems impossible (Sommers & Uvin, 2011, pp. 5-6) and being intentional and strategic about their use of ICTs (Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015). In keeping with that previous research, these findings suggest that, when possible, youth used ICTs to protect themselves from despair and other negative emotions associated with repeatedly unsuccessful employment pursuits:

There are some places where I look for a job, and they ask for my number. . . . They tell me to come back and come back, and it makes me feel bad. So I call [instead of visiting in person]. Sometimes if you're in person they ask for money.

In other words, the disappointment is less sharp and the risk of being asked for money is less likely when following up on potential work by phone rather than traveling to the location in person—and thus spending more money on transportation versus mobile phone minutes. However, sometimes disappointments and challenges were unavoidable in the relentless pursuit of short-term work. For example, one participant described being invited to call potential employers in a week but missing the opportunities because he lacked funds to buy cell minutes or found that his phone lacked a battery and he could not charge it. Other participants described the frustration of being lied to when a position had already been filled:

Another way I use a mobile phone, which has a bad consequence, [is] when I call someone to find for me a job, and people lie to me and say that they will call me. Maybe he gave the job to another person but he tells you that he is still searching for a person [to hire]. The person gave the job to another person and doesn't want to tell you. Every time you call, they say they will call you.

Being lied to through technology-mediated communication—most commonly calling and texting—was a frequently mentioned example of youths' negative experiences with technology. Participants explained that people who owe you money—presumably for short-term work, given the conversational context—could say that they are out of the country or otherwise too far away to meet even if they are in town. Several participants said that it is harder to tell when someone is lying when the person is just a voice on the phone or a brief text message. This difficulty in gauging intentions can have dire consequences for vulnerable youth who are desperate to secure employment:

There are thieves who can call and tell you that he will give you a job, but he will rob you of your phone when you show up, maybe kill you, you don't know. People may call with a plan to rendezvous and after when you meet, do something bad to you. You didn't know he would do something bad to you because he used a phone and promised something good.

Participant: Using a phone can cause bad things. [For example] on the phone, I can have a phone like if I am a teenager and someone can call you and ask you to meet some place and lie to you on the phone. Or you can call someone who owes you a debt and they can lie on the phone.

Interviewer: What is bad about this?

Participant: It can be a person because you are a teenager who calls and tells you he will give you some money, a job, but there are some people who want to rape small girls or rob them.

Interviewer: Has this happened to someone you know?

Participant: Many. [Participant looks down; eyes are red.]

A locally informed understanding of work-relevant technology use would be incomplete without the consideration of harm that youth risk in their efforts to secure paid work. Ironically, this threat—thrift and physical attack by people using mobile phones to make disingenuous offers of employment—is amplified by youths' expertise in locally appropriate technology use: widely sharing their mobile number to expand their social networks and therefore increase the likelihood of finding and securing paid work.

## **Implications for TPC**

In showcasing nonelite Rwandan youths' work-relevant technology use, this article offers some important takeaways for technical and professional communication (TPC) teachers who are introducing the next generation of practitioners to the field and for TPC scholars who conduct research in Global South contexts. As teachers, it is our responsibility to facilitate students in developing a critical view that allows them to see past the "tyranny of the 'real'" (Herndl, 1993, p. 350): to look beyond instrumental concerns of efficiently conforming to industry cultures and conventions (Scott, 2004) to understand cultural consequences of the dominant perspective and the experiences and

expertise that perspective may exclude (Haas, 2012). One way that we can support students in developing these critical views is to expose them to more diverse pictures of what it looks like to engage in professional communication. As scholars, we have a responsibility to design research that opens spaces for the values, knowledge, and experiences of participants to emerge and to garner the respect those values, knowledge, and experiences deserve (Agboka, 2013; Dura et al., 2013)—a responsibility that I would argue is especially important when working in Global South contexts. Indeed, if we do not respect the expertise and experience of local stakeholders as equally legitimate as that of researchers, we are implicated in “colonial exploitation and objectification of users in cultural sites, especially those in disempowered, unenfranchised cultural sites” (Agboka, 2013b, p. 31). Applicable to both of these goals—1) exposing students to broader notions of professional communication and 2) designing research that intentionally seeks out overlooked, underrepresented expertise—is the practice of identifying and reconsidering assumptions that are based on an oppressively narrow view of the field.

For example, TPC students and scholars may assume that technology-mediated communication plays a negligible role—if any—in certain types of occupations, such as manual labor or unregulated person-to-person sales. I would suggest that this assumption is rooted in outdated, elite notions of professionalism, which Petersen (2014) pointed out are changing and need to change because these notions exclude the experiences of marginalized groups. The findings of this exploratory study show many pictures of technology-mediated communication that is vital to the procuring and the performing of work outside of formalized organizations in occupations that do not fit traditional definitions of “professional,” e.g., when neighbors use a mobile phone to hire a young woman to grab her jerry can and bring water, when a young man calls former classmates to ask about the going rate for construction labor to inform his negotiations, or when a fruit seller calls former customers to describe her current wares.

A similar assumption directly opposed by these findings is that ICTs are luxuries irrelevant to the lives of nonelite populations in the Global South. This research counters such assumptions by illustrating the importance of *kairos* in

obtaining short-term work in Kigali and the affordances of ICTs for seeking those kairotic moments. With the rhetorical question, “How can I get a job without cell phone?” one participant makes clear not just the relevance but the *necessity* of ICTs. Paid work is scarce, and willing laborers are numerous. Cell phones are important professional communication tools that enable youth to constantly seek for kairotic moments, for times when employers are hiring for short-term work.

Also called into question by the findings of this workplace study are narrowly informed views of appropriate technology use. What it means to be technologically literate and to use technology appropriately varies according to many factors, including the cultures and communities in which that technology usage occurs (Haas, 2012, p. 304; Walton, Putnam, Johnson, & Kolko, 2009). It is vital that technical communicators seek out examples “that reflect a larger history of technological design and use by people of color and that in turn rupture widely held theoretical and political assumptions and racial stereotypes about technological expertise” (Haas, 2012, p. 288). The findings reported here are rich with examples useful for interrogating appropriate use of technology for workplace contexts: Should a prospective applicant text a company to ask if the position is still open? Is it acceptable to call past customers to describe your current wares? And what is a cell phone for: Listening to the radio for job openings? Receiving payment for the day’s work? In some contexts, communities, and cultures, yes.

And yet it would be dangerously simplistic to assume that communication technology is purely beneficial for those who are seeking and conducting work in highly competitive and highly networked environments, such as that of the Kigali youth in this study. Ding’s (2009) caution against simplistic binaries rings true in this context: “Rather than relying on the binary of ‘should’ or ‘should not,’ we can benefit from a thorough exploration of the costs, dangers, and implications of available options before making well-informed and carefully deliberated decisions” (p. 344). Just as it would be irresponsible for technical communicators to take a simplistically universal stance regarding opposing institutional dictates—which was Ding’s point in the above quote—it would be irresponsible to advocate a

simplistic position regarding whether and how to use technology-mediated communication in work contexts of the Global South.

These findings show that communication technologies can offer vital benefits for nonelite youths' work practices, such as avoiding arrests, fees, and the confiscation of wares for street vendors. But for those same vendors, replacing traditional approaches with technology-mediated approaches has drawbacks: e.g., constraining the pool of possible customers. A higher-stakes example of the risks and rewards of technology-mediated communication relates to the widespread networking practices in which participants engaged: Possible rewards include a much larger network of potential employers and a quicker, cheaper way of connecting with them; possible risks include becoming vulnerable to theft and physical attack by those making deceitful employment offers. Participants are aware of these realities; they weigh these risks and rewards as they navigate their day-to-day work environments and use technology-mediated communication to find and conduct work. TPC students and scholars need to be careful not to make assumptions that narrowly constrain their view of the field in ways that exclude the experiences and expertise of marginalized populations.

## **Conclusions**

This exploratory study illustrates that many nonelite youth are using ICTs in efforts to pursue their own priorities and that ICTs play vital roles in both finding and conducting work of various types, from sales to manual labor. Youths' efforts to pursue paid work often serve as examples of tactical technical communication (Kimball, 2006) which make apparent the mutually influential relationship between technology and culture (Haas, 2012). In becoming attuned to the technological expertise of nonelite Rwandan youth, we see, for example, that being able to access and use design software is relevant but not required to become a professional designer, that narrowing one's customer base may be worth the trade off in avoiding potential arrests, that manual labor may require access to a mobile phone, and that engaging in culturally appropriate job-seeking strategies can put one at risk of physical harm.

In light of these examples, the inadequacy of our current body of workplace studies, a body focused on formalized organizations in the Global North, becomes clear. This focus—this *exclusion*—is a social justice issue: it is a manifestation of unearned preferred status (privilege) that excludes the expertise and experiences of oppressed people. Thus, one goal of sharing these findings is a social justice goal: to make space in our field’s body of workplace studies for a more diverse range of meanings, experience, and expertise. Often the expertise of oppressed people is overlooked because it is tactical, not strategic. It operates alongside, beneath, and even against strategic—i.e., sanctioned, official, institutional—expertise (Kimball, 2006), and these are the histories and stories that go untold (Haas, 2012). Rather than ignoring these work-relevant tactics and experiences—and thus, being implicated in cultural imperialism—we “need to broaden our field of view to account for technical communication as a practice extending beyond and between organizations” (Kimball, 2006, p. 69). We need more workplace studies in geographic regions largely ignored by our field and focused on people whose livelihoods involve work practice outside, between, and beyond formalized organizations. Looking beyond Western formalized organizations can inform a more nuanced understanding of not only what our field encompasses—but also why it matters. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Walton, Price, & Zraly, 2013 for more information about the process of gaining research approval from the in-country review board and Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015 for more information about engaging in the community-based research methods.



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## About the author

Rebecca Walton is an assistant professor of technical communication and rhetoric at Utah State University. She studies the role that communication can play in more equitably distributing power. Her research interests include social justice, human dignity and human rights, and qualitative methods for cross-cultural research. Her work has appeared in *Technical Communication Quarterly*; *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*; and *Information Technologies and International Development*, as well as other journals and edited collections.

**Email.** rebecca.walton@usu.edu

**URL.** <https://english.usu.edu/htm/about/directory/USERNAME=A01658078/>

**Contact.**

Utah State University  
Department of English  
RWST 301A  
USA

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**connexions INTERVIEWS**







connexions interview with  
**REBECCA DINGO**

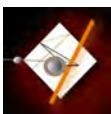
Transcript of the interview with Rebecca Dingo, an associate professor of composition and rhetoric in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA.

The interview was recorded for issue 4(1). It was conducted by Han Yu, via Skype, on January 4, 2016. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Han Yu, *connexions'* section editor.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/166974163>

**What opportunities does the Global South present for professional communication scholars and practitioners?**

I think that the Global South presents several different kinds of opportunities. I think for one thing that... as rhetoric and communication scholars... that we can, I think, learn through cross-cultural communication. And so, for one thing, particularly in the US where we're very isolated, uh... I think that the Global South can offer us new ways of thinking that we might not have thought about before because of how isolated that we are. And that... I'm thinking about Arabella Lyon's work, which...



who is a cross-cultural rhetorical scholar. Uh... I just finished her book, and one of the things that I think she demonstrates so well is... uh... the way that if we were to mix those Western notions of rhetoric with Eastern notions of rhetoric, we would come up with a very different notion of deliberation, which is what her book focuses on. What her argument is is that human rights issues may be better solved by mixing these kinds of communication styles, and so what I see that the Global South offers uh... scholars in the West is ways to rethink, kind of, our rhetorical practices. Uh... but I also think that... I think by joining together we can create new rhetorical practices that are better at... that are going to be better suited to solve problems in the world.

**What challenges does the Global South present for professional communication scholars and practitioners? You mentioned that in the US, we are very isolated. Would you say that is one of the challenges?**

Yeah, I think that's actually one of the major issues. And so... I think that oftentimes, I look at in, sort of, popular media or—not even... not so popular media but just, sort of, Web 2.0 media—at the way that the Global South tends to be represented in the US is, you know, a bunch of cultures that are pretty... although they are represented as being very essentialized in some ways, but the same kinds of ways of representing occur over and over again. I mean, for example, women from the Global South are considered to be this monolithic group that needs to be saved by, you know, Western intervention or by... or that men need to change their... the way that they act in the Global South. But, in fact, I think that it's much more dynamic than that. Uh... I mean, I know that... I know that it's much more dynamic, and so it's important. I think that... would you repeat the question again?

Uh... yes, yes... the biggest challenge I think is to think beyond what it is that we are constantly fed in popular media about what is happening across the world, and to think about what stories we are not hearing and to think about, sort of, the cases that we hear as exceptional as opposed to the norm, uh... and so, kind of, to do more research. And I'm thinking here again of Rachel Riedner's work, and she has a book that just came out, and it's called *Writing Neoliberal Values*. And one of the

arguments that she makes in that book is that we have to start thinking about the bits of texts and, sort of, these stories that we... kind of... that are hinted at and follow them to understand more about global economy and the... more specifically about how, uh... everyday lives are lived and not necessarily these exceptional stories. And so... I think one of the biggest challenges is to be more aware of, um, political... eco... geopolitical and economical issues that connect us all but how that they end up expressing themselves differently in each... each culture, um... and understand in the West, too, that we're at the... we... we are a source... we are a place of power and that, um, we have to be mindful of the way that we have been brought up to understand the US as being this... this exceptional place... um... and understand that we are a part of this global economy.

**Given media's stereotyping of the Global South, how can we step outside of the stereotypes to really approach the Global South?**

I think that that's a good question. Um... I think one... I think there is one... one sort of more... a simple way to do it, although I think that this has complications in saying that. Um... I think that people who do ethnographic projects in the Global South are really... they do really important work because we hear on-the-ground voices of actual people; um... and that's one way that we can learn. And again, but to understand that the work... that that there's a power relationship between the researcher and the person, the subject that is speaking. That the subject may assume that the researcher wants to hear something specific, or the subject... the researcher may assume that all these other kinds of things about the subject. So that can be complicated, but it's certainly one way to do it. I think the other way is to be... uh, I mean, this is going to sound sort of simplistic, but I think trying to keep up with current events for one thing and think about what in the current events—what in the stories of the current events—is not being told, what is missing perhaps in that little... particularly now as information is passed so quickly via web 2.0, um... via Twitter, via Facebook, all those... that we get these snippets of stories but what are we not hearing about, um... and start to kind of delve further into the nuances.

Um... I'm trying to think of a really good example of something recent. Um... Yeah... Um..., you know, I think about, in the US in particular, we have

heard a lot about, like, the... the Syr... Syrian refugees. And what we hear about is that they 're dangerous, that they're, they're Muslims that are gonna come and, you know, produce terror and whatnot. And we're not... we don't see... I was just in... I was in Europe at the same time when this... um... when, uh, everything kind of came to a head. And in Europe, what I saw was countries that said we welcome Syrian refugees. And so to sort of think about those two different stories against each other and the nuances of, you know, why is the U... why are parts of Europe saying we welcome them, and why is the US saying we don't. And so to start to uncover the, I guess, the layers of the story is what is really important. It's hard work to do. I mean... in my research and my networking arguments book, I sort of suggest that we have to kind of unravel all of those different strands. Um... but one of the hard things I think about doing that is "When do we stop, or which strand do we actually follow?" And I don't think that there's a right or wrong answer to that. I think that you have to go where you're gonna be able to find the answers and understand that... the analysis you are doing or the research you are doing is incomplete. And that's, I think, part of the other thing as scholars is to think about, that we're only touching... uh, touching a... a little piece of the... of the larger story but that one piece might be really important in the larger picture.

**How have you addressed these various challenges in your own teaching, research, or leadership roles?**

Well, um, I feel like that is always at the back of my mind in anything I do, whether it's teaching, whether it's scholarship. And also, I'm about to take over UMASS's first-year writing... or... actually their entire writing program next year, and so it's something that I have in the back of my mind as I think about the curriculum. Um, that... I think about how ultimately, we are preparing—starting, you know, at the first... level of the first-year student—we're preparing students to work in—I mean my husband always is, so I have to give him credit—is that we're preparing students to work for jobs that don't exist yet. Um... and given, like, the way that communication has just exploded, that I can easily contact somebody in South Africa who I've done work with and hear back from them often times within a few hours, if not right away. That things happen so quickly that we have to have students to be

aware of how they are presenting themselves, how to best communicate with people and to understand sort of the context in which they come from.

So, for example, you know, I'm mindful when I did work in South Africa that the institution that I was working with was the University of Western Cape where... which was traditionally... a traditionally a... a "colored school"—what they say as a "colored school" in South Africa—where, you know, people who didn't have white skin or black skin but the in-between, you know, went to school. And I was well aware that, you know, during Apartheid that the funding for that institution was so... there was so little money that was given. And that... even though that was, you know, somewhat—not a long time ago, you know, I think 30 years ago—but we still see trickle-down effects of, you know, how people... how people who come from that institution are treated; what the expectations of that institution. And so I'm... I try to be really... I try to teach students to start being aware of those things. And I, again, having been to South Africa many... several times, I still don't fully understand that cultural context, but I am aware that I don't understand it and I'm aware of constantly trying to learn new things. And so that's one thing that I try to keep in mind even at that first-year level... is to think about that this is just starting to prepare them to work for jobs that they don't quite know that exist yet... and then also to assume that they are not going to just be communicating with each other. It's going to be a trans-global experience in the future.

Um... at the level of my graduate students, um, I actually really... I have a lot of students who end up wanting to do ethnographic work in the Global South. And I'm encouraging of them to travel, 'cause that's something that the US—that people in the US—don't do. Um, I know it's expensive for them to do, but I really encourage that. But I also want them to be mindful that, again, if they are doing on-the-ground work that they're only getting a very small piece of the pie. It's an important piece of the pie but to put it in a wider context and to understand, like, what they're... I mean I... being schooled in feminist theory and wo... women's studies, I want them to be aware of the power dynamic and how they might be using these stories, um, and under... as... as a form of capital for jobs in the future and to be aware of that dynamic and how to maybe think about... "giving back" is the wrong word, because that makes it sound like it's some sort of philanthropic, you know, kind of project, but

instead to be careful with those stories and to be mindful of how what... what they're doing with them and try to have their... the people who they're working with, um, be... be really strong participants, um, in what is said.

Um... I also asked my students, um, to be really aware of global political economy. Um, that... and that is a learning... a sharp learning curve and one that I think I'm still trying to master especially because our economic situation is constantly shifting. We went from neoliberal policy to austerity policies, and there's like a fine line between the two. But to understand that one, in the US, we are a superpower in terms of... especially within economics and that we are wealthy here and that we have a lot of resources. Um... and then to understand that those resources are dependent upon the backs of people who don't have resources—and to start thinking about that relationship. So, I try really hard to teach, you know, um, documentary films that kind of show these, because I think that oftentimes they're easier to grasp than theory by teaching them alongside theories. So, for example, I really like the movie *Life and Debt*, which is about Jamaica's, um, economy and their relationship with the International Monetary Fund. So that they understand, like, how these Western, um, wealthy super-national organizations end up affecting, like, actual lived lives, uh, lived experiences. Um, I also... I teach usually an essay, I cannot remember who it is by right now, but it's by two women who look at, um, the way Structural Adjustment Policy in... an African country but... how, because of the Structural Adjustment Policy, women had to work sort of the triple workday. They were working in the home, they were working in their farms, like their... their mini-farms, and then also selling things in the marketplace... and how gendered violence increased significantly. It correlates with Structural Adjustment Policy. So... so to think about that these policies are not just happening between big figureheads but they just trickle down into everyday lives.

Um... and for my research, gosh, that's a hard question. As I'm thinking about my next project, which I'm looking at the rise of... of... the proliferation and rise and circulation of global girl empowerment initiatives in the US and... and in Europe. Um... there's been like the Girl Effect, Girl Rising, Girl Up. And I'm really interested in why it is girls right now. It used to be women in the early part... part of the... at the, at the turn of the, from the... from... from a... to the 20th... 21st

century. And I... I'm not sure... I think I'm not... I'm not exactly sure how to... I'm, I'm really interested in the way that... the way that we have, in the US, have really embraced these, um... um... campaigns. And... I really think it's important to turn a lens on ourselves, and I think that's one of the things I want to teach graduate students, too: to be critical to understand what... even how the Global South perceives us and then how we're perceiving them. Um... so, yeah! That's not... that's not the... most, I don't know, fleshed-out answer, but it's... I'm really... it's something I'm really working on right now.

**That's very interesting. So would you say economic considerations are part of these girl empowerment initiatives?**

Yeah. Well, it's interesting that one thing that I found with one of the groups that I was looking at... it's... it's a partnership between Nike and the UN. I think it's... I think it's Girl... Girl Effect that's... or Girl Up. Anyways, it's hard to remember. They're all girl, girl girl, girl. But, Nike's business plan essentially is trying to create a market, uh, for their sneakers in the Global South by hiring... by educating girls enough so that they can work in these factories but have enough income to purchase the... the items that they're making, too. I mean, and there's... they celebrate that at the same time. So I think... I think that's part of also thinking about the pernicious underside effects of things or why, you know, why businesses are doing these things.

**With that thought and given that professional communication research and practice often involve issues of business and economics, would you say that makes professional communication scholars and practitioners well poised to address social justice issues in the Global South?**

Yeah, I think that... I think that professional communication scholars and people who are doing professional communication outside the academy have the possibility, I think, to do really great social justice projects. I think that the challenge is that because we already have wider discourses around the Global South that ends up stereotyping them over and over again, it's difficult to create something that works against that, because... people expect to see the downtrodden woman, the girl who's abused, the man who, you know, is... is the abuser, and they have a hard time

imagining other ways of seeing the Global South. So that's the biggest challenge, but I think that that's where professional communication... communication professionals and professional communication scholars actually can be at the forefront, I think, of changing these kinds of stereotypes by thinking about how to communicate social justice issues, um, more thoughtfully and more attuned to relations of power. I think that with the work I'm doing right now on the girl eff... on the girl... on the global girls empowerment, um, initiatives... what's one thing where I'm stuck is that all of the... all of those organizations tell the same story over and over again, and they're not getting at, um, what Rachel Riedner would... would say is the... the gendered violence. I mean, she... she uses the term violence purposely and not to mean violence literally of physically hitting or hurting somebody but also the economic violence or political violence that kind of consumes... consumes a person's life. Um... so I think that to get at that it's oftentimes about the economy and the politics and not necessarily about the culture, which is what we tend to see over and over again, that's where I feel like a really great intervention for, um, professional writers and then professional communication scholars could really intervene. And so I don't know if they've... I... I don't know if I've seen anything that anyone has done specifically that I think is a really great example, um... but I think that we have the tools to do that kind of work. It's just having to figure out how to do it in a way that will get an audience to actually listen to it.

I think the most important thing is to... again, because we... we hear so many stereotypes about who is... who is the Global... the Sou... the citizen in the Global South, that is such a, I think, a problem because when people... I think the most important thing is to understand that—much like how in the United States people have a variety of different kinds of personalities and cult... and backgrounds and traditions and interests and whatnot—that that is the case too in the Global South. Uh... I'm thinking of... I... I showed the film *Half the Sky* to a group of students a couple of years ago. Um, and... I'm very critical of the... of that film, but the best thing happened that could've happened after the film. The first person to raise their hand to ask a question and to discuss said—raised his hand and said... raised his hand and said, "I am an Afghani feminist and I'm offended by this film." And so I think that, like, that moment where he... 'cause there were a lot of young



women there who—and the film itself paints, you know, really paints, um, men from the Global South as being, kind of, barbarians in a lot of ways. And that was like the most brilliant moment because he just completely shattered, I think, all of their stereotypes; that he was there, that he wanted to engage, and that he's called himself a feminist. Um... and I... I think that... that... I... I wish that that moment can happen over and over again among my students so that they could see that people from across the world are, you know, are... are... are varied and there, I don't know, that there's nuances and whatnot.

**In what ways should professional communication programs and teachers be preparing students for work with businesses and industries situated in the Global South and for working with people who are native to the Global South—coworkers, clients, audiences, and communities?**

Yeah... I... I think it will be great to have more classes that are... where students can meet, you know, can share a unit of some sort, um, and study together and have conversations about it. And so... I think that that would facilitate a couple things. One it would allow students to see how students in other places, you know, do work in a... in a classroom and then also have their perspective that... of how they kind of come at it and to create a kind of conversation. Um... I'm trying to think what else. Um... hmm... I also think... I really think travel is important, but I know that sometimes when people from the US go to the Global South, they end up being sort of treated like royalty... to say the least. And I... and there's a lot of, I think, wining and dining and whatnot. And I'm talking more from scholars and teachers. And I... and I think that, um, to understand that... I don't think that that often... that gets at, um, what actually happens in most countries. That's not how real life is in the US, that's not like real life anywhere else. And so to really understand a culture... to be less of a tourist and more participatory and, you know, um, and understanding the way a university works, the way, I don't know, the kinds of classes, the kinds of students that are there and whatnot. Um, so I don't know how to... how to get out of that dynamic, but I think that there are oftentimes this... I don't know... um. Yeah, or this idea that, um, the U.S. scholar knows all kind of things and that is not the case and to recognize that the U.S. scholar does not know all.

**What might Global South businesses and industries do to facilitate joint research/teaching with professional communication academics?**

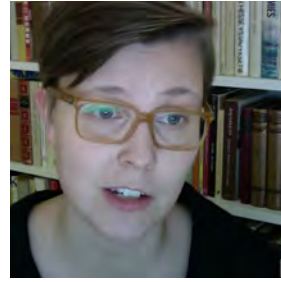
I think that one thing that, um—and this is from my experiences doing some collaborative work in South Africa—that one way that... that, um, I think, collaboration can happen, um, between institutions is by having a common problem that is in that particular local, local con... a common problem in both local contexts. And so that... to see how—I mean, I’m thinking more... this is more on the sciences, but I think that there’s probably some parallels in professional communication. But, you know, um... if a community is having problems with, like, watershed issues, for example, how is it that, you know, water has been, um, dealt with locally in both contexts? And, like, can... if... if both parties look at the problem together and talk about it, I think that some new understandings could develop out of... out of that. And so I think having some sort of common issue... and this... I guess, you know, in women’s studies, I’m thinking, you know, if gender violence is an issue that’s happening in two different communities, like, how are they both addressing it? And what can we learn from those? I think that having that kind of collaboration could be really, really useful. And so... it’s less about coming as, you know, “you are the expert and we are coming to you for your knowledge” as much as, like, “how do we bring our knowledge together to solve this issue? Because, you know, we each have different ways perhaps... or different ways of being trained to deal with this. And so we could help each other in that way.”

**Would you say information and communication technology will facilitate such joint research/teaching or will it hinder the collaboration?**

I think it... I think it can be. I mean, it’s... I think that on... on even the basic level that there’s time differences, you know, and trying... and also different kinds of expectations. Like, I know in working in South Africa that, you know, responding to an email in three months is pretty normal, whereas in the US we would expect it to be usually like within a week or so to have, kind of, to figure... to have communication back and forth. And so... I think that being mindful that it’s not because they’re rude; it’s because there’s all these other things... expectations, you know, of people’s time,

and so therefore we have to understand that. Uh... so I think that there's those kinds of nua... uh, those kinds of things that end up being... really make... make collaboration hard. And I think that, um, also collaborating even over Skype is great, but it's hard when you are just first meeting somebody. That it's easier if you can go and actually go... meet one-on-one, or a group of people can meet together, um, over several times face-to-face; that that makes a huge difference, but that that sets the basis for doing more collaboration, I think, over various kinds of technologies. Um... and then also I think that we... and I'm aware of this too... that, you know, any time you are doing any kinds of... kind of cross-cultural collaboration that I have expectations in the back of my mind of who the people are who are on the other end and to rem... to constantly put myself in check that that might not be the case. And so I know that that probably happens on the other side too, so I think that that's something to I'll need to keep in mind too. ■





## connexions interview with **SONJA VARTIALA**

Transcript of the interview with Sonja Vartiala, executive director of Finnwatch, Finland.

The interview was recorded for issue 4(1). It was conducted by Han Yu, via Skype, on February 9, 2016. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Han Yu, *connexions'* section editor.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/166975599>

### **Could you tell us about your background in education and experience that prepared you for your present position?**

I've been working for different NGOs for more than 10 years, and before coming to Finnwatch I worked, for example, for Amnesty International here in Finland and also Fairtrade. My educational background is in Turku University of Applied Sciences where I studied sustainable development. And, as for this interview, I understood that it's especially related to communications and communications in my present position, so I have to confess that I'm not a communication expert by profession and I have never had any formal training on communications... but I've learned fast.



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**Could you describe your responsibilities as executive director of Finnwatch? In particular, how much of your work in this role involves writing and other forms of communication?**

Yes, so we're a human rights organization focusing on corporate social responsibility, and we conduct research, publish research reports, and also do advocacy work on a national and EU level. And, uh... I'm in charge of our operations and leading my great but small team of experts. And my work, I would say that it's mostly about communication—uh, interaction with partners all around the world, writing reports, and planning our media and advocacy work. And for me, communication is not just about writing or giving presentations. Uh, it's about everything, everything that I do or we do at Finnwatch. So how we interact with people and exchange even normal emails or having meetings. Or, we think of what kind of words we use in our communication, what even impressions that we show on our face, and what we wear in a meeting with, uh, multinational companies. So all different aspects of communication needs to go together hand-in-hand in order for us to get the impact that we want.

**How important do you consider professional communication to be in your work as executive director of Finnwatch?**

Yes, so I would say that it's a very central part of my work, and it's a very important in all stages of our research projects that we do in Finnwatch. So before starting, for example, investigation work in another country, we need to build trust with the local research partners, NGOs, trade unions, workers, and companies. And, uh, it is also important to understand how communication works in different cultures, uh, in different countries, but also in... in different organizations. The culture between NGOs and multinational companies is very different, and we need to understand that. And of course, if we think about traditional or straightforward communication like writing reports or planning media work, it's very important. You can... you can spend months in writing, in conducting research, and... and writing the report, but if you then do bad media planning or bad media strategy, or write a bad press release,

then you waste a lot of resources and work and you will not be able to achieve what you are trying to achieve.

**You mentioned the different culture between NGOs and multinational companies. Can you talk more about how culture factors into Finnwatch's work?**

Well, I come from Finland, and we have quite, um, open culture, and we're used to going straight to the point when discussing with people, and we don't have a lot of hierarchies in our culture. So it's normal for us to go and meet the ministry and just... just say what we think of the political situation or... or some policies of Finnish government. But in many other countries, it's not like that, so you need to go around a bit before saying what you think and how you feel. And also it might take a very long time before you can have an open and straightforward discussion with your partner. And there are some things that you can't say to, for instance, older person or someone who is in a higher hierarchy level than you are yourself, so all of these kinds of things we need to take into account when... when meeting with different people in different countries.

**What kinds of investigative work does Finnwatch do?**

Uh, so we're mostly focused on... on corporate social responsibility, so we're looking into tax, uh, tax issues and also labor rights, uh, in so-called risk countries. A very normal report that we would do is to go on a field... field, uh, trip and meet with the workers of, such as factories or estates or plantations, in... in developing countries, for instance, and try to find out what kind of labor conditions the workers are in and then have meetings with local trade unions and NGOs and... and then send the findings to the factory owner and get their comments. And then, then we will compile all the evidence that we get and then publish a report. So, we're... the report is trying to achieve... or give information on what the situation is but also try to get change and improve people's lives.

**What would you say are some challenges for international NGO writers whose work is intended to support social, economic, and environmental justice, especially in the Global South? And how have you addressed these challenges in your work?**

Well, I would say that usually NGOs, uh... especially small NGOs like... like ours, are working with very limited resources but still facing high expectations from... from different stakeholders. And... for us, it's very important to check our sources and make sure that even though we have, uh, uh... quite limited resources, we have to have our facts right. And we have to practice very high-level integri... integrity in everything that we do. Uh... it can be that you make one mistake in wrong place and your credibility might be lost. So... and also, when operating in high-risk countries, like we do in... in countries like Thailand or Malaysia or... or India, you have to be aware of, uh, different kinds of risks, like facing uh... judicial risks, uh... getting sued, or... or facing different kind of harassment. For example, our researcher Andy Hall, uh... British uh, uh... academic, he has faced four lawsuits in Thailand because of the research that he did for us back in 2012. So, uh, we really try to, uh, do our own due diligence and mitigate risks and also be ready to support our local partners and... and also the workers we interview. So we have to, uh, understand the risks very well in different settings.

**In what ways do you see technologies, especially information and communication technologies, either threatening or promoting social justice in the Global South?**

I would say that, uh, new or relatively new communication technology and so... social media have a chance to promote social justice. Uh... information gets around faster than ever, I think. And civil society can reach international audience with very limited resources. Uh... but, at the same time, uh, world has become very fast, and many times very complicated problems, uh, are squeezed into, uh, Twitter tweets—like 100-character tweets—and people, at least in Finland, uh, we see that they become more and more impatient and, uh, looking for simple solutions in problems where such simple solutions might not even exist.



**You mentioned social media, have you or your team used social media in your work with other countries? Or have you seen social media being taken up by those countries in ways that relate to your work?**

Uh... yes, we use uh... social media uh... Facebook and Twitter um... quite a lot and also, we use social media when communicating with our partners in the countries where we do field research, so it's very easy to very quickly exchange information. And also, uh, we have a partner, for instance in Thailand, who's using social media uh... among migrant workers, so sharing information on labor rights and... and different kind of problems and grievances that they have, so it's a very useful... useful tool.

**What advice might you offer to those of us responsible for developing, teaching, and administering a university professional communication program in order to prepare students to work as writers/researchers for an international NGO?**

Uh... this is a difficult question. I'm not sure if I have very good advice. Um... I think um... social media, whether you work in a company or in an NGO, it's uh... changing the way... way you communicate or... or how people expect you to communicate, so I... I think you still need the basic skills in how to write for different audiences. Uh... but, nowadays, also your personality needs to show in what you do. And I... I guess good communication people need to be good people. They need to be honest and have integrity, believe in what they are saying, and walking the talk. So I... I... it's hard to teach... teach that, so a lot of challenges for... for teaching.

Looking at companies that are... are doing good job in... in communication, there usually, uh, you have your C... uh... CFO or CEO uh... in Twitter, so uh... you can make a lot of damage by just doing communication without being a hundred percent behind what you are saying. So I... I just think that the new way of communicating, social media, people being in Twitter and Facebook uh both in their personal life but in their work life. So I think it's changing the way... how people

should operate as a communication specialist. So it's not just writing something and then going home, but you really have to believe in what you say or at least try to make others believe that you believe it.

**What advice might you offer NGOs as well as businesses and industries to facilitate joint research/teaching with professional communication academics?**

As a watchdog organization, Finnwatch are not very familiar with this kind of cooperation, but we see at least here in Finland, there's a lot of political pressure from the government to make NGOs and universities to cooperate more and more with business and companies. And we see that this kind of cooperation can... can be good, but sometimes it also creates problems, especially when universities or NGOs are trying to be service providers for companies. So... I see that we already have a lot of consultants but too little great civil society and universities, so maybe uh... my advice would be that... that you need to know where you're coming from and what your uh... position and mission is and then start to cooperate with the business and other stakeholders. But as I said, as a watchdog organization, we uh... don't really have this kind of experience as we are uh... trying to stay on another side of the table, so to say.

**What about collaboration between NGOs and academics, then?**

I think that would be very... very good to have more cooperation with... between NGOs and academics. Uh... I think the problem is that academic research is uh... can take years before... so the timeline is very different. So... our reports will... we will um... start and publish a report in... in five or six or seven months, and then the academic world is uh... uh... three years or four years. So, uh, but definitely and... there... there would be room for more cooperation, and in Finland, we've started Finnwatch's network for NGOs that are working with the CSR [corporate social responsibility] issues and also academic uh... academic people, so we're trying to increase that kind of cooperation.

**What kind of staff do NGOs such as Finnwatch have?**

Um... I think it varies a lot. So, for instance, in my team I have a tax specialist, a guy who used to work for tax administration, and uh... and a lawyer uh... who's uh...

who has been focusing on labor rights and working in international labor organization as well as a person coming from Amnesty International, um, and uh... having her background in East Asian studies. Uh... so I... I think it varies a lot.

**What kinds of research procedures or methodologies do you use when you do investigative work in different countries?**

Yes, so we... we use a lot of uh—in our field research—we use interviews, so we interview the workers um... individually or in a group, and we collect uh... also documents like, in our case, salary slips, working contracts, uh... records of working hours, and things like that. And a very important part of our work is so we have an ethical code of conduct [see <http://www.finnwatch.org/en/what-we-do/ethical-guidelines>] for our research work, and we send all the findings to the company for... for comment before anything gets published. So that's... that's the way we try to make sure that all the... all factual errors that might be there in the report... uh... so they get a chance to correct them. And that we will... 'cause what the workers say is very... usually very different than what the company says, so then we try to um... estimate what the truth is between these usually very different stories and... and check the documents and... and then come back with an analysis and our own... own... own view on... on what the situation really is.

**Can you talk more about this code of ethics?**

Uh... yes, it's actually available on our website [see <http://www.finnwatch.org/en/what-we-do/ethical-guidelines>], so if anyone wants to go and check it out, so it's there. So that's one part of... of the... ethical guidelines—that it's public! And uh... so if anyone has a grievance or want to make a complaint, they can... they can do it. Uh... so it basically uh... sets a standard—how we choose our um... targets, so to say, for our research so... and... and to make sure that no third party is influencing our research and our analysis, and that we give a company or... or organization a chance to give comments to the findings and also protecting the... the workers or... or other stakeholders that we interview. So these kinds of issues are... are written down in... in this ethical code of conduct that we have.

**Can you talk more about the role of culture in your work and how you and your staff address cultural issues?**

So um... we... we use... local research partners in our... in our work, so we... want people who are familiar with the culture, language, uh... and... and can put the findings in a local context. So that's uh... we don't go usually ourselves and take a backpack and... and start working around in a... in a new country. So we use uh... local NGOs or... or experts. And also... it's also important when we find a problem there, so that we have a local partner who might... who might be able to help us fixing the problem... or with the company that we have been investigating. And, of course, our um... staff that we have are familiar with the countries where they are operating uh... and uh... we try to use a lot of time to familiarize ourselves to the local situation and... and do a lot of desk research before starting field... field research. So... uh... but basically it's about using local partners who are already familiar with the culture.

**Do you find any challenges in working with these local researchers?**

Yes, yes, there is a lot of challenges. Uh... so we are very strict in... in what we accept as a proof, so we want to have, for instance, copies of salary slips and... and working contracts, and everything needs to be recorded and... and organized and analyzed properly before we accept it. And of course there's uh... there are different cultures and uh... different ways of doing research uh... all over the world and... the best uh... like the partners... uh... we have a lot of partners who... who've been working with us for many years and they know uh... what our... our standard is, but of course, when we go to a new country and we start working with uh... new people, we... it takes a lot of time to... to get the process going uh... as we... we would like to... like it to go.

Sometimes... sometimes our... partner can see that something is... is more important than... than what we actually think it is. Uh... I think it's... I'm not sure if that's a cultural thing, but it's uh... related to different organizations. So if you are a very, so to say, aggressive local NGO that wants to see business doing bad all the

time, so it might be that we disagree with your analysis and then we have to discuss what we... why we think that the company is actually not doing that bad in that particular situation. And uh... so yes, we... sometimes we negotiate and... and... and go back and check the facts and see that our analysis of the situation uh... is coherent with what our local partners are... are thinking. And in some cases of course, it's another way around, so there might be um... culturally rooted racism or... or inequality. For instance, in India when we talk about Dalits, uh... there might be situations—or women—so situations where they are... uh... it's clear that they are being dis... discriminated at, but it's very hard to communicate that with your local partner or with the company that you are in talks with, 'cause they don't see it the way that we see it here in Finland. And it's also... sometimes we come across situations where a company might say that this is how... how it has been done, for instance, in India, so you don't understand because you come from uh... from Finland, and you... you don't... you all don't understand the caste system and... and so on. So... then these kind of cultural discussions are... are always difficult, but it's good that we base our work on... on international human rights, so we... we have quite good uh... good set of rules uh... where we can back uh... our work on. ■

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Department of Communication, Liberal Arts, Social Sciences, New Mexico Tech

Department of Writing, University of Central Arkansas



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