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Introduction to Special Issue on Intercultural and Participatory Risk Communication About COVID-19: Using Immaterial Labor to Promote Social Justice in a Pandemic

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COVID-19 has introduced much disruption to all walks of life and posed threats to the livelihood and survival of millions of individuals. Healthcare systems were overburdened. Due to health disparities, varying access to vaccination, and failing public health infrastructure in different countries, people got infected and died without access to masks, oxygen, or proper treatment. Many countries have gone through multiple waves of outbreaks due to relented masking, quarantine, and social distancing policies in attempts to boost workforce participation and economic recovery. In 2021, 47 million American workers voluntarily quit their jobs during the Great Resignation due to burnout or search for better employment during the pandemic (Chugh, 2021; Fuller & Kerr, 2022). In the labor market, millions of jobs have been permanently lost due to accelerating automation, business closure, or sectoral adjustments (Autor & Reynolds, 2020; Ben-Achour, 2020; Stevenson, 2020). Between March 2020 and May 2021, the U.S. labor market witnessed a massive exodus of three million women, who had to cope with the increasing needs for unpaid care—shopping, homeschooling, childcare, and elderly care—due to furloughs, layoffs, illnesses, and school closures (Saraiva, 2021).

The global vaccine inequity has been immense, with almost 85% of global vaccine doses administered in high- and upper-middle-income countries in comparison with five percent in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) by April 2021 (Asundi et al., 2021; Mathieu et al., 2021). This

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glaring inequity in global vaccine allocation was caused by barriers related to intellectual property, manufacturing, and regulatory considerations, and can bring a heavy toll on the economy, morbidity, and mortality to LMICs (Burki, 2021).

Racial and ethnic minority groups and vulnerable populations, particularly low-income African American, American Indian, and Hispanic American communities, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic with higher infection, hospitalization, and death rates (Mackey et al., 2021; Remeikis, 2020; Stevenson, 2020). This disproportional impact highlights the long-existing structural racism, health disparities, and economic hardship that drive the vulnerability of Black and Brown people to COVID (Boddie, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) highlights the important roles played by social determinants in COVID consequences, which include neighborhood and physical environment, i.e., affordable and quality housing, access to quality healthcare, lower incomes, education barriers, disproportionately high representation in essential work with frequent direct contact and thus higher exposure and infection risks.

One of us (Ding) published a book on transcultural risk communication about SARS among China, the United States, and the World Health Organization (WHO) back in 2003 (Ding, 2014). Focusing on a pre-social media era, the data examined in the book were print or digital: fliers, official documents, traditional mass media, as well as alternative media such as individual websites, text messages, and discussion forums. Today, people communicate about COVID-19 on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Telegram, and WeChat, leveraging the affordances provided by individual platforms for amplification (Lee et al., 2021; Walwema, 2021). This proliferation of COVID-19 information on social media results not only in an information overload that impedes the search for reliable facts but also the quick spread of online misinformation, be it rumors or fake news, about the pandemic (Cinelli et al., 2020). WHO (2021) characterized this phenomenon as infodemic, namely,

> excess information, including false or misleading information, in digital and physical environments during an acute public health event. It has led to confusion, health-detrimental and/or risk-taking behaviours, all of which have been compounded by higher levels of mistrust in health authorities and public health responses.

To cope with the risks of infodemic and reduce its impact on health behaviors during public health crises, scholars have examined the correction of COVID-19 misinformation through mainstream news media (Lwin et al., 2021), fact-checking labels (Zhang et al., 2021), and social media interaction (Lee et al., 2021); challenges and remedies of public health messaging (Nan et al., 2022); as well as ethical issues in COVID-19 communication to mitigate the pandemic (Guttman & Lev, 2021).

The foundational issues underlying risk communication processes remain little changed despite the rapid technological advancement. For quantitatively oriented disciplines such as economics, statistics, and engineering, risk is used to refer to the unpredictability of outcomes, which can be objectively and quantitatively assessed (Sandman, 1993; Weber & Johnson, 2009). The field of psychology, in contrast, treats risk both as a concept influenced by more factors than just probability and outcome level (Weber & Milliman, 1997) and as a culture-driven subjective experience that often generates negative emotions such as fear and vulnerability (Figner & Weber, 2011; Slovic et al., 2004; Weber & Ancker, 2011; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002).

Beck (1992) defined risk as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (p. 21). Beck described the two divergent disciplinary approaches to framing risks as "natural objectivism" and "cultural relativism" (1995, p. 162). Based upon scientific knowledge and economic calculation, the natural objectivist approach has dominated institutional risk-assessment practices with the power of expert rationality (Beck, 1999, p. 99). Cultural relativism, in contrast, considers risks as a social reality shaped by institutional discourses, cultural beliefs and values, and individual perceptions (Mythen, 2004). Risk perceptions thus are culturally situated (Beck, 1996, 1999), discursively mediated, and structured by social contexts (Mythen, 2004).

The emerging communication technologies produce little impact on this existing power structure, the global health disparities, the racial divide, or the expert-non-expert divide that results in the one-directional, top-down, and technocratic information flow from authorities to the public (Grabill & Simmons, 1998). These technologies also have limited impacts in generating the so-called "rational responses" from the concerned and sometimes panicked public to reduce potential harm done by "irrational" responses, i.e., fear, anger, anxiety, distrust, despair, and resistance. Many scholars have argued that calling emotional responses from the public "irrational responses" is a misnomer, since "irrational" responses are ''sometimes a more appropriate and reasonable response than logic" (Katz & Miller, 1996, p. 131; see also Ding, 2020; Fischer et al., 1991; Leiss & Powell, 2004). In their influential article titled "Risk as Feelings," Loewenstein et al. (2001) distinguished between the cognitive and emotional evaluations of risks before emphasizing the central role the latter play in determining behavior outcomes in individual risk responses from the perspective of psychology.

Beverly Sauer (2003) argued for the need to acknowledge and incorporate the knowledge and experiences owned by the public to produce effective risk communication processes and results. How can the public, particularly communities and citizens affected by greater risks, make their concerns, knowledge, and experiences both heard and considered in risk deliberation processes? We argue that, as rhetoricians, we can leverage our understanding of immaterial labor, particularly communicative labor and affective labor, to help promote social justice in risk communication endeavors.

Immaterial Labor in Risk Communication

Immaterial labor is defined as the labor that does not produce material or durable commodities but results in the "informational and cultural content of the commodity" (Lazzarato, 1996). Seeing immaterial labor as the new forms of forces in networks of biopolitical production, Hardt and Negri (2001) introduced three types of immaterial labor: cooperative, "massified" intellectual labor, i.e., the "interactive labor of symbolic analysis and problem solving;" communicative labor, of "industrial production that has newly become linked in informational networks;" and affective labor, or "the production and manipulation of affects" (p. 30). Greene (2004) argued that such immaterial labor shares rhetoric's informational, instrumental, cultural, and cooperative dimensions while producing the commodity of "bodies, affect, and social networks" (p. 201). Greene (2004) suggested that a materialist-communicative approach respecifies rhetorical agency as communicative labor, which functions as "an instrument, object, and medium for harnessing social cooperation and coordination" (pp. 203–204).

Focusing on academic labor, Gist-Mackey, Kunkel, and Guthrie (2021) employed the concept of communicative labor to examine how communication in research, teaching, and service can be emotionally laden work for critical women scholars. They define communicative labor as "the ongoing, interconnected tasks requiring the use of communicative and literate skill sets (i.e., listening, speaking, responding, disclosing, writing, reading, negotiating, and analyzing) to execute work in a way that is undergirded by workplace emotion (i.e., emotional labor, emotion work, emotion with work, emotion at work, and emotion toward work) and compassionate communication." Their study highlights the communicative aspect of faculty labor across research, teaching, and service, which can manifest as compassionate communication, workplace emotion, and gendered work.

Often referred to as *emotional labor*, performances of affective labor are often required by supervisors as the way that work should be executed (Wharton, 1999). Much has been published about work as an emotional experience in the service industry (Choi et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2007) and in the helping professions, which include healthcare, policing, K-12, and higher education (Hochschild, 2012; Kramer & Hess, 2002; van Gelderen et al., 2017).

Risk communication reveres only one type of immaterial labor: the intellectual labor of "symbolic analysis and problem solving," which generates data, scientific results, and public health recommendations (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 17). Intellectual labor comes from experts who conduct research on emerging risks and evaluate risk factors using scientific methods such as laboratory experiments, computer modeling, surveys, or interviews. By contrast, communicative labor, as a part of the abstract labor that "manipulates symbols and information," is rendered secondary and often takes place at the end of intellectual labor (p. 293). Featured by "human contact and interaction," affective labor is often designated to risk communicators and health educators to help create "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (p. 293). Viewed as an add-on to dress up communicative labor, affective labor often remains unacknowledged and invisible, if not institutionally excluded (see Ding, 2019; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Greene, 2004).

When coming from concerned citizens, affective labor is often brushed away as irrational responses that express the anxiety, concerns, and fears experienced by communities directly impacted by such risks. Rather than being legitimate responses to be acknowledged and addressed by experts and authorities, such disruptive affective labor gets stigmatized, silenced, and condemned as inconvenient problems to be addressed. Public perceptions of risk are closely connected with the unofficial communicative labor and affective labor made by concerned communities and citizens. Multiple factors have shaped the individual perception of and responses to risks, including class (Douglas, 1985; Graham & Clemente, 1996), gender (Flynn et al., 1994; Gustafson, 1998; Weaver et al., 2000), age (Hinchcliffe, 2000, p. 127; Jackson & Scott, 1999; Mooney et al., 2000), and ethnicity (Caplan, 2000; Finucane et al., 2000; Mackey, 1999). To better understand and engage with affective labor in public responses to risks, it is important to understand the demographics of the communities affected by such risks, the material conditions and constraints they face, and the concerns they have about such risks before inviting participatory deliberation and decision making input from affected communities.

The Social Justice Turn in Technical and Professional Communication

The field of technical and professional communication (TPC) is experiencing a "social justice" turn (Walton & Jones, 2013). Social justice research investigates "how communication broadly defined can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 347). TPC research offers great potential to improve social justice efforts because professional communication strategies "can be complicit in reinforcing which perspectives and whose experiences are valued and legitimized" (Jones, 2016, p. 343). Therefore, TPC scholars have a responsibility to critique and intervene in the potentially oppressive technical documents or technologies that are influencing already marginalized groups (Jones & Williams, 2018, p. 374).

Social justice issues have been long-standing concerns in the field, such as participatory decision-making and public engagement (Ding, 2013, 2019, 2020; Gerdes, 2022; Grabill & Simmons, 1998; Simmons & Zoetewey, 2012), user advocacy, human-centered design, and social activism (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Jones, 2016; Rose, 2016; Walton, 2016), civic engagement and service learning (Crabtree & Sapp, 2005; Dorpenyo, 2019; Grant, 2022), digital media and mobile technologies (Agbozo, 2022; Sano-Franchini, 2018), disability and accessibility (Baker et al., 2021; Oswal & Melonçon, 2014), and data (visualization) practices (Gouge & Carlson, 2022; Welhausen, 2022). A growing body of TPC scholarship has used social justice as an explicit construct, exploring theories, methodologies, and pedagogies for advocating for positive changes for disempowered and silenced groups (Walton & Agboka, 2021). In public health crises like COVID-19, for example, scholars have explored how data visualizations can render invisible the realities of vulnerable communities (Atherton, 2021; Carlson & Gouge, 2021) and how visual framing of masks may exacerbate racial antagonism (Batova, 2021).

To enact diversity, inclusion, and social justice in TPC, Jones, Moore, and Walton (2016) developed a framework that involves three macro-level concepts (3Ps): positionality, privilege, and power. This 3P heuristic scaffolds researchers in (1) critically thinking about how certain groups are disenfranchised and in (2) recognizing ways that TPC research can either "reinscribe marginalization and disempowerment or promote agency and advocacy" (Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016, p. 220). Extending this framework, Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) further proposed practical strategies for redressing inequalities (the 4Rs): recognizing injustices and systems of oppression, revealing these injustices to others as a call to action, rejecting injustices and opportunities to perpetuate them, and replacing unjust practices with intersectional, coalitional approaches (p. 133). The 4Rs heuristic helps bridge the gap between recognizing injustices and oppression and replacing the systems that uphold them.

Social justice can also be considered an actual or ideal situation that involves three major perspectives, namely, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Jost & Kay, 2010). First, distributive justice has been used interchangeably with social justice by philosophers and the lay public. Focusing on "proportional equality," distributive justice concerns the dispersion of benefits, resources, and burdens in society according to allocation principles. Second, procedural justice, including both decision control and process control, relates to the "procedures, norms, rules" involved in public decision-making to protect the "basic rights, liberties, and entitlements" of individuals and communities (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1122). Third, interactional justice, encompassing informational and interpersonal justice, means that social actors, either authorities or fellow citizens, treat human beings with dignity and respect (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1143).

Drawing on Jost and Kay's (2010) three-part typology of social justice and Greene's (2004) materialist approach, Ding (2019) illustrated a materialist social justice approach by mapping out the theoretical connections between immaterial labor and social justice. Specifically, affective labor is associated with interpersonal justice, while communicative labor, or rhetorical endeavor, improves both informational justice and process control. Collectively, communicative and affective labor can function as what Ding, Li, and Haigler (2015) called "strategic entry points" for marginalized publics to circumvent institutional power and create space for alternative politics and civic intervention to combat social injustice. Kong (2021) extended this framework to include the less studied construct of corrective justice, which corrects or compensates the wrongdoings and destructions for the sufferers of injustice.

Social justice and ethics are intertwined constructions. Believing "all social justice actions as ethically motivated," Walwema, Colton, and Holmes (2022), in their co-edited special issue, argued that ethics has a great deal to offer social justice work. They called for operationalized ethical frameworks and moral values to help us understand how to enact social justice and identify just/unjust behaviors, actions, and policies. For instance, Bennett and Hannah (2022) proposed an ethical framework to promote disability justice in the workplace while Pihlaja (2022) illustrated how ethics enables the formation of normative goals to inform social justice at the Mexico-U.S. border.

Intercultural Participatory Risk Communication

In their co-edited special issue on new directions in intercultural professional communication for Technical Communication Quarterly, Ding and Savage (2013) called for the move from nation-centric perspectives to study transnational rhetoric (Hesford & Schell, 2008; Hunsinger, 2006), transcultural flows (Appadurai, 1996), translingual practices, and power-knowledge dynamics (Foucault, 1976) while paying attention to social justice and accountability in such transcultural work. Studying transcultural communication requires researchers to go beyond monocultural preoccupation to explore cultural contexts and local needs, to collaborate with community partners to solve messy local problems, and to employ methodological reflectivity to cope with challenges posed by such intercultural work (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Baniya, 2022; Ding, 2020; Dorpenyo, 2019; Frost, 2013; Gerdes, 2022; Schoch-Spana et al., 2007; St. Amant, 2017; Sun, 2012; Thatcher, 2012; Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015).

What new developments have emerged in the last decade and how can we update existing theories on intercultural professional communication in the context of a new pandemic? How can scholars, teachers, and practitioners of technical communication engage in critical practices for promoting social justice in transcultural contexts? The objective of this special issue is to examine how immaterial labor can be used to promote social justice in transcultural risk communication about COVID-19. This special issue covers a series of topics on risk communication and brings together a diverse collection of methodological practices for technical communication practitioners and scholars to examine risk discourses and risk communication practices operating both locally and globally to shape our embodied experiences during the pandemic.

We include studies that bring communicative and affective labor to the forefront of risk communication whether as storytelling, rhetorical care technologies, content reuse, or coalition-building efforts to support language access in indigenous communities. Taken together, this special issue provides insights into possible ways that technical communication and rhetorical scholars can contribute to the search for strategic entry points in rhetorical negotiations to promote social justice in a pandemic shot through with uncertainties, challenges, and crises.

Overview of Articles in the Special Issue

We group the five articles in this special issue by general topic areas, including translational and translingual practices in community-based settings, tactical communication through alternative media to intervene in dominant narratives, and social media's mediation of anti-Asian discourses.

Articles on the first topic focus on informational justice, language access, and translational practices in language minority communities. Erika Hernández Cuevas and Laura Gonzales demonstrate coalition-building strategies for promoting Indigenous language justice during the COVID-19 pandemic. They offer an expanded view of language access that includes not only translation or interpretation of content, but also community knowledge and collaboration. Through collaborative work with Indigenous language speakers, translators, and activists in both the U.S. and Mexico, they highlight three essential elements of building coalitions for Indigenous language access: translation, indigenous perspective, and technical communication. Drawing on translation studies, transcultural risk communication, and care ethics, Soyeon Lee provides an ethnographic case study of the communicative and caring activities—what she calls "rhetorical care technologies"—in a Korean-speaking transnational migrant community in the U.S. in COVID-19 recovery. She categorizes nonprofit organization workers' caring strategies into four types, including translingual attunements, transmodal attunements, translational attunements, and coalitional actions. Such rhetorical labor helps multilingual community members navigate the monolingual standardized design provided by government officials.

Articles on the second topic explore how citizens engage in tactical communication through alternative media to counter official narratives. Focusing on the case of Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary, Chen Chen illustrates the mediating roles that public pandemic diaries play in circumventing institutional barriers. Using a social justice-informed, critically contextualized methodology, she explains how the communicative and affective labor of Fang Fang's diary enacted social justice by recognizing, revealing, and rejecting oppressions experienced by Wuhan residents during the lockdown. Pritisha Shrestha and Gabriella Wilson offer another illustration of how alternative information flows promote social justice during a pandemic and infodemic. They discuss the ways that Nepali netizens use immaterial labor to disrupt and dismantle deficiency narratives about non-Western countries. They highlight the importance of examining localized resistance and collaboration in grassroots communities.

Articles on the third topic examine how mass and social media disseminate and mediate anti-Asian discourses using content reuse analysis. Drawing on intercultural communication frameworks, Chenxing Xie's article investigates how Chinese and American mass and social media employed content reuse strategies in reporting anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her study offers implications for technical communicators to strategically reuse content while considering the cultural differences of target audiences.

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