Theoretical Threads:
Digital Literacy as Activism in Technical Communication Scholarship

I started my research with the *Communication Design Quarterly*'s special issue on digital life published in June of 2024. This thread of scholarship framed digital literacy as an effective tool for activism, showcasing how digital literacy gives people the tools to improve, combat, or navigate complex power structures. There were three articles that stood out to me: "Redrawing the Maps: Digital Literacy Practices of Grassroots Activists" by Amber Buck, "The Post-Digital Life of Transnational Activists: Develop a Tactical Technological Literacy" by Chen Chen, and "Augmenting for Accessible Environments: Layering Deep Mapping, Deep Accessibility, and Community Literacy" by Leah Heilig et al Starting from the present and working backwards, I used these three articles as a base to trace the foundations of digital literacy as activism and attempt to find the roots of this scholarship. I argue that this theoretical thread is compelling because it redefines technical communication as a field that not only produces functional documentation but also equips communities with communicative tools for resisting injustice, navigating systems of power, and expanding access to information and technology.

Amber Buck shows how "grassroots activists use diverse digital composing tools to create content for the purpose of affecting change online" (Buck 23). Buck continues to highlight the power of digital activism by using real world case studies. She focuses on a group in Tuscaloosa that worked together to oppose a racially gerrymandered district map and showed how the group "launched an online petition and a letter writing campaign to urge city council members to support their community drawn map" (Buck 26). The group also used digital tools "from Google Workspace, particularly Docs and Sheets" (Buck 27). While the Tuscaloosa group failed to achieve their goal, Buck chooses to focus on the wins and emphasize the implications that this case study has for technical communication and the teaching of technical

communication. The author provides three areas to focus on: “Digital writing workflows and writer’s decisions about digital tools; integrated digital tools for specific purposes; researching activism, social justice, and power” (Buck 30). Buck concludes her work by acknowledging the importance of storied activism, that while this particular example of activism did not succeed, there is still an opportunity to focus on the successes. Buck’s work is a clear extension of the work done by Agboke and Matveeva in *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication: Scholarly and Pedagogical Perspectives* published in 2018. Buck is interested in the sense that she is offering community pedagogies meant to educate activists instead of traditional students in a classroom.

Agboka and Matveeva’s work is the first edited collection of scholarship that explores citizenship and advocacy in the field of technical communication (Getto 195). The goal of this collection is to “push diverse research terrains into conversation with one another, culminating in fresh approaches to the ways we incorporate social justice into TPC work” (Richter 416). The book’s goal is ambitious; it brings together a diverse range of ideas that have never been collected before. In other words, it is a starting point. It is the beginning of something that can be built upon. Buck seems to have taken up that mantle and continued this work; her own piece could have fit well in the section of the book titled “Choosing the Right Approaches to Advocacy and Community Engagement: Working with a Real Client.” The special issue from which my research began owes a lot to the work accomplished in this text. However, while the book’s goals are commendable, it fails in certain aspects to achieve these goals. The biggest failure, identified by Richter, is the fact that “Missing in this collection are any purposeful conversations of access and accessibility” (417). As this paper will show, access and accessibility later became central concerns in technical writing, suggesting that the field recognized this gap and worked to address

it. This collection is a continuation of the work of one of its editors and contributors: Godwin Y. Agboka.

Agboka's work seeks to expand the notion of what culture means to the field of technical communication. "Although the literature is replete with claims about the importance of cultural in intercultural contexts and training, the explication of the concept of culture remains a major problem" (Agboka 161). Agboka claims that the field of technical communication, while making strong claims, is not living up to its talk regarding the importance of understanding what culture means in a technical communication context. This work is the result of a conversation in the scholarship around how culture influences communication. Agboka seeks to develop the work that came before him by focusing on how culture should not be the definition of individuals, emphasizing that a culture is something that people possess not that controls every part of their being (164). This notion of culture being the all-powerful agent in determining someone's personality is known as the "big culture" approach and Agboka is staunchly against it, instead advocating that cultural signs are ambiguous and multifaceted, influential not determinative (166). Not only that, but cultures are dynamic not static, the influence they do possess ebbs and flows with time (167). In sum, Agboka advocates for a more nuanced approach to culture, one that should shape technical communication's approach to theory and pedagogy (175-176). While Agboka's work is critical of the way culture and intercultural communication had been theorized in the field, his work would not be possible without the work of those that came before him, particularly the work of Emily Thrush.

Agboka's 2012 work and Thrush's earlier scholarship, despite being separated by nearly twenty years, share a common goal: improving international professional and technical communication. Thrush was ahead of her time. Where Agboka is part of a globalized world, this

is something that Thrush was on the cusp of. Rather than taking internationalization as a given, Thrush spends much of the article justifying its importance (272-273). Thrush identifies simple areas of confusion that occur between cultures, recognizing that "their world experience prevented them from interpreting the situation and predicting the next step as the writer of the test question expected" (274). While Thrush might not have been as concerned with the nuance of culture's influence, the fact that she is considering the impact of different cultures at all is a significant leap forward for the field of technical communication. Thrush focuses on things such as "The hierarchical structure of society and workplace… culturally specific rhetorical strategies… amount of common knowledge shared within a culture… differences in world experience… cultural differences in processing graphics" (274-279). Some of these findings are still being used today, the focus on graphics can be seen in our course textbook, *Technical Writing 101: A Real-World Guide to Planning and Writing Technical Content*. Thrush's work plays a role in the history of both the importance of cultural literacy and social activism in the field. It opens the door to possibilities of more socially conscious approaches to technical communication. There is even a thread between this work and the work of Chen Chen and their focus on how technology is used against authoritative regimes.

Chen's work in 2025 is the second of the three articles that I discussed in the introduction of this paper. In Chen's work, she shows how advanced digital literacy gives individuals the tools to not only navigate systems of power but gives those same individuals the tools to subvert these structures, particularly in acts of resistance against surveillance in oppressive regimes (17-18). It is important to emphasize that undermining these oppressive regimes was only possible because of the digital literacy of the participants. Chen shows that incorporating digital literacy into pedagogy with the specific intent of examining its subversive potential is not only an

effective tool for encouraging inquiry but an essential part of educating global citizens (19). This focus on interculturality and global citizenship is what ties Chen to the line of scholarship from Thrush to Buck. Chen's work itself is a response to and extension of previous scholarship from Safiya Noble, specifically Noble's work *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* and Ruha Benjamin's work *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for The New Jim Code.*

Both Noble and Benjamin focus on how neoliberalism has become baked into every facet of our society, including our technology. "Systems that help proliferate unconscious bias are built into apps, websites, and other resources widely available to the general population" (Wilks 75). Noble focuses on systematic approaches, attempting to solve the problem from the inside "by way of public policy in order to help counteract the imbalances in social, political, economic, and cultural justice that already exist through institutional structures and are compounded by digital media platforms" (Wilks 76). While Noble's work offers a user-focused perspective, Benjamin uses a code and algorithm centered view. Benjamin puts forward the idea that "race itself is a technology that is designated to create classifications and to justify injustice while mirroring capabilities found in the world of technology—evolution and reimagination by people in power to suit their end goals" (Wilks 77). Both authors put forward the idea that these technologies are systems of oppression. Noble seeks policy as a solution, Benjamin uses knowledge as a solution, while Chen focuses on transforming these tools into weapons of liberation, shifting attention from critique to tactical use. In this sense, Chen's work represents a significant evolution in the scholarship: if Noble and Benjamin diagnose the problem of algorithmic oppression, Chen explores how digital literacy can become a practical tool of resistance within those very systems. All three are essential to creating any kind of change when it comes to wrestling back power and

control from large tech companies and their partnership with governments around the world. All these works are in conversation with the scholarship of Jared Colton in the article “From NoobGuides to #OpKKK: Ethics of Anonymous’ Tactical Technical Communication.”

Colton’s work is an explicit extension of the concept of “tactics” put forward by de Certeau in 1984 and brought into the technical communication field by Kimball in 2006. Colton seeks to define the ethical implications of some modern “tactics” used in digital spaces by examining the practice of doxxing and the distribution of instructional guides by the hacking collective anonymous (60). The piece uses an ethics of care as a framework for determining the ethical impacts of the tactics of Anonymous: “how wounding and caring manifest” (66). While Colton “wholeheartedly” supports any technical communicators interest in tactics, they show how these tactics can be ethically complex. This work pushes away from the utilitarian idea of justifying terrible acts so long as they support the common good and encourages a localized system of evaluation from which activists can operate. Colton builds off the work of scholars previously discussed in this article, Agboka is the most cited scholar in this article, but he also weaves together scholars from critical theory to build a more interdisciplinary field. Colton is a member of a contemporary cohort of scholars with similar ambitions, but the foundation of this article is the work of Kimball.

It seems that the farther back in time we go into the scholarship of technical communication, the less radical the thought becomes. This was true of the work of Thrush discussed above and it is also true of the work by Kimball, but these scholars paved the way for the radical thought that was to come. In his work “Cars, Culture, and Tactical Technical Communication” Kimball connects de Certeau’s framework of tactics to analyze technical communication documents within different car communities. Kimball himself acknowledges the

mundanity of the subject of the automobile (67), however bringing de Certeau into technical communication is itself a radical gesture. It could be said that de Certeau could only be taken seriously in technical communication when applied to small or seemingly insignificant documents. Kimball points out that these documents are cultural artifacts and that all "Technical documents build from and contribute to communal narratives and cultural myths" (73). In this way, even the most insignificant technical documents can shape and contribute to the fabric of society. Kimball uses the example of the Volkswagen beetle "reappropriated after the war from its fascist and Fordist origins, however, the Beetle came to embody resistance to authority, as Beetle owners tactically modified their machines in unique and creative ways" (77). This reappropriation was turned into a user guide on how to achieve this act of cultural rebellion or subversion. In this we can see the seeds of Chen in the subversion of technological literacy, Benjamin and Noble in their approach to understanding the power of technological systems, and Colton's ethical approach to tactical technical communication. One aspect of activism that has been missing from the above scholarship is a focus on technical communications role in accessibility.

The work of Leah Heilig, Ally Overbay, Madison Jones, and Taylor Roberts in "Augmenting for Accessible Environments: Layering Deep Mapping, Deep Accessibility, and Community Literacy" extends the scholarship of accessibility in technical communication. The article positions itself a response "to recent calls for greater attention to access as an issue of community literacy… as well as the demand for more justice-focused and emancipatory accessibility work in TPC" (Heilig et al. 33). The authors respond to this call by examining how to improve access to "wild" or natural spaces on the University of Rhode Island's campus. They emphasize the complicated relationship between advocates of accessibility and advocates for

environmental protections, seeing how the latter often visualizes access to the natural world as limited to one type of user: white and able bodied (Heilig et al. 34). One way that the authors seek to bridge this divide is with the concept of "participatory deep mapping" (Heilig et al. 35). This approach seeks to combine the "natural" world with the digital world to manufacture environments that increase accessibility for all without disrupting the naturalness that all users in these environments desire. While there are many regulations that seek to support individuals with disabilities, there are spaces that are marked out as separate, free from the reach of these regulations. Where regulations fail, the authors of this article show how community literacy and digital literacy around access and accessibility are the key to facilitating change (Heilig et al. 38-39). The authors conclude by offering a pedagogy that educates students on the importance and applications of accessibility in technical communication. This work combines many theories, but one of the foundational texts that Heileg et al. extend is the work of Bivens et al. and their work "The Activist Syllabus as Technical Communication and the Technical Communicator as Curator of Public Intellectualism."

The influence Bivens et al. had on Heilig et al. is visible in their approach to pedagogy. By analyzing activist syllabi, Bivens et al. "suggest the pedagogical circumstance this curatorial work might happen within" (73). While Bivens et al. focuses on a variety of social issues, the most relevant section for examining the relationship between the two authors comes from the section on accessibility. In this section, the authors examine the role that technical communicators can play in the improvement of open-source activist syllabi by helping "activist syllabi creators comply with federal laws, international accessibility standards, and general accessibility guidelines for digital work" (Bivens et al. 86). The open-source nature of this project strengthens community involvement and paves the way for the work that Heilig et al.

would continue. Both are interested in the importance of accessibility in creating meaningful societal change and they continue to build on the concept of digital literacy as activism.

In this paper, I have examined the diverse ways that digital literacy in technical communication can be used from an activist perspective. I have traced this scholarship back to its roots when the field of technical communication was becoming interested in internationalization. This global perspective is part of what has set technical communication on the path towards inclusion and activism. Another aspect that the work discussed in this paper shows is how the field of technical communication is not exclusively interested in serving their clients' desires. The field is interested in bridging the divide between client interest and moral and ethical implications of communicative practices. This is a tradition that must be upheld and further explored as the world becomes more tumultuous. Later scholars, such as Agboka and Kimball, expanded on this perspective by focusing on social justice issues and the introduction of tactics into the field. Contemporary scholars like Chen, Buck, and Heilig et al. have extended this work even further by focusing on real-world examples activism grounded in technical communication and digital literacy used to undermine systems of oppression.

This shift is significant because it effectively reorients the field by influencing the conversation and positioning technical communication as something greater than the sum of its parts. Technical communicators play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interact with substantial chapters of human life. Whether by exposing racist algorithms, using oppressive technologies as tools to undermine those technologies themselves, or designing accessible environments, these scholars show that technical communication can function as a site of civic engagement and social change.

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