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Making a Case for Political Technical Communication (Pxtc)

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the accelerated adoption of political technology during the COVID-19 pandemic evinces exigency for a rhetorically grounded framework to teach, research, and practice political technical communication (PxTC) as a sub-discipline. As a starting point, I use a rhetorical genre studies approach to identify political social actions that separate political communication technologies into four distinct genres: election, electioneering, constituent services, and punditry.

KEYWORDS

Politics; technology; technical communication; rhetoric; genre studies

Introduction

Politics, like many other spheres, was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Field operations were suspended, campaign offices were shuttered, and party conventions were clumsily moved online. Social media, virtual conferencing, and digital advertising were already important methods of voter outreach for campaigns well before the pandemic. However, COVID-19 vastly accelerated the growth of virtual campaign operations. Door-knocking, town halls, debates – staples of almost every political campaign in the US – all had to be rethought. Political technology is not new, but the pandemic accelerated its adoption, innovation, and use. Technologically mediated communication has long played a role in dis/orientating constituents in relation to political candidates and issues, but the existential risk of the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly accelerated political uses of technology because traditional campaign methods threaten public health. In this article, I argue for synthesizing both established and emerging technical and professional communication (TPC) trends into a Political Technical Communication (PxTC) sub-discipline. From my perspective, TPC as a discipline is already doing an effective job of exploring both the technical communication of politics and the politics of technical communication. In carving out such efforts as a disciplinary track, like the Rhetoric of Health & Medicine, PxTC may help magnify the prominence and public impact of ongoing and future political technical communication work.

The rapid adoption of political technologies has created a new type of political operative that, in my opinion, may most accurately be described as a political technical communicator. Technical communicators "Whether they desire it or not [. . .] are always implicated in relations of power" (Slack, Miller, & Doak, 1993, p. 31), which is why it is critically important that technical communicators acknowledge our authorial role in the creation and communication of political experience. The field of TPC trains communication designers (Rose, 2016), experience architects (Potts, 2014), and social justice advocates (Jones, 2016) whose articulations of technology help to mediate socio-political relationships. Political campaigns need people who are skilled at communicating and at learning to use writing technologies for persuasion. From building multi-level peer-to-peer texting scripts to training

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volunteers how to use mobile canvassing apps, political technical communicators are essential to any modern campaign even though no such formal title exists as far as I know from my own experience working on campaigns. Taking up the moniker of PxTC would help theorize and professionalize these relatively new roles within political campaigns. Beyond electioneering activities, PxTC professionals also work in several other fields essential to democracy ranging from the design of electoral user experiences to the legislative staffers that build constituent services systems for their bosses. I'm suggesting that PxTC stakes a rhetorical claim for TPC scholars and programs to intervene into the political sphere by formally naming disciplinary political work.

Although technology-intensive campaigning is not new, the pervasiveness and power of technological actants in democratic networks has grown rapidly in the COVID era. I am particularly concerned with how advances in "Communication technologies [. . .] embody and enforce new social relations" (Haraway, 1991, p. 164). COVID-19 has radically, and perhaps permanently, altered the terrain on which political battles are fought. Colton and Holmes (2018) write that "Technologies are constantly changing and evolving to our needs and desires and, in turn, changing those needs and desires" (p. 43), which in the ecology of COVID campaigning, I argue, means that there can be no return to a pre-COVID influenced politics. Indeed, elections for at least the next generation will be infected with a variety of COVID discourses such as COVID relief legislation, vaccine distribution and compliance issues, and possibly new vaccine resistant COVID-19 variant[1] (or other viral) outbreaks.

Adding to those direct implications of pandemic politics are the Zoom town halls, ElectionBuddy (a Cloud-based voting platform) powered primaries, and face masks as campaign merchandise that likely will persist after COVID-19 is consigned to textbooks, Wikipedia articles, and the aging memories of our Generation Z students. The COVID era has violently underscored that modern politics in the US is marked by a near pathological deification of the individual as a completely autonomous and independent subject. The result has been allowing, and in some cases encouraging, political actions to prioritize individual gain over health and social justice in campaigning and policymaking. This prioritization of the individual is one reason why basic precautions during a pandemic, like social distancing guidelines, mask mandates, and vaccines, have been met with partisan ire.

To be clear, COVID is not the topic of this article, it is merely the exigence for naming PxTC as a sub-discipline. Establishing a sub-discipline takes curricular innovation alongside novel theorizing. For example, these efforts could include adding college classes, emphasis areas, certificates, and other modalities of credentialing that further two aims:

(1) recruiting students who are interested in politics
(2) training political technical communicators

In addition to curricular approaches, there are ambitious academic moves to be made in formalizing PxTC such as organizing conference divisions, pitching special issues, engaging interdisciplinary political projects, establishing specific faculty lines, and creating new outlets for publication. To be clear, I realize that what I am proposing is a sprawling agenda that will require collaborative disciplinary and programmatic effort. Some TPC programs will be better positioned than others to contribute the resources needed to make PxTC a reality. Patience and care are required for PxTC to take root and grow, but what comes of our labors will be worth our collective efforts.

It is important for readers to understand that I know I am not inventing PxTC whole cloth. What I am proposing is only possible because of the growing body of TPC work centered around politics. In fact, the kernel of my own thinking about PxTC originated while reading the election technologies special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* edited by scholars Dorpenyo and Agboka (2018). There is nothing unique about arguing that TPC scholars should study politics or be more political. New scholarship inching our discipline toward the political sphere is growing more common. For example, a recent and insightful TCQ article from TPC theorist Williams (2022) articulates a conceptual framework (Policy, Roles, and Sites) for disciplinary researchers to comprehensively study public policy formation.

The novel perspective I offer here is to make the case that political theorizing in TPC scholarship has matured and that our programs are ready to meet a growing need for technologically savvy political communicators. What I am proposing opens new avenues for TPC students to participate and compete in a burgeoning multi-billion-dollar electioneering industry (Center for Responsive Politics [CRP], 2020); such a warrant is a crass but critically important consideration for approving new curriculum. PxTC would be to TPC as political communication is to communication studies or political science is to social science. That is, it would offer students a tangible route from TPC training into political campaigns, electoral regulation, and a thriving political technology industry.

In the following sections, I argue for accepting PxTC as a sub-discipline of TPC. To do this I first delineate PxTC from other disciplines engaged in political theorizing; specifically, I argue that our field's grounding in rhetoric and techne separates PxTC from political science and political communication. Second, I situate PxTC as a synthesis of emerging and established trends in TPC theory, with a particular concern for demonstrating how TPC commitments to social justice should inform PxTC as a sub-discipline. Third, I offer a brief gentrification of political technologies as a starting point for disciplining PxTC inquiry. Finally, I provide a curricular sampling of an introductory PxTC course readers may adopt and adapt in their own programs should they be convinced of my aims in this article.

Discipline & Techne in PxTC

Defining a sub-field of inquiry for a discipline can be an impactful rhetorical move. Helping to ground the importance of work focused on disciplinary identity in TPC, Rude (2009) writes that "All disciplines consider their identity as it exists and might change, but emerging disciplines foreground such questions because of their need to carve out a space for their work" (p. 187). Disciplinary naming enables the coagulation of seemingly disparate lines of inquiry to generate new possibilities out of established work. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press [OUP], n.d.), discipline as punishment appears to precede discipline as instruction by over a century, although both meanings are thought to be rooted in *discere* – the Latin verb for learning. The phrases in the previous sentence may call to mind the French theorist Foucault, whose work teased out linkages between the disciplinary techniques of statecraft and the broader power/knowledge political economy that orders the world around us (Foucault, 1978, 1994). Disciplinary naming in the context of this essay is a disciplining technique to help focus on the interplay of rhetorical constructions, technological devices, and the political pursuit of power. By disciplinary technique I mean both in Foucault's sense as relating to machinations of power, but also in the context of the etymology of techne as mediator between action and the possibility for action (Sterne, 2006). PxTC attends to power by laying a foundation for technical communicators to engage political action more fully and at a curricular level.

Before attempting to delineate PxTC from the related disciplines of political science and political communication, I want to make clear that overgeneralizations of other disciplines in this article are for conceptual clarity and should not be taken to imply that I believe the totality of either political science or political communication links to the critiques I am articulating. Rather, I am clearing space for TPC to stake its claim in politics because I believe our field should have a more meaningful role in political theorizing and practicing than it currently enjoys. That role is, admittedly, playing out to a degree already; however, disciplinary naming can help unlock the full potential of PxTC to advance field-informed political theories and praxis.

What does PxTC bring to the table that its cousins do not? TPC brings a rhetorical grounding in techne and a toolbox for unpacking technological rhetoric. A guiding assumption of PxTC is what Winner (1980) has called the "political essence of technology" which "encompasses the whole of technology's capacity to transform, order, and adapt animate and inanimate objects" (p. 237). Willful technology shapes democratic community through a host of disciplinary techniques and strategies that technical communicators are well suited to reveal. Techne "bridges the chasm between possibility and

actuality" by positioning the technical communicator between "action and the conditions of possibility for action" (Sterne, 2006, p. 92). More simply put, techne is what takes one from thinking to doing. Some of those conditions of possibility are what we now call techniques, technology, and technicalities – mediators between what is human and what could be beyond human with more-than-human assistance. Where discipline, as noted above, attempts to order knowledge, techne attempts to convey it.

The term techne can be traced to a pre-platonic era, originating with the Indo-European words *tek*, which referred to building houses, and *tekton*, which referred to a subject who builds things out of wood (Gordon, 2002). By Isocrates' era, tek mutated into techne and has been most often interpreted as a reference to practical knowledge contained in instruction manuals. Gordon (2002) has noted that although "techne was used in many different ways in classical Greek discourse, it always referred to a kind of knowledge [. . .] that can be learned and taught" (p. 152). However, Papillion (1995) argues for a broader interpretation, that techne for the Greeks implied two related senses:

> It can be the craft or ability to do something, a creative skill; this can be physical or mental, positive or negative, like that of metalworking or trickery. It can also be used as an art in the sense of a set of rules or theories. (p. 149)

A spectrum from metalworking to trickery offers a wide-ranging toolbox for understanding and applying techne to TPC today, which is perhaps why some have sought to recover techne beyond its most basic understanding as merely practical knowledge (Johnson & Ranney, 2002). Techne makes an excellent grounding vector for TPC as a disciplinary endeavor, as made clear by the dedication of an entire special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, guest edited by Bridgeford and Moore (2002), to linkages between techne and the field.

As the etymological root of technical, techne may also be understood as craft and the study of craft (technology) that is dedicated to understanding how "professional" (craft-orientated) communities come to understand themselves and their tools. In the context of political inquiry, this articulation helps to link PxTC to, but also differentiates PxTC from, political science and political communication. To be clear, I am not arguing that other disciplines lack techne in the theoretical sense of conditioning action nor multiple technai in the practical sense of instructions. Rather, I am arguing that following Sterne's (2006) distinction between techne as embodied knowledge and episteme as abstract knowledge, PxTC ought to theorize from a position of practice rather than from a position of distance.

Privileging embodied knowledge may help PxTC avoid the mistake of over-systematizing knowledge production to maintain a false sense of neutrality and objectivity – like some branches of political science that still adhere to one or more of the five myths political theorist Ollman (2015) polemically identified:

> l) that it studies politics; 2) that it is scientific; 3) that it is possible to study politics separated off from economics, sociology, psychology and history; 4) that the state in our democratic capitalist society is politically neutral, that is available as a set of institutions and mechanisms to whatever group wins the election; and 5) that political science, as a discipline, advances the cause of democracy. (p. 362)

Writing under a pseudonym, Poly Sly (2018) characterizes such political science as nonsense and nonscience, arguing that some political science departments today are not "oriented to organizing their work around actual research missions for applications with social benefit" (p. 281). Although some TPC scholarship may link to the criticisms of political science offered by Ollman and Sly, the social justice turn (Agboka, 2014; Jones, 2016; Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019) has helped steer a path for the discipline where active and engaged scholarship centered on social benefit is encouraged more often than it once was.

Political communication also has its instrumentalists, haunted as it is by the deterministic remnants of antiquated linear models like the "hypodermic needle theory" of mass media and political propaganda (Esser, 2008, p. 4836). However, political communication's grounding in rhetoric renders it a closer approximation for PxTC. In fact, some political communication theorists, such as Kreiss

(2016) and Finlayson (2019) are making similar calls in their own discipline as I am here regarding TPC. For instance, Finlayson (2019) argues for political communication to start thinking within the digital public sphere "in ways that can defeat manipulation, promote factual and rational analysis" (p. 80). It is my contention that technical communicators can answer this call with novel, and perhaps better, approaches than other fields have so far.

A driving purpose in this article is to articulate and justify PxTC as a sub-discipline capable of translating programmatic commitments to social justice into political analysis and action. PxTC can be studied rhetorically, qualitatively, and quantitatively by TPC scholars pushing social justice theorizing to the electoral sphere of US democracy. It is at once an opportunity for our discipline and a needed progression in political theorizing and praxis that we are primed to contribute toward. At this point I've attempted to carve out a space for PxTC in the broader ecology of political theorizing, and now I will turn to situating PxTC within TPC theory, research, and practice.

Situating PxTC in TPC

Previous scholarship linking TPC to politics is groundbreaking because it opens the door for further examination of the role that the discipline plays in democratic processes. This work owes a significant debt to Dorpenyo and Agboka (2018) who have written the following:

> If technologies raise concerns about integrity, social justice, usability, and human rights, technical communicators can play a mediating role in how people interface with technologies and/or how they can effectively use their technologies to accomplish their civic, political, or democratic goals. (p. 350)

Part of the work of PxTC is acknowledging and assisting in improving the TPC work already being conducted in the political sphere. As a practitioner-focused discipline, social-justice-orientated TPC educators are equipped to help political operatives design campaigns and employ technology ethically. Jones and Williams (2018), to whom this article also owes a significant intellectual debt, write that "Our challenge as technical communicators is to know how to respond if asked to write, design, or distribute information used to facilitate oppression and discrimination" (p. 384) – an insidiously common phenomenon in political practice. I would add, as Whitney (2013) demonstrates with voter education guides, Edenfield (2019) demonstrates with consent messaging, and I have demonstrated elsewhere with campaign brochures (Cheek, 2020), that specific communication design choices made by influence campaigns can intentionally and unintentionally align messaging with problematic ideologies held by an audience.

Being adept at negotiating in the liminal space between rhetoric and materiality, technical communicators can help campaigns and pundits recognize and move beyond some of these ideologies. A productive step in that direction would be to encourage abandonment of homogenizing language such as "the White vote," "the Black vote," and "the Latinx vote" in favor of messaging strategies that organize around abating and eliminating the pernicious effects that ideologies such as White supremacy and cis heteronormativity have on the whole of society. Questions about who gets to participate in US politics have always been circumscribed by raced and gendered ideologies. That point is underscored by Jones and Williams's (2018) study of ballot literacy tests and other early disenfranchising technologies of US democracy. Like electoral politics, TPC "has a history of ignoring the ways in which our work is saturated with White male culture" (Haas, 2012, p. 284). Stultifying fixed raced and gendered assumptions continue to operate in election, electioneering, constituent services, and pundit technologies in use today. Writing about the immense influence that race has in US politics, West (2017) argues that there "is no escape from our interracial interdependence, yet enforced racial hierarchy dooms us as a nation to collective paranoia and hysteria – the unmaking of any democratic order" (p. 4). Calling on TPC scholars to take critical race theory and the implications of Whiteness[2] seriously, Haas (2012) argues that "race is a rhetorical construct, but it is not only rhetorical" (p. 282) because race and racism manifest in material and physically violent ways.

Political theorist Young's (1994) concept of seriality suggests that although race may be rhetorically constructed and ideologically sustained, the consequences of those constructions are materially felt by dispossessed, exploited, and neglected communities. By recognizing the commonality shared by such a series, I do not mean to suggest that we should "prioritize broad concerns over those of particular subgroups" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which would risk further marginalization. Rather, seriality offers us a way to think through common social bonds and the intersectionality of oppression without essentializing identity and without engaging in fallacies about a post-racial society. This seriality is especially important to forefront for those working in politics because, as Crenshaw (1991) has argued, the "struggle over which differences matter and which do not [. . .] raise critical issues of power" that may determine "who will survive – and who will not" (p. 1265). Such existential struggles are political struggles that technical communicators should be trained to engage in by empowering many series of folks based on common, even if disparate, relationships to the structural inequities that plague our collective political, economic, and social life.

An example of seriality in political activism is Black Lives Matter, a now global movement against police brutality and the prison-industrial complex. The movement is rhetorically juxtaposed against the material effects of racist police states: the devaluation of Black life. Thus, without essentializing experience, Black Lives Matter makes manifest a seriality of folks oppressed by brutal White Supremacist police states that extend well beyond one race, one ethnicity, one gender, or even one nation. Serial formation points to the possibilities of PxTC theorizing that can help campaigns better attend to social injustice without reproducing problematic essentialist ideologies about race, which are often expressed in mundane punditry like "all Black voters feel this way" and "all Latinx voters feel that way."[3]

Technology, as I use it in this article, extends beyond the devices and digital platforms that often compose the boundaries of what is popularly understood as technological – a point that Koerber (2000) drives home arguing that rhetoric itself is a technology because "rhetoric is a meaning-making tool, a system that helps us use language to make sense of the world" (p. 61). An example of rhetoric as political technology is the Orwellian attempt by Cline, a Utah State Board of Education (USBE) member, to ban from public classrooms 100 terms and concepts that Cline believes to be related to Critical Race Theory (CRT). A brief sample of Cline's (2021) dirty words amendment to Board Rule R277-328 includes anti-racism, critical pedagogy, diversity, empathy, equity, inclusivity, land acknowledgment, multiculturalism, patriarchy, social justice, structural racism, and white privilege. Cline builds a false lexicon for CRT to turn a legal theory about the centrality of race in US jurisprudence into an omnipresent intellectual scapegoat. For Cline and company there are certain words that evince a broader US cultural decline brought on by the eggheads, communists, and hippies occupying university campuses. Her amendment didn't pass, but the cultural war over CRT in public education is far from over and political technologies like Cline's CRT lexicon rhetorically magnify a solution in deep search of a problem.

Rhetoric as technology in political communication is often more mundane and seemingly trivial than Cline's lexicon. For example, a lot of technical rhetorical labor goes into crafting vacuous and almost neutral messages intended to persuade broad segments of an electorate without necessarily committing a candidate to specific proposals (e.g., hope, change, "x" deserves better, building bridges, etc.). If technical communicators are known for anything, it is their efficient and effective distillation of expertise through strategic and tactical communication skills; but in doing this work, as Katz (1992) famously demonstrates with the Just memo and Frost (2016) demonstrates with an unconscionable Texas abortion law, it is easy to forgo critical awareness for efficiency and expediency in TPC. Historically, as Nakamura's (2014) research reminds us, technological development has often accompanied the racialization of already disenfranchised communities for the purposes of labor exploitation. When it comes to political technology, it is worth asking who is disenfranchised and closed off from power because of specific technologies (Dorpenyo, 2019), which is work that technical communication and rhetoric scholars are well equipped to do.

Successful political campaigns are effective at deploying discrete tactics of influence that align with strategic understandings of an electorate, which is why rhetorically trained technical communicators can make effective political operatives who are skilled at manipulating writing technologies to

persuasively enact such tactics. Technical communicators are also often trained in user experience approaches that can provide the strategic insight those communication tactics are based on. For example, minimal saturation interviews can help a small budget campaign generate insight about their constituency and enable user profile building based on those insights. Profiles can then be used to train volunteers, write scripts, and advertise. Knowing other budget friendly workplace communication methods (e.g., A/B message testing, running focus groups, affinity diagramming, etc.) would be an asset to any campaign, but especially a poorly funded one where access to external research firms is cost prohibitive. Haraway (1991) has argued that "Writing, power, and technology are old partners in Western stories of the origin of civilization" (p. 153) and what is electoral politics except the negotiation of power in civilization? PxTC critics, with their audience-attuned senses and facility with writing technologies, are equipped to do the intellectual labor of revealing that which electioneering technology often renders opaque: the ideologies that drive the crafting and consumption of political campaign communications.

Genres of political technology

In this section, I use rhetorical genre studies to identify, taxonomize, and expound on four genres of political technology. The central premise of rhetorical genre studies is "that genres are best understood not so much as text types, to be defined by their textual regularities, but rather as typified actions in response to recurring social contexts" (Freedman, 1999, p. 764). In using this method to sense and distinguish technological genres of PxTC, it is important to look beyond similarities in form and substance; genres should instead be identified by common actions different technologies make possible. This approach to classification is rooted in Miller's (1984) ethnomethodological articulation of genre which "seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates" (p. 155) by understanding the syntactic (form) and semantic (substance) through the lens of the pragmatic (action). Indeed, Miller (1984) argues that "if genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive, because human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through attributing of motives" (p. 152). To exemplify the use of social action as a marker for the typification and intelligibility of technologies, consider the case of the proprietary spreadsheet software Microsoft Excel. What may we *do* with Excel? A home user budgets, a teacher grades, and a researcher analyzes. The form (spreadsheet) and substance (data) remain the same (or similar), but the action changes. More importantly for the rhetorical critic, it is the action that contextualizes and reveals.

The historical function of communication technologies has been to "strengthen the control of large, complex organizations" positioning all workers "within the systematic control of the organization" (Longo, 2000, p. 114). With that in mind, Table 1 contextualizes PxTC and sketches four potential genres of PxTC technologies that similarly attempt to bring constituencies within the systematic control of governance. Dorpenyo and Agboka (2018) take a broad view of election technologies

Table 1. Examples of political technology by genre.

	Election Technology	Electioneering Technology	Constituent Services Technology	Pundit Technology
Social Action	Electing	Campaigning	Servicing	Commentating
Examples	Ballot design, precinct maps, literacy tests, voter files	CRM software, design programs, canvassing apps, donation processors	Templated response e-mails, virtual town halls, constituent badging	Polling aggregators, Red/Blue maps, postmortem reports
Sub-topics	Balloting (ElectionBuddy, redistricting (GIS data), securing (voter ID), educating (voter guides)	Finance (ActBlue), Data analytics (Civitas), Labor (MiniVAN), outreach (Votebuilder)	Correspondence, casework, grassroots (Resistbot), lobbying, press release	Polls, maps, aggregators (538), agenda setting (podcasts)

writing that they "are not merely suggesting [only] the physical equipment with or on which votes are cast" (p. 349). Rather, election technology encompasses many different pieces of hardware and software used to conduct elections.

Election technologies may be described as any sufficiently technical artifact related to the administration of elections. Voter guides (Whitney, 2013), literacy tests (Jones & Williams, 2018), and biometric voter identification (Dorpenyo, 2019) are examples of election technology. Electioneering technologies may be described as any sufficiently technical artifact related to advocating for a partisan electoral outcome. Mailer design, voter databases, and peer-to-peer texting applications are examples of electioneering technology. Constituent services technology may be described as any sufficiently technical artifact related to constituent communication with elected officials. The government pages of elected officials, templated letter responses from their offices, and the Whitehouse's "We the People" petition system are examples of constituent services technology. Pundit technology may be described as any sufficiently technical artifact related to commentary and reporting on elections. Polling aggregators, electoral math, and election maps are examples of pundit technology.

Following a concern with the essence of technology more than technological devices (Borgmann, 1984), the inquiries laid out here are driven in part by a desire to understand the essence of what political communication scholar Kreiss (2016) calls technology-intensive campaigning. Modern campaigns leverage significant advances in technology to both activate and suppress voting behavior. Such election strategies illustrate Winner's (1980) point that "technological change expresses a panoply of human motives, not the least of which is the desire of some to have dominion over others" (p. 124). Cline's false CRT lexicon evinces such a desire for dominion over others through political activation and deactivation.

The false lexicon is insidiously persuasive because it capitalizes on cultural grievances to excuse discursive violence. Like a real-life Dolores Umbridge, Natalie Cline leverages codifying language to manufacture problems and purify public education of critical thinking. The failure of Cline's amendment is less important than using a false lexicon to enframe CRT as a threat to children. Unfortunately, Cline's rhetorical invention is likely to be taken up in state boards of education and legislatures across the country over the next few years. The false lexicon is a political technology that may be understood through its social action. Cline might regard her actions as in service to her constituents, even though her amendment would have harmed many of them.

It is important to keep in mind that distinguishing between political technologies can be imperfect and unclear. A relatively early example of PxTC scholarship concerned with election technology is Whitney's (2013) exploration of xenophobic tropes about immigrants published in a voter education guide. What makes the voter education guide election-related vs electioneering-related? On the one hand, the guide facilitates the administration of an election, and it is framed as a nonpartisan communication. On the other hand, the informative framing of voter education guides may conceal persuasive messages attempting to influence who votes, and who or what they vote for in an election. State governments annually provide such guides (in some cases with information solicited from candidates), but so do advocacy organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) who, in their voter education guide, compare candidate policy priorities using the rubric of NASP organizational positions (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020). How information is organized in such guides can quickly move the genre of the document from election to electioneering.

The application of most typologies can be fraught with judgment, but there is still value in identifying, tracking, and analyzing various constructs of PxTC. I want readers to consider the present text an invitation to critique the concepts and genres of PxTC that I have attempted to articulate. Criticism is generative when thinking through the role technical communicators and their facility with writing technologies may bring to the political table. The next section continues along a different line of generative inquiry, positing a skeletal example of the tenor and structure a PxTC course might take alongside practical advice about teaching politically orientated courses. I offer it in the hope that others

may adopt and adapt it to suit their own curricular needs; I also hope that naming PxTC may contribute to administrators better understanding of the many connections between the discipline of TPC and theories of race, gender, ability, class, and social justice.

Sample PxTC course

Course description

We live in an increasingly polarized political reality characterized by information warfare and replete with fake news, post-truths, and hostile social media dialogue. Technical communicators working in politics need to learn how to navigate a complex terrain of technologies that can be as partisan as the campaigns that use them. Students in this course will explore the practice of technical and professional communication in political campaigns by designing campaign materials, learning inclusive social media messaging strategies, writing policy briefs, and exploring the role of election, electioneering, constituent services, and punditry technologies in shaping democratic politics.

Student learning outcomes. *By the end of this course, students will*:

(1) Learn about political technical communication (PxTC) as a field of study.
(2) Understand PxTC concepts, terminology, and technologies.
(3) Synthesize political theories and methods relevant to technical communication.
(4) Apply technical communication theories, methods, and practices to politics.
(5) Examine the role of technology in democratic processes.
(6) Critically assess the use of political technologies in the public sphere.

Advice on teaching PxTC. PxTC may be taught face to face or online. Regardless of medium, it is important for students to have access to the technologies that campaigns do. These technologies would include design programs already commonly used in TPC programs like Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, and Spark as well as programs essential to campaigns but unlikely to be found elsewhere in our disciplinary courses such as NationBuilder, MailChimp, and Fundhero (alongside the partisan analogs of these platforms if access can be negotiated). Many of these programs require significant resources to purchase institutional licensing; however, there are many open source and freeware alternatives for students to train on such as Scribus, Inkscape, and Canva for design tools; and Increment, Mobilize, and Spoke for campaign tools. Instructors would also do well to connect the course explicitly to community issues by bringing in campaign operatives and elections officials to discuss their experiences with students, an exercise that facilitates the identification of linkages between political work and TPC expertise. The parallels between the "anytime, anyplace" myth (Fielding, 2016) of online learning and digitally driven politics are numerous and should be leveraged in virtual classes. For example, many of the electioneering technology advances of the past few cycles have worked toward the personalization of politics, enabling micro-targeting and on-your-own-time volunteering opportunities that, like online education, may pose potential spaceless/placeless problems that are exploitative. In the way that "Flexibility stands to make education more student-centered" (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019, p. 1007), flexibility makes politics more accessible and constituent centered.

No matter the medium, social presence is important, as research shows that students want and need instructors to "be actively engaged in facilitating the course during the implementation of the course" (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018, p. 63). For this course, I would add that political presence is also important. That is, instructors should not shy away from discussing political controversies and engaging constructively with students over salient issues. Ideally, folks who teach PxTC will also model political engagement by reflecting on their own political subjectivity and drawing on their own experiences with political technologies. Hess and Gatti (2010) write that "Infusing higher education courses with rich and high-quality discussions of controversial political issues is not easy" but that "For professors who make the effort to become skillful at this form of teaching, the pay-off is high" (p. 25). PxTC sets instructors up for just such a pay off, but that will require a gutsy accounting and embrace of

the instructor's own political contexts. Facilitating political conversation in a PxTC course, which may naturally attract opinionated students, is a difficult job. Face-to-face PxTC classes carry the advantage of instructors being able to read student nonverbal behavior to know when conversation is getting too heated. Online instructors, lacking such an advantage, should develop community rules of conversation for civil dialogue in their forums before engaging political controversies.

A participatory approach where students co-design rules at the beginning of a course would emphasize democratic decision-making and community building as a core part of PxTC. Some possible ground rules for consideration include

- attack arguments, not people.
- read peer posts generously.
- try to understand differing points of view.
- avoid absolutist approaches to conversation.
- root opinions in evidence and course readings.

All instructors should consider their topic choices and methods of intervention before a course runs. Few, if any, topics should be off limits in a PxTC course because the world in which we train our students to advocate in does not have any such prohibition. However, instructors should keep in mind that some topics touch on very sensitive issues that may be quite personal to students and the depersonalized environment of online forums can quickly become an unproductive medium for authentic engagement. Still, hot button issues that bring out keyboard warriors can teach useful lessons even when conversation goes awry. Having guidance in place that predetermines when and where an instructor will engage, intervene, or even shut down conversation goes a long way toward alleviating student fears about participating in political discussions.

Conclusion

Practitioners and academics from a variety of politically concerned fields have a stake in better understanding the rapidly accelerating uses of political technologies. Political communication, political science, sociology, and philosophy (to name a few) would all benefit from the insights of sustained sub-disciplinary inquiry by PxTC scholars. More specifically though, TPC as a field is served both by the cross-pollination of an interdisciplinary approach and through expanding recent disciplinary scholarship on TPC and electoral politics (Dorpenyo & Agboka, 2018). Additionally, PxTC inquiries have the potential to influence policymaking approaches to the regulation of campaigns, elections, and electioneering technology for the purposes of better protecting socially just democratic processes and outcomes.

Political technology is not the only question for PxTC rhetorical critics, but the need for more theorizing of the uses, ethics, and implications of political technology represents an opportunity for disciplinary expansion. TPC can stake a rhetorical claim in the political sphere through the disciplinary naming of PxTC. Technology has a way of fading into the background of consciousness. The backgrounding of technology is a consequence of what Borgmann (1984) termed the "device paradigm" which conceals problematic implications of technology (p. 40). In moving through the world, we encounter technological persuasive appeals everywhere we go but often remain oblivious to the how and why of those appeals.

PxTC is as much about action as it is about raising awareness of the ubiquitous yet opaque technologies mediating political experiences. Scholars should get involved in campaigns, and practitioners should be involved in scholarship. Taking techne as their rhetorical grounding, TPC scholars and practitioners can help each other better understand the political technologies mediating candidate, campaign, and constituent interactions. The work of PxTC is already being done and continued investment in such work contributes to creating more ethical political tools, processes, and experiences. I hope others might add to this work with a generous spirit of contestation so that PxTC theories

may be pitched and tested in generative ways. Criticism will help stretch, test, and push PxTC to mature as a sub-discipline. When the COVID-19 pandemic ends, we will continue to live with the accelerating use of political technology and a precarious public health situation. The sustained academic scrutiny of political communication technologies from rhetorical and empirical perspectives is a critically important democratic obligation for TPC scholars concerned about promoting a more just future.

Notes

1. Outbreaks of vaccine-resistant humans are also a notable risk, as the antics of anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers makes clear.
2. I have chosen to capitalize "White" and "Black" wherever these words reference racial identity because I am persuaded that such a rhetorical move may be helpful in calling attention to the link between structural racism and White identity formation. For a concise discussion of the pros and cons of this capitalization choice, refer to Nguyễn and Pendleton (2020).
3. This lesson still hasn't been learned by political practitioners as the Texas Democratic Party's 2020 election postmortem makes clear.

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