MAKING EXPERTISE VISIBLE

A disruptive workplace study with a social justice goal

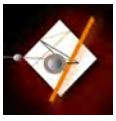
Rebecca Walton

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.



CONNEXIONS • INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL
2015, *4*(1), 159–186
http://dx.doi.org/10.21310/cnx.4.1.16wal
ISSN 2325-6044

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 MINIYOUTH, 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[1] 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:

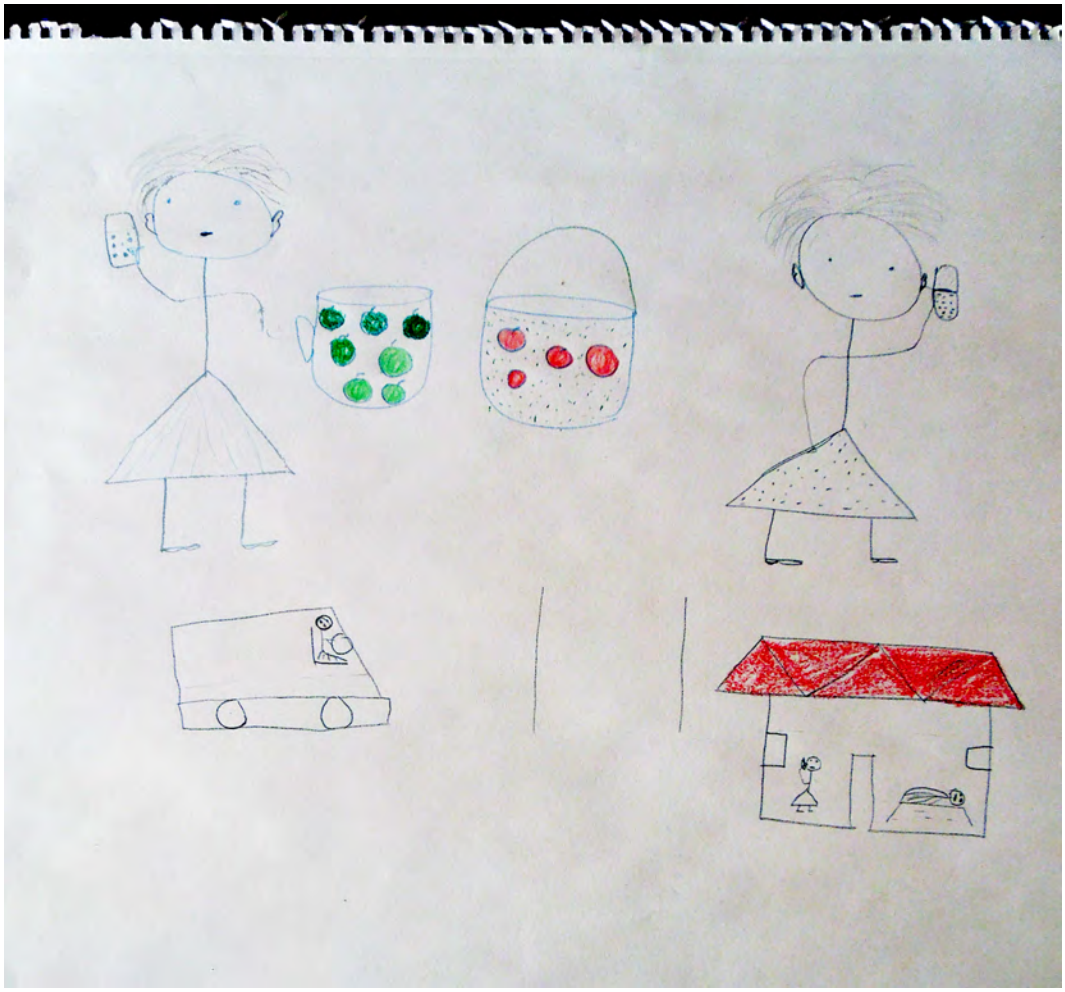
> We are living with women neighbors, and there are some women who have my [cell phone] number, and they can call me and tell me that there is some job of bringing water and they tell me to be quick and I take the jerry can and I go.

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—theft 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

[1] 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.

References

African Economic Outlook (2012). Rwanda 2012. Retrieved from http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Rwanda%20Full%20PDF%20Country%20Note_01.pdf

Agboka, G. Y. (2013a). Participatory localization: A social justice approach to navigating unenfranchised/disenfranchised cultural sites. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 22*, 28–49. doi:10.1080/10572252.2013.730966

Agboka, G. Y. (2013b). Thinking about social justice: Interrogating the international in international technical communication discourse. *connexions • international professional communication journal, 1*(1), 29–38.

Bandyopadhyay, T., & Negash, S. (2009). Factors affecting PC use among African youth: Empirical study from Ethiopia and Rwanda. In *Proceedings of the Southern Association for Information Systems Conference – SAISC '09* (pp. 140–145). Retrieved from http://sais.aisnet.org/2009/proceedings/SAIS%202009.pdf/Bandyopadhyay,%20Negash.pdf

Black, L. L., & Stone, D. (2005). Expanding the definition of privilege: The concept of social privilege. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 33*(4), 243–255. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.2005.tb00020.x

Blumenstock, J., Gillick, D., & Eagle, N. (2010). Who's calling? Demographics of mobile phone use in Rwanda. AAAI Spring Symposium 2010 on Artificial Intelligence for Development (AI-D).

Devitt, A. J. (1991). lntertextuality in tax accounting. In C. Bazerman and J. Paradis (Eds.), *Textual dynamics of the professions* (pp. 336–357). Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Ding, H. (2009). Rhetorics of alternative media in an emerging epidemic: SARS, censorship, and extra-institutional risk communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 18*, 327–350. doi:10.1080/10572250903149548

Donner, J. (2006). The use of mobile phones by microentrepreneurs in Kigali, Rwanda: Changes to social and business networks. *Information Technologies & International Development*, *3*(2), 3–19.

Dura, L., Singhal, A., & Elias, E. (2013). Minga Perú's strategy for social change in the Peruvian Amazon: A rhetorical model for participatory, intercultural practice to advance human rights. *Journal of Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization, 4*(1), 33–54.

Haas, A. M. (2012). Race, rhetoric, and technology: A case study of decolonial technical communication theory, methodology, and pedagogy. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *26*(3), 277–310. doi:10.1177/1050651912439539

Heath, C., & Luff, P. (2000). *Technology in action.* Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Henderson, P. G. (1996). Writing technologies at White Sands. In P. Sullivan and J. Dautermann (Eds.), *Electronic literacies in the workplace* (pp. 65–88). Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Herndl, C. G. (1993). Teaching discourse and reproducing culture: A critique of research and pedagogy in professional and non-academic writing. *College Composition and Communication, 44*(3), 349–363. doi:10.2307/358988

Human Rights Watch. (2003). Lasting wounds: Consequences of genocide and war for Rwanda's children. Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f4f595a12.html

Jones, N. N. (2014). Methods and meanings: Reflections on reflexivity and flexibility in an intercultural ethnographic study of an activist organization. *Journal of Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, *5*(1), 14–43.

Jones, N. N., & Walton, R. (Forthcoming). Using narratives to foster critical thinking about diversity and social justice. In M. Eble and A. Haas (Eds.), *Integrating theoretical frameworks for teaching technical communication*.

Kanyesigye, F. (2012, April 14). Youth, ICT ministries merged. *The New Times*. Retrieved from http://mail.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=14962&a=52483

Kimball, M. A. (2006). Cars, culture, and tactical technical communication. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 15*, 67–86. doi:10.1207/s15427625tcq1501_6

McCarthy, J. E., Grabill, J. T., Hart-Davidson, W., & McLeod, M. (2011). Content management in the workplace: Community, context, and a new way to organize

writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 25*(4), 367–395. doi:10.1177/1050651911410943

National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. (2014). Thematic report: Socio-economic status of youth. Retrieved from http://statistics.rw.gov/system/files/user_uploads/files/books/RPHC4_Youth.pdf

Negash, S. (2012). Perception of African youth on personal computer utilization: The case of Ethiopia and Rwanda. *International Journal of Information Systems and Social Change, 3*(2), 39–59. doi:10.4018/jissc.2012040103

Petersen, E. J. (2014). Redefining the workplace: The professionalization of motherhood through blogging. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *44*(3), 277–296. doi:10.2190/TW.44.3.d

Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. (2000). Rwanda Vision 2020. Retrieved from http://www.gesci.org/assets/files/Rwanda_Vision_2020.pdf

Rude, C. D. (2009). Mapping the research questions in technical communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *23*(2), 174–215. doi:10.1177/1050651908329562

Scott, J. B. (2004). Rearticulating civic engagement through cultural studies and service-learning. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *13*, 289–306. doi:10.1207/s15427625tcq1303_4

Singerman, D. (2007). The economic imperatives of marriage: Emerging practices and identities among youth in the Middle East. *Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper*, (6).

Sommers, M. (2012). *Stuck: Rwandan youth and the struggle for adulthood*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Sommers, M., & Uvin, P. (2011). Youth in Rwanda and Burundi: Contrasting Visions. United States Institute of Peace. Retrieved from http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr293.pdf

Soucy, K. (2012). Collaging: Getting answers to the questions you don't know to ask. *Smashing Magazine*. Retrieved from http://uxdesign.smashingmagazine.com/2012/02/06/collaging-getting-answers-questions-you-dont-know-ask

Spinuzzi, C. (2012). Working alone together coworking as emergent collaborative activity. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *26*(4), 399–441. doi:10.1177/1050651912444070

Stevens, C. (1999). Reaching socially marginalized youth. *YouthNet publications*. FHI360. Retrieved from http://www.fhi360.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/Publications/FOCUS/InFOCUS/socmarginalized.htm

The New Times. (2012, April 19). Rwanda: Tech savvy youth will accelerate development. Retrieved from http://allafrica.com/stories/201204190132.html

Thurman, T., Snider, L., Boris, N., Kalisa, E., Nkunda Mugarira, E., Ntaganira, J., et al. (2006). Psychosocial support and marginalization of youth-headed households in Rwanda. *AIDS Care,* 18, 220–229.

Walton, R., Mays, R., & Haselkorn, M. (2016). How humanitarian culture informs change adoption: A case study of humanitarian logistics. In C. Zobel, N. Altay, and M. P. Haselkorn (Eds.), *Advances in managing humanitarian operations*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.

Walton, R., Price, R., & Zraly, M. (2013). Rhetorically navigating Rwandan research review: A fantasy theme analysis. *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, *4*(1), 78–102.

Walton, R., Putnam, C., Johnson, E., & Kolko, B. (2009). Skills are not binary: Nuances in the relationship between ICT skills and employability. *Information Technologies and International Development*, *5*(2), 1–18.

Walton, R., Zraly, M., & Mugengana, J. P. (2015). Values and validity: Navigating messiness in a community-based research project in Rwanda. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *24*(1), 45–69. doi:10.1080/10572252.2015.975962

Ward, L. M., & Eyber, C. (2009). Resiliency of children in child-headed households in Rwanda. *Intervention, 7*(1), 17–33. doi:10.1097/WTF.0b013e32832ad3ac

Ware, J. (2002). Understanding distributed work. The Work Design Collaborative. Retrieved from http://www.thefutureofwork.net/assets/Understanding_Distributed_Work.pdf

Winsor, D. A. (1999). Genre and activity systems: The role of documentation in maintaining and changing engineering activity systems. *Written Communication*, *16*(2), 200–224. doi:10.1177/0741088399016002003

World Bank (2014). Rwanda overview. Retrieved from http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/rwanda/overview

Young, I. M. (2009). Five faces of oppression. In G. Henderson and M. Waterstone (Eds.), *Geographic thought: A praxis perspective* (pp. 55–71). New York: Routledge.

Zachry, M. (2000). Communicative practices in the workplace: A historical examination of genre development. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *30*(1), 57–79. doi:10.2190/UMGD-LGR6-QJUE-CJHY

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the partners whose efforts made this research possible: to the Rwanda National Police; the Rwanda National Ethics Committee members and staff, especially INGABIRE Valentine; to BANAMUNGU Idi, and all the leaders and members of Counseling Volunteers Club-Rwanda; to the generous Rwandan youth who shared their experiences; to translator and collaborator UWITONZE Fabrice; to field research coordinator Jean Pierre Mugengana; to musicians Ras Banamungu, SMS, Ras Kayaga; to caretaker Nzete; to undergraduate research scholar Audrey Merrill; and most especially to medical anthropologist and research partner Maggie Zraly.

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

Manuscript received June 15, 2015; revised November 7, 2015; accepted December 14, 2015.