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Social Justice Scholarship Informing Visual Communication Practices

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Social Justice Scholarship Informing Visual Communication Practices

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An Alternate Plan Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English

Technical Communication

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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ABSTRACT

My discussion hinges on the groundwork of social justice as integral to the field of technical and professional communication (TPC) with an understanding of the importance of visual communication; ultimately, I seek to **understand the intersections of Social Justice and Visual Communication within the field of Technical Communication**. Based on this research, I develop a heuristic that allows technical communicators to critically analyze their visual communication efforts, specifically infographics, for advocacy/social justice.

Keywords: Social Justice, Social Action, Advocacy, Ethics, Visual Communication, Visual Rhetoric, Critical Analysis, Decolonial, Postmodern, Infographics, Visualization, Data Visualization, Race Theory

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that the world is in crisis, on many levels and especially with regard to human life. In an effort to maintain power and control, systems of oppression have historically been put in place to class certain groups as more valuable than others. The study of power dynamics abounds in scholarly research and is a multidisciplinary study; but at its heart, it is about valuing others because they are inherently valuable. Many social structures teach us to value certain aspects of individuals and life while devaluing others who lack said trait. This has led to massive inequalities and injustices that continue to diminish certain groups which leads to egregious practices that damage the self-worth of those impacted by these socially constructed systems of belief.

Although technical communication has found niches to discuss ethics, I would have appreciated greater discussion of the social dimensions of our work and its impact on society. Earlier on in my curriculum I took an interest in advocacy, although I didn't have a name for it at the time. In my Visual Communication course we were provided an assignment requiring us to take a given set of data and create an infographic based on some or all of the information offered. I took a decidedly environmentalist approach and created a story about why we should reduce our carbon foot print, tracking the amount of semi-trucks that travel the US and what that amounted to in carbon emissions. My graphic was far from sound but it highlights a desire that I don't think is unique to me. I cared about how I could make an impact in the world, how I could use my unique voice and set of skills to improve *something*, in some way. This is what I hope to articulate with the research I've done and it speaks to some of the unvoiced desires I've had of my academic experience.

I hope my argument encourages pedagogy to make social justice a foundational concept within TPC, and that we can find ways to infuse advocacy into our visual communication so we can confront the systemic and systematic practices of marginalizations that occur in the world we live, work, and play in. Bridging the connection between the delivery of information and how that impacts the individual and their role in society, I thought it important to articulate a heuristic for visual communicators to analyze content for social justice influences but also to think critically about how they can implement a social justice framework within their visual communication practices, specifically with infographics, an influential communication tool. In conducting research for this project, there appeared to be very little research within TPC that addressed this important function and I was curious to see how the two can be coupled to promote humanitarian efforts. This research pulls from many disciplines to structure a heuristic that meets the needs of technical communicators working within various industries. It is already noted that visual aids are a powerful form of communication and often activate change and encourage agency, much faster than any other medium. With my research, I consider how we can leverage this medium as technical communicators to encourage a social justice approach to our visual communication practices.

METHODOLOGY

The scope for this project is to review the literature regarding social justice within TPC, its value to the field, and methods for incorporating this perspective to our practices. This is followed by a discussion of visual communication and the various modes for evaluating the effectiveness of a given communication with an eye toward incorporating social justice in these

practices. I pay special attention to research focused on race relations to provide context for a social justice approach.

I close my literature review with a discussion of infographic rhetorical strategies and I seek to find the intersections of theory and practice that can be applied to visual information to provide my peers with a heuristic for evaluating said communication. With a conceptual guide for how to evaluate visual artifacts with a social justice approach, we can then become experts in applying methods that speak to our roles as social advocates. Ultimately, I seek to promote an approach that will allow us to be caring visual communicators, adept at creating a space for all to feel represented, respected, and appreciated by promoting diversity and encouraging acceptance.

CURRENT CONVERSATION (A LITERATURE REVIEW)

Social Justice in Technical Communication: Establishing Centrality

There has already been a strong foundation for ethics in technical communication and the research explored here extends the scope of ethics to include social justice as an important framework for technical communicators. Discussions of ethics within technical communication considers our roles as transmitters of information and what was first articulated as presenting information 'objectively' has been turned upside down by scholars such as Katz who have questioned what is morally appropriate based upon the cultural context (1992, 1993) and the influence we have as communicators. His article, "The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust", dissects the role of expediency as a moral paradigm within the Nazi regime and the atrocious results of such an ideology. He reminds readers that even

'objective' language does not dismiss the cultural overtones that influenced the technical communication that lead to the death of thousands.

The growth of research in technical communication as a means for social justice has expanded significantly within the past forty years. Many scholars (Agboka, 2014; Agboka & Matveeva, 2018; Aiello, 2006; Haas, 2012; Haas & Eble, 2018; Johnson-Eilola, 1996; N. N. Jones, 2016b; N. N. Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016; Katz, 1993; Petersen & Walton, 2018; Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019) have paved the way in asserting Technical Communication not as a field based in objectivity but as a field enmeshed in the human experience and thereby a rich ground for promoting social change. Many academics of the social justice framework have argued how this approach increases the value and validity of the field (Agboka, 2014; Haas, 2012; N. N. Jones, 2016b; N. N. Jones et al., 2016), have supplied greater purpose for practitioners within the field; and more importantly, asserted the ethical responsibility we have to do so within the field. There are many interrelated concepts that drive social justice within TPC and they will be briefly reviewed below.

As previously mentioned, the human condition is a foundational concept within technical communication so it logically locates **humanistic approaches** as core concepts for social justice approaches. The humanistic approach contends that:

[T]echnical communication is not neutral or objective. Instead, [it] is political and imbued with values. Technical communication reflects certain perspectives, viewpoints, and epistemologies. As such, technical communicators must be aware of the ways that the texts and technologies that they create and critique reinforce

certain ideologies and question how communication shaped by certain ideologies affect individuals. (Jones, 2016 , p.345)

At its core, humanism is concerned with the human experience and that is already inherent to the field of technical communication when you consider activities such as usability testing, instructional design, instructional manuals, etc.

Agboka (2014), Haas (2012), and Jones (2016a) have all ascribed to **decolonial methodologies** for addressing social justice concerns. Agboka proposes decolonial methods as an alternative to current approaches for intercultural communication research (2014) while Haas employs a decolonial approach to pedagogy (2012). In her article “The Technical Communicator as Advocate,” Jones discusses several approaches that can facilitate social justice work within technical communication, the decolonial approach being one of them. They all implore situated and located accountability frameworks as fundamental ethical practices that should drive our research and pedagogy. In essence, this approach acknowledges the negative ramifications of colonialism and that technical communicators must be cognizant of the context they are working in; considering local, political, historical and cultural influences (Agboka, 2014, p.298) while also considering our role as meaning-makers and the ideologies that inform our decisions.

There are many other theories, approaches, and methodologies that speak to the social justice movement (critical race theory, participatory design, feminist theory) and TPC has recently sought to synthesize the research within the field. One book that begins to elucidate the complexities of advocacy within our field is *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication: Scholarly and Pedagogical Perspectives* (2018). It is a collection of articles that provide frameworks and practices to situate our understanding of social justice (advocacy) within

technical communication to help students, scholars, and professionals implement them in their practices.

The contributors of this text move beyond a discussion of “objectively” sharing information to reminding readers of the inherent cultural perspectives that influence how we perceive and communicate and the implications of that for acting responsibly as communicators (Agboka & Matveeva, 2018) state that:

[T]echnical and professional communicators play various roles in shaping democratic discourses locally and globally. Not only do teachers, researchers, and practitioners produce artifacts that contribute to advocacy and global citizenship, but they also conduct important research and work in governmental and civil society organizations that all shape these practices. (p. 8)

This passage reminds us of the levels of influence we have within our practices and that the field of practitioners spans various communities (within academics and otherwise).

The authors define advocacy as **“the process of using a combination of academic and practical skills and knowledge systems to enact social justice with the goal of improving the quality of life for communities”** (p. 11), this is the definition I ascribe to when discussing advocacy and I use it interchangeably with social justice.

Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action (2019) is another text that explores advocacy within the field of technical communication. This book discusses how technical communication has been historically complicit in oppressive practices and provides models for promoting social justice. The authors propose the following definition of social justice in relation to technical communication:

Social justice research in technical communication investigates how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people – those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced. Key to this definition is a collaborative, respectful approach that moves past description and exploration of social justice issues to taking action to redress inequities. (Loc 1467, citing Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242)

Both texts articulate the need for our practices to take an active approach to improving the lived experiences of others, and to gain greater clarity on that approach, I briefly review passive and active forms of social justice within the scholarly research.

Passive Social Justice

Passive social justice has been explored by several researchers and usually in conjunction with or opposition to active social justice approaches. Passive social justice is typically considered the theory side of advocacy (Walton et al., 2019) and the authors note that the theory should *inform* the action taken for social justice (Loc. 1534). They remind us that the ideologies and theories are important but that a discussion of them must lead to processes that encourage change. Colton and Holmes (2018) suggests that a passive equality framework is problematic for enacting social justice because it typically signals/identifies an injustice but communicators must then wait for the institution to address those injustices. They identify this as the liberalist practice known as **distributive justice** wherein social justice can only be enacted by the “state and its institutions” (8). This leaves communicators feeling helpless in their efforts or detached from their results due to the time it may take for results to be seen. Colton highlights this methodology with an example of “requesting a company policy change to include captions in all

online videos and then waiting for the policy to take effect” (p. 7). With this example, change is subject to the approval of some governing organization which strips communicators from the power they have as influencers, even if in microscopic ways. To be clear, Colton and Holmes describe passive equality as “systems of political organization, wherein humans are viewed as receivers of equality distributed by an organization...rather than as active enactors of equality” (2018, p. 5). As Walton et al. (2019) articulate, a distributive framework views people as consumers “and therefore cannot address injustices that have nothing to do with the material or are not solely material” (Loc. 1129). They also state that the distributive method relies on an economic framework that can result in a host of problematic ideologies and that it is best to temper one’s approach given the situation being addressed. The authors present various social justice models and the situations best suited for that model and they also acknowledge that issues can and often are multifaceted and various methods may need to be combined to address a concern; what they would term a **collective approach** (2019).

Given the extensive research in technical communication calling attention to marginalizations, Colton and Holmes note that there are few positive (active) frameworks to help TPCers *enact* social justice; this is where my research and interests converge and where a discussion of active social justice approaches frame the heuristic I develop.

Active Social Justice

Much research has considered the ethics of what we do as communicators, ensuring that the information we share is accurate and considerate of all potential audiences; the aim of not causing harm. But there is also a need for our field to become actively involved in the social paradigms that influence how we perceive information and communicate with one another.

Aiello (2006), Agboka (2013), Colton & Holmes (2018), Haas (2007), Jones (2016a), Medina (2014), Balzhiser, Pimentel, & Scott (2019) and many others exemplify active approaches to social justice within technical communication and we can use them as guides to continue the charge.

Colton and Holmes cite Rancière's research as the beginnings of a model that can help technical communicators begin to re-think ways of applying social justice; ways for "verifying equality via communication practices" (2018, p. 6). This method suggests that any act of recognition for any individual(s) who have been oppressed is an act of social justice (13). Rancière implies that this process of political emancipation acknowledges the equality inherent in oneself, and thereby that of another. Simply put, once you recognize your own equality, spotlighting the equality (humanity) of another is an act of social justice.

Articles by Haas (2007) and Medina (2014) are clear examples of active social justice as espoused by Rancière. These articles seek to provide recognition to oppressed peoples, acknowledging the humanity of the practices that generally go unseen or are denigrated in our post-colonial society. Haas reminds us that the general definition of hypertext in our technology-driven society can actually be traced back to the historical wampum belt, an object used to record civil affairs such as "alliances, treaties, marriage proposals, ceremonies, wars, etc." (78). With this essay she challenges colonial perceptions of technology by providing a "counterstory" explaining the use of wampum belts. She offers dignity to a practice that maintains the same conceptual framework acknowledged as technology today—verifying (think Rancière) the equality of the American Indian culture that developed and utilized the wampum belt. As she closes out this essay, she urges further research in rhetorical sovereignty – "the inherent right

for indigenous communities to claim and shape their own communication needs in digital and visual spaces” (95-96). This reaffirms notions shared by Banks (2005) by way of Baraka who suggests that “machines are an extension of their inventor-creators....the technology of the West, is just that, the technology of the West. Nothing has to look or function the way it does” (106). This is a reminder for creators to question their perspectives, to question the status quo.

Medina apparently picks up the call with her essay, “Tweeting Collaborative Identity” (2014). Medina’s article works by disrupting notions of information literacy within this digital age by “challeng[ing] assumptions of genre, voice, and audience” (65). She discusses how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) such as Twitter can be fertile ground for “reinforcing support networks and facilitating the performance of ethnic identity” (63) for Latin students; reconciling the marginalization of the Latin voice within American culture and providing an opportunity to uplift their voice. This is an act of social justice that encourages linguistic diversity and questions the homogenous paradigm (white, middle-class, male voice) of communication within America. She states that accepting linguistic diversity will help American society to “connect to the growing Latin market and [has] the potential to better prepare” (64) the growing Latin student population within technical communication. These articles are just two examples that provide positive means for enacting social justice within technical communication scholarship.

Many scholars share methods for enacting social justice and I believe the work of Jones et al. (2016) and Walton et al. (2019) provide a synthesis of ways to consider social justice within technical communication. In *Technical Communication after the Social Justice Turn*, these authors make it important to note that there are two key terms for social justice that are often

implied but rarely articulated— **collective and active**—these are concepts that move their discussion forward and inform their approach to advocacy. These scholars reinforce the research done by others that assert that instances of injustice cannot be seen in a vacuum because forms of oppression are often multiplied and interconnected and responses must be collective and/or collaborative. For it to be considered social justice, it must also have an active element of recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing oppression, what they term the 4Rs (loc 3371); one can note these practices within the articles by Haas and Medina. It is with this text and much of their previous research that I hinge my discussion of social justice in relation to visual communication, more specifically, infographics.

Beginning in 2016 with their article “Disrupting the Past to Disrupt the Future: An Antenarrative of Technical Communication” and explicated more fully within their book *The Social Justice Turn*; Jones, Moore, & Walton present two ideas to help us activate processes within TPC: the **antenarrative** and the **3Ps model**. Neither are new to the field of technical communication but they synthesize these concepts in a way that offers tangible tools for the technical communicator. With these concepts we are reminded that although theory is integral to building understanding, action (on some level) is essential for social justice approaches to be effective within our field.

The **Antenarrative**, cited by Jones et al. (2016) but first introduced by Boje (2001), is a way of “re-seeing” a long-held perception; he defines it as a “fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and improper storytelling” (p. 1). In social justice research, one can find terms such as “re-imagining”, “re-visioning”, “reframing” and other similar phrases that speak to the notion of antenarrative. It is essentially the “re-telling” of a story from a different

perspective, and Jones et al. (2016) use it to provide an alternate view of TPC and the work and goals that should motivate our field. Haas' article on the hypertextuality of the wampum belt and Medina's work on "(re)imagining [the] linguistic abilities" (2014, p. 66) of the Latin Community serve as other powerful examples of antenarratives. In reference to semiotic work, Balzhiser, Pimentel, & Scott assert that "[w]ithout probable, alternate readings, interpretations of the most powerful prevail, silencing or discriminating against others' realities" (2019, p. 7). This highlights that alternative readings serve an important function of bringing to the fore, ideas, behaviors, practices, and peoples that were/are marginalized, revealing the ways that power work in our society. Once recognized, these inconsistencies or forms of oppression can be addressed; this practice of revealing serves as an important catalyst to enact change, or at the very least, change perceptions that then can influence action.

As previously mentioned Walton et al. Synthesize the **3Ps** (Position, Privilege, and Power) by exploring each concept and how they can be used in social justice work within TPC, articulating that understanding position and privilege help to reveal the level of power a said group or individual has in influencing "social capital and agency" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 220). They insist that this framework will help scholars and practitioners examine these constructs in relation to themselves and others in the hopes of creating more inclusive practices within TPC (p. 212). Below is a brief description of each concept.

Positionality refers to the "idea that aspects of identity—such as race and gender—are not essential qualities but are identity markers" that indicate how we perform our identities in our society. They cite that positionality is relational, historical, fluid, particular, situational, contradictory, and intersectional (loc. 1808). All of this amounts to recognizing the complexity of

the human experience and what accounts for who we are; it reminds us to be wary of applying overly simplistic or deterministic attributes to any given group or individual and thereby being critical of the terminology, practices and ideologies we enact in our lived experiences as TPCers. In terms of the classroom experience, Medina reminds us that “many times, students are not aware of the assumptions they perpetuate if they do not practice critical reflection” (Medina, 2014, p. 67), this presents a strong case for introducing positionality in pedagogy in the hopes of developing communicators who think reflexively about their role and influence. Recall key concepts espoused by Agboka and Mateeva (2018) and other scholars that urge us to understand and consider our role in the meaning making process which is inherently influenced by the social constructs we live and work within.

Privilege stems from the understanding that certain positionalities afford individuals certain unearned (economic, cultural, social and political) advantages to the detriment of others (Jones et al., 2016, Walton et al., 2019). They acknowledge that privilege is afforded to those who align with the dominant cultural constructs and again they remind us that the complexities of privilege require that we be vigilant in examining how they manifest in our lives and the world at large. Haas’ discussion of hypertext, reveals how Western cultures have privileged certain definitions of “technology” when in fact many artifacts predate these frequently unchallenged notions of what technology is. Walton et al. (2019) provide the definitive example of privilege in academia with male graduate students who are more likely to receive prestigious research projects whereas female graduate students are offered smaller assistantships (loc. 2244). This is a clear example of the importance for TPCers to cultivate a critical eye for recognizing privilege so that we can then challenge these oppressive practices wherever we work.

Finally, Power occurs at the intersection of positionality and privilege with privilege being the unspoken means for securing relative amounts of power (Jones et al., 2016, p. 220). They state that “occupying a position of privilege means not just having power but having more power than certain other groups of people” (p. 220-221) and they note (through citing Foucault) how the use of power can negatively impact marginalized groups in terms of “domination (power of one group over another), exploitation (separation of people from what they produce), and subjectivity (categorization of people and the positioning of them as dependent upon others’ control) (221). Medina (2014)—citing Cornel West—reminds us that the structures within modern discourse (that are based in white, male-dominated ideals) “have the power to produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which set perimeters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas” (p. 69). This articulates that those who have power, have control in privileging ‘meaning’ and what is considered acceptable; many scholars in the field challenge these traditional conceptions that persist oppressive practices and that is part and parcel the aims of many social justice approaches within technical communication.

To close out their framework, they home in on **coalitional** work that recognizes, reveals, rejects, and replaces (4Rs) inequities. They note that various individuals with multiplied marginalities can build a coalition of action toward a given goal. This term also implies that multiple injustices intersect at various points and must be addressed from multiple fronts, through multiple perspectives/plans of action. This recaptures Banks (2005) message when he provides the poetic example of how collective action can be unique and expressive:

African American rhetorical history shows powerful unities of identity and purpose across centuries, classes, genders, and ideologies, once we realize that unities are not absolute. To say that one must play fuller, richer chords, and leave individuals more room for improvisation both with and against those chords is not to say that there is no music that can reflect their collective energy and aspirations. (5)

This highlights that individual ways of 'seeing' and acting (the tone of your musical chord) can come together for a collective/common goal (the musical score); that a person's individuality does not negate the possibility to activate change.

Technical Communication is touted as a means of practical communication but as you can see from the discussion on social justice, that does not mean it is void of ideals that speak to the good of humankind. The research has provided countless tools to help communicators facilitate change and it is with this in mind that I turn my eye toward visual communication and how social justice can and is enacted within the discipline of TPC.

Social Justice and Visual Communication: Locating Prevalent Themes

The conversation of social justice within visual communication is not new, in fact, multiple disciplines tackle various facets of this topic and I offer up a multi-disciplinary review to help situate the conversation within TPC. The breadth of research within visual communication could not be enumerated here so I pay special attention to research directed toward social theories of visual rhetoric with special attention given to race issues. It is already acknowledged that perceptual/cognitive theories of visual communication is not sufficient in accounting for the varied ways that individuals interpret and are influenced by visual codes, (J. Jones, 2015; Charles

Kostelnick, 1993) and so my research swiftly directs attention to the inherent social dimension of visual rhetoric, specifically locating resources related to TPC (as much as possible). Haas (2012), Jones (2016), Jones et al. (2016) Walton et al. (2019) and many others advocate for studies that specifically look at race at the intersection of TPC because our field has been historically complicit in oppressive practices and recognizing these patterns can help us move into more humanistic approaches (think social advocacy).

From a discussion of political cartoons of the 1800s (Bates, Lawrence, & Cervenka, 2008) to marketing material of the 21st century (Campelo, 2011), researchers have found niches to address the problematic practices of marginalizing, discriminating or otherwise disregarding classes of citizens within visual communication. My research works in combination with the 3Ps and 4Rs to lay a foundation for the heuristic I propose, below is a review of those studies.

First, I must mention a premier work that attempts to provide an overarching view of what visual rhetorics is, what it implies, and how it can be applied in the field. *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Helmets & Hill, 2004) is a collection of case studies that examines the connection between visual images and persuasion and includes contributions from rhetoric scholars in the English and communication disciplines; they represent a variety of methodologies—theoretical, textual analysis, psychological research, gender studies, and cultural studies, among others. This text serves to highlight the many artifacts that can be considered visually persuasive and sheds light on the mundane so that we can see how ingrained the ‘social’ is for visual manifestations. The editors seek to demonstrate that every new turn in the study of rhetorical practices reveals more possibilities for discussion and if one does a quick search for visual rhetorics, the list is

inexhaustible and reminds us of all of the potential avenues that can be taken with a focus on visual rhetorics.

Functional literacy and semiotics are just some of the theories found within a discussion of visual communication with a social focus, and at its core, it is understood that the interplay of individuals with society and communities create a shared space for meaning (code creation) (Aiello, 2006; Griffin, 2002; Mauricio Mejía & Chu, 2014), this is the crux of these approaches. These theories, among many others, have long been espoused as a means for acknowledging the social and cultural influences of meaning making within visual communication and several scholars within TPC emphasize the necessities for these theories within our practice and pedagogy (Balzhiser et al., 2019; Brasseur, 2003; Charles Kostelnick, 1993; Li, 2020).

Although Kostelnick does not overtly state functional literacy in his article, one sees the links of what Mejia & Chu (2014) later discuss as functional literacy when developing a heuristic for visual design communication. Kostelnick, asserts that pictorial images are filtered through a “social lens” and goes on to explicate the three levels of lived experiences that inform the audiences functional reading of pictures (functional literacy); they are outlined below:

1. Cultural context (the shared worldview, experiences, or values of group members);
2. Conventional context, (readers share the visual codes of a discipline/specialized subject);
3. Immediate context, (constraints of the situation in which discourse participants use a picture) (p. 244).

I consider this not only a methodology used to critically analyze the audience, but to act as checkpoints for designers to reflexively analyze themselves during the design process. Mejia & Chu (2014) explore the intersections of design, rhetoric (classical) and functional literacy and

provide a useful diagram elucidating the various aspects of design to include the artifact's social context, various persuasive appeals, and cannons for the creation process, the model is as follows:

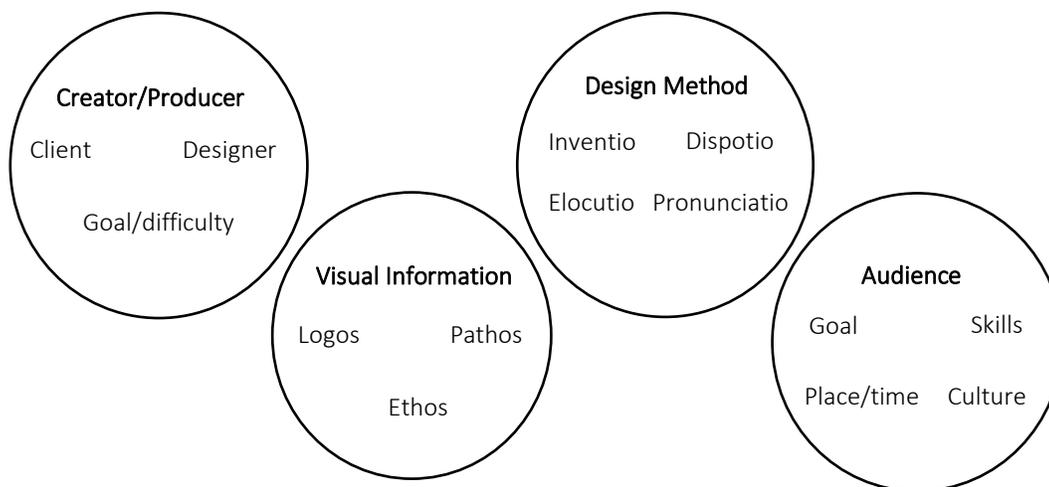


Figure 1. Mejia & Chu's Model for Visual Communication

They offer this model as a useful tool for analysis and research and it's one step toward thinking reflexively as a designer.

Jones states that "we must examine the design and dissemination of communication critically with a focus on understanding how oppressive conditions can be rearticulated and reinforced" (2016, p. 346), this speaks to the humanistic foundation of technical communication and there has recently been work within TPC that specifically answers this call to action with regard to visual design. Balzhiser et al. (2019) and Li (2020) both look at how design practices can and have disenfranchised racialized groups. Balzhiser et al "call[s] for actively enacting advocacy as a fundamental, routine design tenet" (2019, p. 3) supporting this with their research regarding the document design of the U.S. Census form of 2010, which makes apparent the "incongruities in design [that] can potentially harm people" (p.3). Li discusses data visualizations found in the

U.S. *Statistical Atlases* of the late 19th/early 20th century that were strategically created to ‘other’ the Chinese immigrant population, all for the social and political aims of those in power.

Both instances place these documents within the historical, social, cultural and economic paradigms that they were developed in, reminding communicators of the influence of documentation on viewer perceptions and possible misconceptions. This is also echoed in the *Defining Rhetorics* article, “Gendered Environments: Gender and the Natural World in the Rhetoric of Advertising” (Hope, 2004) where the author situates her analysis of marketing collateral in relation to American ideals of economic security and how the portrayal of nature engenders overconsumption, a problematic attitude, in light of the “recognition of worldwide environmental degradation” (155). This research takes a gender studies approach that is closely linked to social justice work and one can see the advocacy inherent in this article; it is an example of revealing the ideologies (capitalism and consumerism) that harm our environment. Taken together, all three articles are reminders to always be mindful of the structures that we work within (positionality) and our influence (power) in promoting (privileging) certain invisible ideologies; think the 3Ps framework espoused by Jones et al. (2016).

Walton et al. (2019) state that “[w]e need to draw upon a wider variety of traditions, writing forms, and ways of knowing to craft the messages of more socially just TPC” (loc. 2115) and this elucidates some of the rhetorical strategies I’ve discovered to help us re-think visual communication, some of which, do not conform to traditionally Western visual rhetorical strategies.

In 2008, Bates, Lawrence, & Cervenka challenge Eurocentric visual rhetorical norms by introducing the Afrocentric visual rhetorical framework of *Visual Nommo*. It defies Eurocentric

ways of knowing which is reminiscent to research already discussed (Haas, 2007; Medina, 2014). The authors note that Afrocentric creations can (and maybe should) be analyzed through an Afrocentric lens that brings many qualities inherent in Afrocentric culture to the fore. This particular article conceptualizes visual *nommo* as “the expression of the word through African uses of sight, texture, color, irony, metaphor, narrative, and other visual strategies” (279) and identifies several manifestations of this to include: “indirection, the appeal to history, repetition, mythication, and stylin” (280).

Bates et al. discussion of indirection pick up Banks’ notion of the “underground” (2005). Discussed in his work *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Banks speaks to the notion that Black people have had to make a way on the periphery of society because of exclusionary practices. Black people have had to manifest in indirect ways, which required a strong use of cultural codes to relay messages, whether in rap music or in slave quilts. Banks provides this strong example: “Because slaves were under such constant surveillance for any activity perceived to be threatening, knowledge needed for resistance and escape was encoded into seemingly harmless activities” (124) i.e., quilts, negro spirituals, and folk tales. Bates et al. mention that indirection was a form of “hidden scripts” examples of which include “innuendoes, insinuation, implication and suggestions”. It was a form of communication that allowed Black people to express themselves in heavily coded ways, thereby reducing the threat of violence so often employed by slave owners who perceived resistance. Although this type of retaliation is not practiced today (or at least not called by that name), threats to life and freedom still abound and where practices of racism are institutionalized, it frequently takes indirect or covert means to enact change. Notions of *Indirection* or *underground* and many other Afrocentric methods

make Afrocentric practices a powerful tool in social advocacy efforts. Students could benefit from this pedagogical shift to disrupt the institutionalized oppressions found within the classroom, professional scholarship, and the workplace where power is always at play.

Banks also notes that the scholarly research has firmly traced the lines of spoken and written rhetorical traditions but visual and design studies were lacking during the time of this article. He cites Tate and Jafa ("From Dogon to Digital: Design Force 2000. Looting Other Disciplines Along the Way" 1998) with acknowledging that the continuity is there, it is our way of *seeing* that needs to be reframed (106). This brings up notions of what is art? What qualifies? Which ultimately calls up the question of what frame of reference are we operating from? "For Jafa and Tate, we need to see design differently by looking at our own traditions to make that difference, to interrupt those practices and theoretical approaches that continue to exclude African Americans and other people of Color" (106).

Based off of evaluating the work of Black architects and slave quilters, Banks offers up a heuristic for design that speaks to the purposes of social justice, "a framework for the visual principles and arguments that can be engaged and employed in the pursuit of justice for Black people while preserving and celebrating African American culture" (129). Below I summarize the heuristic he proposes.

- Acknowledge design practices as a struggle against injustice "offering ways to resist the stubbornness of racism and racialized exclusions;"
- Commit to "charting and maintaining the continuity of specific visual patterns and practices, ideas, and materials" found within Afrocentric work;

- Provide a participatory approach that engages lay people impacted by the design artifact and seeks to maintain “underground” (indirect/concealed) design spaces for practitioners to work within. (This is based on the historical understanding that African Americans have learned to thrive within these spaces due to dominant, exclusionary practices);
- Apply an approach that “encodes freedom directly into spaces and artifacts, in a sense, an approach that embeds the technical communication, the instructions, the documentation, into the artifacts and spaces themselves (i.e., slave quilts);”
- Be willing to “use every means available in design, even dated and discarded technologies, and spaces and artifacts of the everyday;” and
- Assert “intellectual and physical freedom, no matter what hindrances still seem to prevent that freedom” (129-130).

Within this framework, and the framework espoused by Bates et al.(2008), it is important to note that Afrocentric communicative practices in America have always been about challenging the norm, whether overtly or covertly. Both Banks and Bates et al. assert that these frameworks can be used to evaluate African American rhetoric but I would argue that they can be used across the board for all types of communication. Why not analyze *any* artifact through the Black lens, especially communication targeted to the black and brown communities? The reverse paradigm has been the standard for centuries. Banks validates this view by suggesting that any “directly persuasive public address and less overtly persuasive day to day performances that contribute to the creation of individual and group identities” (3) could benefit from an Afrocentric rhetorical study and I would extend this to methodology.

Racialized groups are well positioned to challenge the dominant, white, male orthodoxy by acknowledging that other perspectives are valid and valued, that conformity and uniformity are not desirable, but even more so, impossible. It forces society to become comfortable with ambiguity and adapt to functioning with uncertainty, *that* is the benefit of 'other' ways of knowing. Other ways of knowing provide a stronger voice for social justice *because* of the multitude of individuals speaking on behalf of equality and because they come from differing backgrounds that can speak to/challenge varying levels of marginalization at various fronts; this is what Walton et al. (2019) and authors within *Citizenship and advocacy in Technical Communication* (2018) would term as coalitional work.

Another prominent socio-cultural component of the research related to analyzing visual communication is situating the artifact within the context it occurs within; its positionality (Jones et al., 2016; Walton et al., 2018). Many scholars maintain this as a baseline for situating their critique or as a component of their framework (Bates et al., 2008; Hum 2015; Mejía & Chu, 2014) This consists of researching and understanding the creator's social, political, economic, and cultural paradigms. This practice of evaluating the context of the artifact will encourage students who become future designers to recognize their own perceptual biases to help mitigate these biases in their work products (artifacts). This is an important reminder for TPC considering Brasseur's statement that technical visual communication is not void of the contextual influences of the time and notes that this "self-reflexivity" has been largely absent in TPC (2003, p. 148); a notion echoed by Walton et al. (2019) some fifteen years after Brasseur's assertion.

An example of a framework founded in positionality is the *gaze*, a term which refers to the "normative habits for selecting and perceiving visual input" (Hum, 2015, p. 193) and how we

make sense of visual information based upon our position (think 3Ps) in the world. Following this, the “racial gaze” constitutes ways of seeing based on external difference (skin tone, external features) and the beliefs influencing attitudes and actions (194). Hum provides a useful visual rhetorical framework that articulates the racialized *gaze* which covers three possibilities for its transformational power, they include:

1. Methodological (think analysis/critique): the racialized gaze as Design operates as a verb through the characteristics of sight (physiological, visible differences) and site (these physiological traits turned to stereotypes that define a group).
2. Theoretical (think production process): discusses how racialized gaze as Design also functions as a noun where it acts as the design elements available to the artist based on their individual positionality which always influence their design choices and the resources (rhetorical devices) available to them.
3. Pedagogical (Instructive): she demonstrates racialized gaze as Design by analyzing four works by cartoonist Thomas Nast and explains how this investigative approach can be used in the classroom to build greater awareness of how culturally dominant ideologies inform Design (design choices and available resources).

One can see the similarities between Hum’s suggestion of the racialized gaze as design and the 3Ps framework espoused by Walton et al. (2019). Furthermore, considering the available design elements discussed in this framework reminds me of Bates et al. (2008) and Banks (2005) with the use of Afrocentric design elements. Exposing students to visual nommo and other Afrocentric design elements will make available a breadth of options that diversify our rhetorical tool kit and specifically speak to subverting cultural norms.

Before closing this section, I would like to share one final quote from Banks (2005) in his discussion of slave quilts and the power of 'mundane' (not obviously rhetorical) communication.

Aside from the near-obvious notion that design is much more than style or the aesthetic, while it might include all of those overlapping concerns. The quilts also offer some more substantive lessons for an African American rhetoric of design: that messages, even explicit instructions on how tools might be used toward liberatory ends can be designed and built into the artifacts themselves, and that the most important technologies and uses to explore are often the everyday. (p. 126)

Once again, we are reminded of the power we have in our everyday communicative practices and the research has been plentiful that even the most mundane communications are laden with rhetoric, tending to reaffirm accepted norms and simultaneously be complicit in injustices. From statistical atlases, survey forms, user manuals, instructional guides, etc. Everything created operates within a social construction and as thoughtful communicators we must be cognizant of the ideologies informing our choices, but not only be mindful, but be advocates for those who are oppressed; that is our duty as a humanistic field.

Infographics: A Communicator's Tool

As technical communicators, one of our primary tasks is delivering information in a comprehensible and accessible way and in a world where we are inundated with information, many tools have come to the forefront to aid in comprehension. Infographics are quickly becoming one tool that can span environments and disciplines because of its utility in delivering a message clearly and concisely and many technical communicators have found niches working with this genre. Much of the effectiveness of infographics stems from the **Picture Superiority**

Effect which states that information is more memorable when paired with images rather than text alone (Krum, 2013, p. 20). There is much research that articulates the power of the visual communication of our field, especially considering the positive, scientific ethos (read: rationality) of data displays such as graphs, charts, and tables (Brasseur, 2003; C Kostelnick, 2008) . The power lies in the design choices made and this notion is discussed in work by Barton and Barton (1993), Brasseur (2003) and Li (2019), just to name a few. There have been many studies that evaluate the impact of imagery on memory and message efficacy and time and again the research confirms that visual aids improve comprehension.

In our heavily digitized era, we can access information on our phones and the amount of information available creates “information overload”. Infographics have come to the fore as a means to navigate our information age quickly and effectively and as the tools to create visually appealing graphics becomes more readily available, the use of infographics has increased exponentially and its potential for social advocacy magnified. Programs such as Word, Excel and PowerPoint now offer built-in features that can help users create visual aids such as diagrams, charts, and graphs with relative ease, providing greater accessibility, allowing for many industries to put them to use in their workplace.

This section will discuss some concepts that help us to analyze how infographics work rhetorically so that we can improve our use of this tool for social advocacy aims. As a genre, infographics are easily applicable to social advocacy as evidenced in the collateral that abounds online. Scholarly research also contends that infographics have wide appeal because of its utility in building comprehension and many studies have argued for its use in education (Martix, S;

Hodson, J, 2014; Yearata, Kelly, Kissel, & Schonhar, 2018) while the corporate sector frequently use infographics to make high-level decisions or to promote company culture (Zhang, 2017).

Several articles mention the use of infographics as a genre for advocacy. One case study notes how a TPC practitioner put together a report detailing the experiences of female employees facing discrimination and ways the organization could mitigate these practices, she included an infographic to supplement the material (Petersen, 2018, p. 31). Another article discusses pedagogical approaches to social justice and mentions how students used infographics in a service-learning project (Edwards, 2018, p. 291). Both articles highlight the usefulness of infographics but did not detail the methodology used to create these visual artifacts. Another article discusses the power of visuals by conducting two experiments on the role of infographics in the decision-making process related to pro-environmental messages (Lazard & Atkinson, 2015, p. 6). Reflecting on the persuasive power of visual communication, my heuristic identifies useful ways for us to consider, evaluate, and develop visual artifacts, specifically infographics, that speak to our roles as influencers.

Infographics have numerous uses, making it a great space for technical communicators to share messages quickly and effectively. I briefly discuss some of the rhetorical strategies of infographics with reference to its use for social justice aims. A standard definition for infographics is difficult to pinpoint because of the diversity within the genre but the term Infographics derives from information graphics and it is essentially a unified display that uses images, text, and graphics to tell a story. Krum (2013) suggests that storytelling is a key component that makes an infographic effective and as we've learned from my review of social justice work, narratives and antenarratives can be a powerful tool for recognizing, revealing,

rejecting, and replacing (Walton et al. 2019) social injustices. This situates Infographics (considering its narrative focus and picture superiority effects) as a powerfully communicative tool for advocacy and instances of its use have already been articulated in multiple studies (Lazard & Atkinson, 2015; Perez & Kaufmann, 2016; Yearta et al., 2018).

As previously mentioned, infographics go by many names and I've provided a brief review of those types to situate my discussion of them. **Data Visualizations** and **Data Displays** are frequently appearing terms in conjunction with infographics or narrative visualization. Per Lankow, Crooks & Ritchie (2012), "data visualization is a visual representation of data or the practice of visualizing data. Common forms include pie charts, bar graphs, line charts, and so forth" (2012, p. 20) and infographics frequently utilize these genres to concisely display statistical information in their storytelling process. This is where the Picture Superiority Effect is most pronounced with infographic design and it a reminder that people can conceptualize information much better when it is presented visually as opposed to textually.

Information visualization (Kostelnick, 2008) and **narrative visualization** (Hullman & Diakopoulos, 2011) are other terms synonymous with infographics. Narrative visualizations are commonly found in journalistic contexts and work to convey a story, usually through data. But to give further explanation, Segel and Heer (2010) describe narrative visualizations as "nuanced techniques for sequentially directing a viewer's attention and keeping viewers oriented across transitions" (p. 1140). This sequential component relates back to infographics foundational concept of storytelling which reminds me of the very powerful effect of narratives on the reader.

There are several rhetorical themes common in infographics, such as the previously mentioned theories of functional literacy and semiotics. Another common theme within the

literature is the **Rhetoric of Science** which refers to the persuasion inherent in data displays. At its heart, this approach looks at how to best convey information to end-users (Kostelnick, 2008, p. 117) and this perspective relies on the perceptual habits of its audience and looks at removing any impediments to their understanding. Aesthetically, this rhetoric prefers minimalist designs that provide high-contrast and a simple layout for the sake of clarity (p. 119). John Jones' notes that if people have been exposed to these types of data displays before and have learned to interpret them intuitively, their automatic perceptual habits can cause them to erroneously apply judgements to similarly visualized information, what he termed the **heuristic of representativeness** (2015 p. 293), this articulates some of the concerns related to the inherent persuasion of data displays. Because Western society applies a strong trust in the objectivity of data displays and because of societies familiarity with these formats and its simplicity, it can easily lead to the misrepresentation and misuse of data. This reminds me of Jones et. al (2019) who discuss how TPC practices can be complicit in oppression, data can be complicit in oppressive ideologies but it can also be an agent for change, when practitioners are aware of the ideologies and influences that impact their design. This leads to a discussion of what and how information is displayed, better known as Information Access Rhetoric.

Like rhetoric of science, **Information Access Rhetoric** is a concept that considers the information displayed in a graphic. To tell a simple and effective story, designers choose what data/information to include and *how much* of that data/information to include, this is what Barton and Barton (1993) would term *rules of inclusion* and *rules of exclusion* (53). This is exemplified in the previously discussed article by Li who utilizes these concepts to reveal the injustices of the early *U.S. Statistical Atlases*, what apparently amounts to the intentional misuse

of Information Access Rhetoric and Rhetoric of Science. Hullman and Diakopoulos (2011) suggests that these “omission[s] or information loss choices” (p. 2234) take on a rhetorical effect because of the impression these choices can give to its audience. Jones (2015) would term this as issues in the **heuristic of availability** (297) which contends that humans have the intuitive habit of only considering the information displayed. We have the tendency to judge, based only on the information given which could lead to evaluating a situation incorrectly. Designers should be considerate of what information is omitted and how the information they keep is organized; these choices act rhetorically because the designer is choosing (based on their positionality) what information users have access to in order to make their decisions. Omissions can also result from a desire to simplify the message, and in teaching infographic design, Toth articulates the challenge that designers face: they must “grapple with issues of clarity, conciseness, tone, ethos, and design while trying to communicate effectively with the intended audience” (2013, p. 454). This quote explains the considerations that come together during the creation process and makes it clear that designers should be keenly aware of their rhetorical situation.

Closely linked to Information Access Rhetoric, **Mapping Rhetoric** addresses *how* designers translate textual information into visual representations as opposed to *what* gets translated. Both Locoro, Cabitza, Actis-Grosso, & Batini (2017) and Hullman and Diakopoulos (2011) mention mapping as a point where designers must make decisions about what and how information is shared with their audiences. Hullman and Diakopoulos contend that *obscuring* can occur in the transmission process and they describe obscuring as “introducing noise into a representation, often on a perceptual level, such as in the case of adding a gratuitous third dimension” (p. 2234) and Kostelnick agrees that three-dimensional displays “often hide data or

impede the reader’s ability to make comparisons” (p. 118) causing issues in clarity. Although Kostelnick does not use the phrase “mapping,” his discussion makes it clear that designers need to be vigilant in developing accurate data displays because ethical issues could ensue otherwise.

Jones (2015) third and final heuristic, the **heuristic of affect** asserts that individuals can develop positive or negative associations with a design which can impact their decision-making, this is affirmed with research conducted by Lazard and Atkinson’s (2015) who concluded that the inclusion of visual content leads to more persuasive, comprehensive communication that aids in behavior and attitude change (27). Once again, this is a reminder of the picture superiority effect and how influential it is in shaping attitudes and decisions, a concept that TPC can tap into to enact social advocacy.

Barnes (2017) from the Media and Journalism discipline, captures a useful infographic design process that would be beneficial to TPC professionals as well. As with my research, he was interested in understanding the design process, and after conducting a cognitive task analysis of 10 college students, he devised a simple model that captures some important steps in the process. Of course this model is not all inclusive but it does provide a useful framework for pedagogy. I have recreated the graphic below.

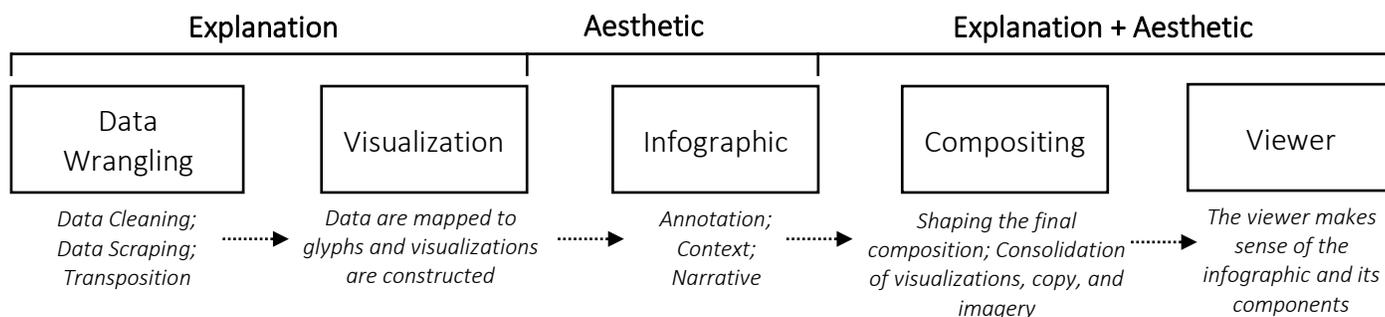


Figure 2. Barnes’ Proposed model of the infographic design process

His graphic (and research) highlight that dealing with data is the primary component for creating an effective infographic, and understanding the data is of the utmost importance. He breaks down the infographic design process into five steps with data wrangling or data exploration as the first step. This step entails the designer reviewing the information looking to make sense of the data (find trends or patterns). Barnes states that infographic designers are essentially “sensemakers” and before taking on this integral role, they must be able to interpret information effectively or they “risk presenting inaccurate and biased information and inferences to viewers” (58). This reaffirms the power that designers have in creating/influencing perceptions and thereby influencing decisions and serves as a reminder to wield that power with intentionality and integrity.

The following stages are mostly self-explanatory, progressing from exploring the data to visually mapping the data effectively (mapping rhetoric), creating a context/narrative for the data visualizations (infographic design) and finalizing the design prior to sharing with the audience. I use this as a baseline for the design step included in my heuristic.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: DESCRIPTION OF HEURISTIC

As previously mentioned, my heuristic relies heavily on notions espoused by Jones et. al (2019) and it serves as a frame for the various social justice and design frameworks I incorporate. I also want to note that this framework is not meant to replace other forms of visual critical analysis or design theory but to supplement or enhance it with a focus on the social justice turn.

The heuristic designates three phases of the design process, from inception to distribution. Phase I addresses the rhetorical situation when a project is received/assigned. Borrowing from the model espoused by Mejía & Chu (2014), I include designer, client, audience,

and goal to prompt designers to begin considering the positionality of all stakeholders and the overarching goal for the communication. Next is Phase II, borrowing from Barnes' infographic process, I highlight the rhetorical strategies to consider/utilize to enact change referencing frameworks espoused by Bates et al (2008), Banks (2005), Hum (2015) among others, but also keeping in mind privilege and power during the design process. Finally, Phase III, considers the audience's reception of that artifact and the context it is presented in, this reflects the final component of Mejía & Chu's (2014) visual communication model and how all 3Ps come together for change.

HEURISTIC: ADVOCACY IN INFOGRAPHICS

Phase I: Design Project (Positionality)

| Designer | Client | Audience | Goal |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the ideological influences that inform decisions? • What is the designer's skill level? • Given the designer's positionality, what are the resources available to them to convey a message? (Think <i>racialized gaze</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is their intent with graphic? • How can I mitigate functions of power to promote equality? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the audience's positionality/social context? (Think functional literacy) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the social context of the artifact? • How can/does artifact influence society? • How can inclusivity and advocacy be enacted? |



Phase II: Design Method (Privilege & Power)

| Data Wrangling | Visualize Data | Infographic | Compositing |
|--|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the data telling us? Be mindful of ideological influences (review data and interpret) • Create exploratory data visualizations to see trends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Cleaning • Data Scraping • Transposition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the most effective and ethical way to map data into visual form? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be mindful of rules of inclusion and exclusion, heuristics of representativeness, availability, & affect) • Be mindful of proportion of visual variables to ensure they are mapped to data correctly (shape, size, value, color (hue), orientation, etc.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annotation (context and narrative) • Context (How can I offer participatory approach to those affected by artifact?) • Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What rhetorical strategies can facilitate sovereignty? (design tools such as Visual <i>Nommo</i>, Banks' heuristic, and other Afrocentric rhetorical strategies) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shaping the final composition (balance power dynamics inherent in design), consider superiority affect |



Phase III: Audience Reception (Positionality, Privilege, & Power)

The viewer makes sense of the infographic based on their contextual setting (functional literacy/Positionality). Based on their positionality and privilege, the audience will make decisions about how to move forward (power). Be mindful that the context of artifact viewing will impact viewer's interpretation of the communication.

CONCLUSION

My heuristic is an attempt at synthesizing thought processes that help us to become more self-reflective communicators. As Hum notes of the racialized *gaze* as Design, I would like to “imagine anew the choices and arrangements that promote a socially tolerant and racially inclusive future” (209) and my belief is that foregrounding self-reflection is an important, and often overlooked practice for imagining new choices. It is a well-established pedagogical practice to consider your audience, but we are not always taught to think about what beliefs we are bringing to the table and how that influences the creation process. It is not often emphasized that we can be proactive agents for change (although frequently implied), but my work and the work of many other social justice scholars view this as the beginnings of reconciling that unspoken divide.

The heuristic I developed is simplified to provide communicators with considerations for enacting social advocacy in their design projects and precursory knowledge of some of the frameworks integrated into this heuristic would be needed to fully implement its use and could be considered one flaw to this heuristic. In a classroom setting, this heuristic could supplement the theories that are espoused as a means to synthesize the learning and as a reference for designers, and I’ve attempted to highlight questions that communicators could/should ask themselves during the design process to engage in more critical, reflective practices. Although this heuristic specifically addresses infographics, I believe any visual communication practitioner will find usefulness in considering the various phases of this processes and leave what is not applicable.

Further research in the rhetorical strategies of non-normative (Eurocentric) cultures could extend this conversation and the repertoire of strategies available to the visual communicator. This will help to increase our awareness of other methodologies which could assist us in communicating better to various audiences, especially considering the global and intercultural environment we all work within. If we would like to move forward as a field, we must embrace other 'new' modes of 'knowing' so that we can enact our inherent roles as social advocates; learning about the communication practices of diverse cultures can assist in that regard.

Although our efforts may appear microscopic or insignificant, the culmination of all of our efforts would be apparent overtime and I hope my discussion urges communicators to consider themselves as change agents. A social justice perspective instills greater accountability in us and serves to remind us to always be vigilant in our practices and embrace difference.

My desire is to help the field move forward toward a more intentional use of social justice as a framework for our practices which will further validate our field but to also offer meaningful value to the work we do especially given the superiority effect of visual imagery. My research answers the call put forth by many and I hope my musical chord adds to the score of social advocacy.

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