

Situating Public Memory as a Keyword in Technical and Professional Communication

Alexander Slotkin, Florida Atlantic University, aslotkin@fau.edu

April O'Brien, Sam Houston State University, aprilobrien@shsu.edu

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Abstract: Building on the previously implicit relationship between public memory and technical and professional communication (TPC), this article argues that bringing these fields of study explicitly into dialogue with one another helps researchers and practitioners think more rhetorically about the social impact of their work, because such reflection helps ensure that our communication practices ethically engage community values and promote more socially just outcomes. Situating public memory as a keyword in TPC illuminates past injustices to deepen our understanding of current conditions. Accordingly, we call for work in TPC that outwardly engages public memory—work that explores TPC's role in shaping public memory narratives and the impacts those narratives have on different peoples, places, and events.

Keywords: Public Memory, Social Justice, Technical Communication, Technical and Professional Communication

Author Bios: Alexander Slotkin is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Florida Atlantic University. His research and teaching center on cultural rhetorics, Jewish rhetorics, writing studies, public memory, and technical and professional communication. His work has appeared in journals including *Rhetoric Review* and *Communication Design Quarterly*.

April L. O'Brien is an associate professor at Sam Houston State University. Her research and teaching interests include public memory, countermemory, and technical and professional communication. Her co-authored book, *Countermemory: A Rhetoric of Resistance*, was published in 2025 with University of Alabama Press.

Introduction

This article explores the understudied connections between public memory and technical and professional communication (TPC) studies by building on ongoing calls from within the field to broaden the scope of TPC (Itchuaqiyah et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2020; Cobos et al., 2018). More specifically, this article highlights the presence of public memory in TPC and its contributions to how TPC shapes and circulates the narratives that publics use to establish shared identities. We argue that putting TPC research explicitly into conversation with local public memories allows researchers and practitioners alike to think more rhetorically about the social impact of their work, because such reflection helps ensure that our communication practices ethically engage community values and promote more socially just outcomes. To that end, we believe taking a transdisciplinary approach to public memory and TPC supports our field's social justice turn, namely its aspiration to shift out of neutral (Shelton, 2020), respond to local cultural and non-cultural contexts (Agboka, 2013), and advocate for marginalized and oppressed communities (Jones, 2016).

The social justice turn in TPC pushes scholars to consider how public-facing documentation like zoning laws, literacy tests, and census record questionnaires impact communities differently (refer to Rea, 2024; Jones & Williams, 2018; Pimentel & Balzhiser, 2012). Notions of who counts as the “public” are key areas of inquiry for social justice research because technical and professional documentation is not siloed in private or semi-private workplace settings. Indigenous scholars like Haas (2015) have long argued that we “construct ourselves and O/other in relation to one another, to visuals and visuality, and to technologies” through rhetoric and power (p. 206). Questions about how groups of people cohere through these rhetorical power dynamics, defining the communities that make up or fall outside of the “general public,” is rightfully the subject of public memory *and* TPC. As Moore (2023) argues, it “is not enough to acknowledge that there are multiple publics; instead, technical communicators must understand the way that power and oppression imbue the public sphere” (p. 236). To understand how TPC acts are contextualized within the power structures shaping the public sphere, scholars need to explore how memory influences the public's identity.

What is the “Public?”

It's important, then, to clarify what we mean by the “public.” This is no simple task, as the term tends to resist easy definitions. There are often multiple publics at play—*the public*, *a public*, or even a *counterpublic*—that each denote different ideas. But it's important to recognize the differences between them, as they constitute distinct groups of people with differing interests. Speaking about the public denotes a sense of totality, a unified body encompassing everyone in a group, community, or nation (Warner 2002, p. 49). Exclusion from this totality can mean subordination and marginalization, often resulting in the formation of a counterpublic. A counterpublic is any group that forms in opposition to dominant discourse, choosing instead to participate in alternative forms of discourse (refer to Warner 2002). Importantly, counterpublics are not necessarily marginalized or oppressed, as white supremacists oftentimes form counterpublics to disrupt progressive policies. That is, a counterpublic is not defined by its ethics or access to power but rather its relationship to public discourse. A public, on the other

hand, refers to a more concrete or bounded group of people (Warner, 2002, p. 49), such as the audience at an opera or the folk reading this manuscript.

Yet none of these groups are static. Multiple, overlapping *publics* emerge over time in response to shared (i.e., *public*) discourse. For example, the audience at a theater may be invoked in the same breath as the general public. Likewise, a member of the public might simultaneously belong to a counterpublic that opposes only a fragment of dominant discourse. What unites each of these groups is the formation of personal and impersonal relationships—often self-organized—between members in response to some event or concern (Warner 2002). And it is through the ways these events and concerns are articulated that publics come to form collective identities and create public memories.

Rather than representing straightforward retellings of historical events, *public memory* describes shared beliefs about the past—some true, others fictitious—that reflect a social group’s beliefs and experiences in the present, such as by emphasizing some actors and events more than others. In other words, public memory is a rhetorical act of invention, suggesting:

...that there is no ‘pure’ articulation of the past, but [instead] that the language, structural elements, arguments, tropes, narratives, justifications, and such in which the event is cast—as well as the availability of knowledge of the event to begin with—are inventional resources available in a culture (Blair et al, 2010, p. 13).

Public memory aids TPC researchers in understanding how groups of people use specific communicative technologies in particular contexts by offering a window into the beliefs and experiences that animate and shape these users’ perceptions of the world around them. Moreover, TPC forwards public memory narratives by repeating and circulating these stories through public-facing documentation, including brochures (Johnson et al., 2008), historical marker texts (O’Brien, 2022), and gravestones (Slotkin, 2020). It’s important to note, however, that these public memories are often invented using resources from dominant (or dominating) languages, forms, and codes identifiable with one or more powerful social groups, silencing marginalized and oppressed voices.

Public Memory in Technical and Professional Communication

Social justice scholarship in TPC and public memory studies share a common interest in interrogating the flow of power and information impacting how marginalized and oppressed counterpublics speak, intending to center their voices in public activity. Rude (2008) explained in the introduction to the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*’s special issue on public-facing writing that:

...our field has staked some places in the public sphere. We have developed knowledge of how texts and communication practices function in decision making and change in a range of social issues. Our research is often driven by personal commitment to types of issues, but it is also motivated by a sense of civic responsibility that is enhanced by awareness that the field’s knowledge gives it the potential to contribute to social justice (p. 267).

Even more to the point, O'Brien (2022) asserted that "oppressive public memory documents are TPC issues that should be taken up by scholars in our field" (p. 112), including historical marker texts minimizing the contributions of Black, Indigenous, and people of color. But despite their shared interests in forwarding social justice initiatives through public-facing documentation, public memory is rarely mentioned in TPC scholarship.

Searching the term "public memory" in some of the major technical and professional communication research journals yields only a handful of results at the time of writing this article (refer to Table 1). *Technical Communication Quarterly* and the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* curated some of the highest search results, with three articles from each journal featuring some discussion of public memory. Additionally, of the ten articles found across twelve journals, only two articles use the phrase "public memory" more than three or four times in the body of their work: O'Brien's (2022) "Exclusionary Public Memory Documents" and O'Brien and Walwema's (2022) "Countering Dominant Narratives in Public Memory." Other articles use similar metaphors to describe the role of memory in technical and professional writing, namely, other subtopics in memory studies. So, while there are zero articles in the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* that mention "social memory," there are five that mention "collective memory" and one discussing "social memory."

<i>Journal Title</i>	<i>Number of Peer-Reviewed Research Articles Mentioning "Public Memory"</i>
<i>Journal of Technical Writing and Communication</i>	0
<i>Business and Professional Communication Quarterly</i>	0
<i>IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication</i>	0
<i>IEEE Transactions on Technology and Society</i>	0
<i>Journal of User Experience</i>	0
<i>Programmatic Perspectives</i>	0
<i>Technical Communication and Social Justice</i>	1
<i>Communication Design Quarterly</i>	1
<i>Journal of Business and Technical Communication</i>	1
<i>Technical Communication</i>	2
<i>Technical Communication Quarterly</i>	3
<i>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</i>	3

Table 1. TPC Journals and the Frequency of the Term "Public Memory"

Although closely related, these terms are both distinct from one another. According to Casey (2004), "Social memory derives from a basis in shared experience, shared history or place, or shared project. Collective memory, in contrast, has no such basis but is instead *distributed* over a

given population or set of places” (p. 25). Additionally, these forms of memory are themselves distinct from public memory, which is a dynamic recollection of or narrative about a shared event or experience by a group, community, or society—one that is created, revisited, and circulated in open spaces. Thus, even if additional research articles from these journals engage other keywords in memory studies, they may not be engaging public memory.

The findings in Table 1 are not a definitive measure of a gap in scholarship, especially given, as we maintain, that public memory work is implicit in TPC—even if it goes unnamed. Additionally, the sample size in our search is too small to definitively name a gap across the entire field. TPC research is frequently published in journals and books that transect fields like writing studies, rhetoric, and digital humanities, which are not included in our search. But searching thousands of articles¹ published as early as the 1970s across twelve different journals provides a bird’s eye view of previous and ongoing disciplinary conversations. Moreover, some interdisciplinary journals not included in this list, such as *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, do not contain articles that mention “public memory” alongside “technical communication,” “technical and professional communication,” or “TPC.” Other journals, such as *Xchanges: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Technical Communication, Rhetoric, and Writing Across the Curriculum*, only turn up high-matching search results that contain either “public memory” or some variant of “technical and professional communication,” suggesting that the two topics are never explicitly put into conversation with one another (refer to Figure 1). Hence, as surface level as the data featured in Table 1 may seem, it does suggest that disciplinary relationships between TPC and public memory are yet to be made or at least yet to be formalized.

¹ At the time of writing, there is a total of 7,702 unique articles shared between just three of the listed journals: the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, and *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*.

Search

"public memory" AND "technical and professional communication" OR "TPC"

Any author Any time All

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 »

75% [Stories We Hear, Stories We Tell, and Stories We Live: Teaching Narrative in the Technical Communication Classroom](#)

xch-article

In my first semester of college, I took an English class that used Joseph Campbell's model of "the hero's journey" as a framework for all the writing we did in the course. We created short stories, analyzed articles and films, and researched the lives of historical figures. Campbell's idea of the monomyth—that all stories follow a familiar pattern—was brand new to me back, then but applying it as a lens to look at both pop-culture and scholarly work taught me that narrative serves a valid function in academic settings. Because humans are narrative beings, . . .

In [Issue 17.1/2](#)

Published by [xcheditor](#) on 12/22/22

54% [Understanding the Experiences of Technical Writers in New Zealand and Australia](#)

xch-article

This article reports the results of semi-structured interviews with 19 technical communication professionals in New Zealand and Australia. Findings show that many of these workers are self-taught, and their most important skills are making ethical considerations, adapting to work environments, explaining and expanding their value in workplaces, creating writing communities, and developing TPC work techniques.

In [Issue 16.2](#)

Published by [xcheditor](#) on 02/24/22

Figure 1. A partial view of the results curated by Xchanges for the search term, "'public memory' AND 'technical and professional communication' OR 'TPC.'" The light-gray numbers to the left of each article presumably denote how closely related that result is to the user's search term. While the first two results have the highest percentage match to the search, neither article contains the phrase, "public memory."

Some scholars articulating these connections between fields argue that genres of public memory rightfully fall under the purview of TPC (O'Brien, 2022; O'Brien & Walwema, 2022; Slotkin, 2020), while others discuss how examples of technical and professional documentation tap into or engage an audience's public memory (Navon & Noy, 2023; Sentell, 2016). And still others discuss how public memory studies would benefit from the methods and methodologies TPC practitioners and researchers bring to the table (O'Brien, 2023). While these approaches help widen meaningfully where and how technical and professional communication occurs, we aim to link public memory with TPC more closely by demonstrating the field's implicit investment in public memory before explaining how transecting these fields strengthens TPC research and practice. We intend to build on these nascent conversations by illustrating how TPC is already intertwined with public memory formation through certain recurring themes: the rhetoric of neutrality, public memory artifacts, counterpublics, resistance, and tactical interventions. These thematic conversations in TPC trace already existing topics of discussion in public memory, making them key sites of analysis. These topics also hint at the benefits of putting TPC and public memory studies into conversation.

Incorporating public memory more explicitly into TPC research offers scholars an opportunity to intervene in these narratives in support of marginalized groups that "exist in contradistinction to what might be called *the public*" (Moore, 2023, p. 235) by laying these historical narratives bare. We argue that we need to move beyond thinking of TPC and public memory studies as overlapping fields of study and instead as a transdisciplinary field of scholarship. Echoing Gonzales, McNair, and Bawarshi (2020), we assert that disciplines "are not defined as pre-

existing entities that relate to one another but rather are constantly being defined through their relationship with one another. That is, boundaries emerge from rather than precede the interactions” between disciplines (p. 434). To that end, the first part of this article articulates how the areas of interest and inquiry shaping TPC and public memory come together through a thematic literature review. Afterward, we demonstrate the power and importance of naming public memory as a keyword in TPC studies by analyzing two recent pieces of legislation governing how U.S. institutions remember the past. Finally, we conclude with a call to action for TPC scholars to recognize the importance of public memory as part of a disciplinary move toward social justice.

The Implicit Work of Public Memory in TPC

While explicit work on public memory in TPC is limited, a considerable portion of social justice-oriented TPC scholarship engages with public memory in implicit ways. Whether TPC research overtly or tacitly addresses public memory, by reviewing both types, we uncover three distinct reasons public memory work is a benefit to TPC scholarship:

1. Public memory helps TPC researchers understand how groups of people use (or have used) specific communication technologies in particular contexts by providing insight into the beliefs and experiences that influence and shape their perceptions of the world around them.
2. TPC research provides scholars the opportunity to challenge unjust narratives in support of counterpublics by exposing historical narratives.
3. Studying public memory documents illuminates past injustices to help us better understand our current conditions.

In what follows, we demonstrate how traces of conversations in public memory have appeared thematically in TPC scholarship. As part of this review, we demonstrate how these articles propel our argument about the significance and benefit of technical communication and public memory research in collaboration. Since many TPC works feature analyses of historical documents, we narrowed the scope of our study. At the outset of conceptualizing this article, we established that our study, situated at the intersection of technical and professional communication (TPC) and public memory, would be grounded in explicitly social justice-oriented goals. We contend that engaging with public memory offers a meaningful pathway for advancing justice and equity within the field of TPC. As a result, the pieces that we’ve chosen to focus on are TPC works that deal with the rhetoric of neutrality in technical documents; public memory as a technical communication artifact; and counterpublics, resistance, and tactical interventions.

The Rhetoric of Neutrality in Technical Documents

Although TPC is presumed by some to be objective, several scholars and practitioners have demonstrated that technical documents have historically functioned as tools of exclusion, violence, and racial oppression. These documents, including immigration pamphlets, legal codes, literacy tests, and bureaucratic memos, rhetorically construct dominant narratives under the guise of neutrality. This section examines how technical documents have perpetuated social ills like

settler colonialism, white supremacy, and systemic disenfranchisement through their language, structure, and circulation. Johnson et al. (2008), Jones and Williams (2018), Williams (2010), and Katz (1992) each uncovered the ideological forces embedded in ostensibly informational documents, which reveal how TPC has long played a role in constructing public memory and shaping racial hierarchies.

Johnson, Pimentel, and Pimentel (2008) identified representations of whiteness² that are evident in early technical documents on New Mexico, including references to color blindness, selective attribution, whitewashing, and privileged language (p. 215). The authors examined two documents created by the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration, an organization founded in 1800 to encourage immigration to the state due to the perception that the state was overrun with “racial inferiors” (p. 217). These documents, “Legend of Montezuma” and “Illustrated New Mexico,” were pamphlets that provided a whitewashed story “to attract more white settlers to New Mexico and thus likely gain a larger white influence over government and business” (p. 219). The goal, in other words, was to perpetuate settler colonialism.

Part of this settler colonial project entailed disseminating highly technical and seemingly “neutral” information about the region to answer frequently asked questions new settlers might have. For example, the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration, the organization responsible for creating these pamphlets, compiled them into booklets “consisting of annual and biennial reports from the secretary of the bureau; reports collected and written by county commissioners on their counties’ climate, minerals, and agricultural and water resources; and reports from various towns describing their population, geography, transportation lines, water and fuel resources, industries, climate, schools, banks, and hotels” (p. 218). This seemingly straightforward information attracted white settlers³ to an area painted as just waiting to be developed, building on ideas of *terra nullus* or empty land by erasing Indigenous populations from the area or framing them in ways that would be appealing to white settlers: “qualities such as law-abiding, peacefully, liberty loving, and patriotic” (p. 227).

Johnson et al.’s (2008) work adds to the historical study of TPC by overlapping these fields with public memory. After all, part of studying history entails reading documents that have contributed to how that history is remembered. No document is innocent in its retellings of history, with each piece of TPC rhetorically constructing how different groups of people (in this case, white settlers) think about and remember this time period. And this, of course, is partly the project of public memory. Furthermore, we can define documents like “Legend of Montezuma” and “Illustrated New Mexico” as both technical documents and public memory documents.

While these brochures can be categorized as informational documents, they are likewise public memory artifacts in that they demonstrate what Phillips (2004) called “a rhetoric of memories”

² While APA rules maintain that “white” and “whiteness” should be capitalized, we want to draw attention to the debate within academic circles about this rule. We choose to not capitalize “white” because, as David R. Roediger (1994) writes, “Whiteness describes, from Little Big Horn to Simi Valley, not a culture but precisely the absence of culture,” with “specific ethnic cultures always stand[ing] in danger of being swallowed by the lie of whiteness” (p. 13). In our view, whiteness—the antithesis of community—should not be capitalized as if it were a culture.

³ It’s unclear who exactly these white settlers were, but the pamphlets hint at an audience of “enterprising Americans” who would wake New Mexico “from her slumber so she might give up her resources for their benefit,” drawn to “the myriad opportunities for wealth or homes” (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 218).

(p. 2). Phillips (2004), in his foundational collection, *Framing Public Memory*, explains this concept of a rhetoric of memories as “[t]he ways memories attain meaning, compel others to accept them, and are themselves contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories are essentially rhetorical” (p. 3). The brochures function rhetorically to compel potential visitors to accept the narrative the writers created about whiteness and the Indigenous populations who live in the area. One of the key points is the way these documents demonstrate overtly the absence of neutrality and the presence of bias and racism that are embedded into the writing. An awareness of these issues should also serve as a warning for TPC scholars and practitioners. Public memory documents can be harmful, as with these immigration pamphlets, and we must ensure that we are not also creating disenfranchising public memory documents in TPC work.

Jones and Williams’ (2018) “Technologies of Disenfranchisement” continues in the same vein as Johnson et al.’s (2008) work. In their article, Jones and Williams (2018) examined historical literacy tests and other related texts in the U.S. from 1890-1965. These documents were used explicitly to disenfranchise Black voters. To uncover deceptive messaging, Jones and Williams (2018) conducted a critical rhetorical analysis of an Alabama literacy test and voter application form, which was similar to other literacy tests in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. One aspect of the study focused on the Application for Registration, Questionnaire, and Oaths. While it seems like a potentially forthright document, Jones and Williams (2018) found that the information in this part was used as a form of surveillance. The information was commonly used to target the home addresses of Black voters to intimidate them and prevent them from speaking out about voting rights (para. 24). Thus, Jones and Williams (2018) argued that the “texts and technologies deployed with the express intent of oppressing and disenfranchising was a reality that impacted Blacks desiring to vote in very real and material ways” (para. 25).

Alongside their analysis of these documents, Jones and Williams (2018) also provided examples of resistance via activists who sought to evade discriminatory laws and practices. They chronicled organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a group that adopted nonviolent protest methods and created their own technical documents to combat disenfranchisement. A CORE chapter in Georgia, for example, assumed a “forthright and direct” manner “in its assertion that the goal of the document is to organize disenfranchised citizens and win the right to vote” (para. 28). The instructive manual covered a range of topics, including how to run a meeting and how to form committees, and it also included hand-drawn maps that outlined voting district.

Through this work, Jones and Williams (2018) demonstrated the intersection between technical communication, public memory, and social justice. They pointed out how technical communication documents are not neutral and, in some cases, have been used to disenfranchise Black voters in the U.S. As TPC scholars and practitioners continue to study the field’s relationship with public memory documents, it will be important to note the various ways that seemingly neutral or objective artifacts contribute to injustice, racism, and discrimination. In addition to recording the methods and outcomes, Jones and Williams (2018) also described historic examples of TPC documents that empower historically marginalized groups. For social justice-oriented technical communication scholars today, these examples provide tangible ways to move towards equitable documentation.

Williams' 2010 book, *From Black Codes to Recodification: Removing the Veil from Regulatory Writing*, explored the historical and rhetorical evolution of legal and regulatory writing in the United States, particularly as it relates to race and social justice. As a case study, Williams investigated Black Codes, which were laws enacted in the post-Civil War South to control and oppress newly freed Black Americans (2010). Like Jones and Williams' (2018) article examining election-related documents to demonstrate their inherently oppressive nature, Williams' book studies legal documents that were used to maintain racial hierarchies. Williams first positioned Black Codes as technical communication documents because they are considered regulatory writing, a genre that falls under the broader domain of technical communication (2010, p. 3). These codes were drafted with the intent of structuring societal interactions, much like modern legal and bureaucratic documents. Throughout the book, Williams traced the shift from explicit to implicit bias in legal language; outrightly racist laws eventually were replaced with more subtle, race-neutral wording that nonetheless maintained systems of inequality. For example, Jim Crow laws gradually transitioned into race-neutral policies that nonetheless negatively impacted minoritized Americans. Via rhetorical analysis, Williams interrogated regulatory writing and, in doing so, demonstrates how word choices, framing, and bureaucratic structures inform policy, which in turn reinforces existing hegemonic power structures. While the book challenges technical writers, policymakers, and legal professionals to examine their writing for biases, it also makes a larger argument about how this type of writing impacts marginalized communities and how to work towards equitable use of language (Williams, 2010).

It is helpful to frame Black Codes as what Phillips (2004) called "the memory of publics" since we frame Black Codes as both technical communication artifacts and public memory documents (p. 3). As Casey (2004) argued, "public memory is not just one kind of thing" (p. 17). Phillips (2004), citing Casey, further posited that public memory "occurs in the open, in front of and with others, and is distinct from concepts like 'collective memory' or 'social memory'" (p. 4). As a reminder, public memory differs from collective memory and social memory because it is rhetorical, situated, and open to change or contention over time. In contrast, collective memory emphasizes internal group cohesion and shared identity, and social memory is broader and diffuse in nature. Furthermore, Phillips (2004), again referring to Casey's (2004) work, makes this claim, "The horizon of public memory both constitutes our sense of public and allows a space wherein individuals can become public beings" (p. 4). Bringing these ideas together, we contend that it is impossible to evaluate Black Codes apart from the larger public memory context. These legal documents represent a moment in time in US history when Black Americans were systematically and *publicly* oppressed through bureaucratic language.

We see the same line of argumentation for Katz's pivotal 1992 article, "The Ethic of Expediency." Katz investigated a Nazi memo written by an SS officer that discussed how to make the Holocaust more efficient. This memo, which is simultaneously a technical communication document and a public memory artifact, highlights the principle of expediency. Katz noted that the document's impersonal, technical tone illustrates how technical communication documents can focus so much on logistics that they entirely miss the ethical considerations as well. In other words, what is fastest and most expedient is valued above what is morally right (1992, p. 266). Katz's work was groundbreaking in that he established the lack of neutrality or objectivity in technical communication long before some of the work that we've

already surveyed. Like Jones and Williams (2018) and Williams (2010), the artifact—a memo—can be classified as a public memory artifact that represents the ideology of Nazism, and when studied rhetorically, reminds technical communicators about the dangers of seeking expediency above ethics (Katz, 1992).

Public Memory as a Technical Communication Artifact

While the previous section focuses on technical documents that have shaped public memory, this section reverses the lens to consider how traditional public memory artifacts, such as gravestones, cemeteries, and historical marker texts, can also be understood as technical communication. These artifacts circulate information, establish credibility, and frame historical narratives, thereby functioning rhetorically like more conventional technical documents. Slotkin (2020) and O'Brien (2022) expanded the scope of TPC by analyzing public memory artifacts as situated and culturally meaningful forms of documentation. Drawing on theorists like Phillips (2004) and Casey (2004), this section highlights how public memory is not a passive recollection of the past but an active, rhetorical process shaped by technical genres and communicative choices.

Slotkin (2020) studied the intersection of public memory and technical communication vis-à-vis a unique examination of cemeteries. More explicitly, Slotkin (2020) examined B'nai Israel Cemetery in Gainesville, Florida, which includes 300 remains and the Gainesville Holocaust Memorial. He positioned gravestones and memorials as technical documents that are used to circulate information about a cultural community to the public. For Slotkin (2020), "Cemeteries circulate technical information through the material and symbolic or rhetorical mediation of visitor activity while interfacing specific cultural registers," which makes them another example of technical documents that also function within the realm of public memory (p. 17). Slotkin's (2020) article was guided by the research question, What does it mean to read gravestones as material objects of technical communication invested with an individual or public's memory? This question is compelling, especially in the way that it positions gravestones as material objects of technical communication, but also by reminding readers that these sites are sacred. Slotkin (2020) illustrated how technical documents are "intimately tied to their localized cultural contexts" (p. 23). By attending to these localized cultural contexts, technical communicators are reminded of the tangible ways our work intersects with the lived experiences of communities. These moments underscore the ethical responsibility we carry in shaping narratives, practices, and spaces that affect real people in meaningful ways. Furthermore, by studying public memory artifacts—like gravestones—as technical communication artifacts, we expand what technical communication can do and be in the world. As meaning-making artifacts, gravestones are imbued with a rich cultural heritage and should be regarded as both public memory and technical communication.

In addition, O'Brien's (2022) "Exclusionary Public Memory Documents" situated historical marker texts (HMT), which are traditionally understood as public memory artifacts, as informational reports. In the study, O'Brien took the reverse approach from what we've taken in our literature review thus far: the article with an example of public memory and argues that it is also a technical communication document. This scholarship also studied both the HMTs and the application process in which an interested person might submit ideas for a potential HMT. The

study's findings indicate a lack of diversity in the state and county level commissions. The historical commissions responsible for approving HMTs, both at the county and state levels, are predominantly white, which influences the types of histories that are deemed significant and approved. In addition, the research uncovered an exclusionary application process. The process for applying for an HMT is complex, requiring substantial research and literacy skills, a significant fee, and a 5-10 page historical narrative, which can disproportionately exclude multiply marginalized communities. Finally, O'Brien (2022) argues that the content on HMTs is biased and problematic. A content and discourse analysis of over 16,000 Texas HMTs shows a severe underrepresentation of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and AAPI histories. When these individuals or events are mentioned, they are often portrayed negatively, inaccurately, or with euphemisms that obscure racialized violence and injustices. O'Brien (2022) suggested that despite small shifts towards equity (such as the Undertold Marker Program), significant changes are needed. She proposed an "action-oriented approach" to redress these inequalities. The pieces in this section highlight unconventional examples of technical communication documentation that intersect with public memory artifacts, thus showcasing the significant relationship between technical communication and public memory.

Counterpublics, Resistance, and Tactical Interventions

In response to exclusionary public memory systems, marginalized communities and activists have employed tactical forms of technical communication to resist dominant historical narratives and promote truth-telling. This section explores how technical communication can be a site of resistance and coalition-building, with documents serving as tools for organizing, advocating, and reclaiming erased histories. The Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) Community Remembrance Project analyzed by O'Brien and Walwema (2022) illustrates how technical communicators can engage with public memory to foster equity and justice. O'Brien (2023) further demonstrates how recommendation reports concerning contested monuments can either sustain or disrupt narratives of American Exceptionalism. Taken together, these works show how technical documentation can serve not only to record history, but to transform it.

The next piece, O'Brien and Walwema's (2022) "Countering Dominant Narratives in Public Memory," examines how historical commissions often refrain from installing historical marker texts (HMTs), memorials, or monuments that acknowledge violence against Black and brown individuals. To address this, the EJI employed various strategies to bypass local historical commissions and commemorate lynching victims. O'Brien and Walwema's (2022) study considered the EJI's Community Remembrance Project (CRP), a resource guide for community activists, as the primary data set. Using the 4Rs framework (Walton et al., 2019) and principles of tactical technical communication, the authors analyzed how the CRP serves as a coalitional tool for truth-telling that challenges disparities in public memory. O'Brien and Walwema (2022) argue that public memory texts frequently sustain systemic racism by omitting discussions of racial terror lynching, and these omissions have significant cultural and material effects on communities.

The final piece in this series of articles, O'Brien's (2023) "Mundane Documents, American Exceptionalism, and Savannah's 'Unique' History," again synthesizes concepts from technical communication and public memory to focus on two recommendation reports that address a

public memory site. These recommendation reports influenced the decision-making process regarding the Confederate monument in Forsyth Park, Savannah, Georgia. Through a comparative rhetorical analysis, O'Brien (2023) assessed the "Historical Context" sections of both reports, explored the rhetorical significance of the phrase "Savannah's unique history," critiqued the survey methodologies, and compared how each document proposed concrete and measurable strategies to support truth-telling efforts related to the city's Black, Muscogee, and Yamacree histories. O'Brien connected the issues with the two recommendation reports with current interventions in TPC scholarship, including Jones and Walton's (2018) work on narrative to inspire social change, Itchuaqiyaq's (2021) Indigenous research paradigm (IRP), and Carlson's (2021) discussion of Visual Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods.

The scholarship we have surveyed asserts that technical communicators can play a crucial role in disrupting exclusionary public memory narratives and advancing truth-telling through collaborative approaches to community activism. This work highlights how technical communicators can leverage rhetorical strategies, coalition-building, and tactical interventions to challenge dominant historical narratives. By engaging with marginalized communities, developing inclusive documentation, and advocating for historically accurate representations, technical communicators contribute to a more just and equitable public memory. Our efforts not only expose omissions and distortions in historical discourse but also create pathways for communities to reclaim and honor their histories in meaningful ways.

Naming What We Know: Public Memory in Technical Communication

As demonstrated, a significant body of scholarship in TPC is already engaging with public memory, even if this connection remains unspoken. We believe that explicitly naming the relationship between TPC and public memory studies in our work enables us, as technical communicators, to more effectively engage in social justice. Like threshold concepts, public memory as a keyword in TPC transforms our perception of and engagement with documentation by calling attention to sedimented networks of power developed over time. Social justice work, after all, requires us to call attention to how local and global networks of communication—many of which are embedded in public discourse—benefit some communities while marginalizing and oppressing others. Or, as Haas and Eble (2018) put it:

...technical and professional communicators must be able to ascertain how these networks are constructed, by whom, toward what ends—as well as the stakeholders, power dynamics, distributed agency (distributed by whom/what; who/what benefits, is underserved, and disenfranchised within the network; in what ways), and the direction(s) of the material and information flows and within the network(s) (p. 4).

We contend that these networks simultaneously create and are influenced by public memory narratives—contemporary stories about the past that shape how a community organizes itself for the future. To that end, situating public memory firmly as a keyword in TPC studies allows scholars and practitioners to name and call attention to the colonial and racist beliefs being perpetuated in everyday forms of technical and professional writing.

Keywords explain important concepts within a field to experts and newcomers, changing over time as the field accumulates new words and ideas. To that end, “articulating keywords helps us to take a useful snapshot in time of the field’s ongoing development” (Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 2023, p. xi). Much like public memory, keywords are rhetorical inventions composed of timely disciplinary experiences and beliefs. As Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2023) explained, “For technical and professional communication, a field aligned historically with the arts and sciences of discourse, keywords are an insightful location for development and analysis because we understand language to be constitutive of our being in the world” (p. xi). Rather than only representing a still snapshot of a field and its progress, keywords act as a web of ideas that help to define a field.

Scholars work with keywords to trace new disciplinary ideas by reevaluating their relationship to different keywords, as well as the relationships between keywords. In that sense, these relationships between new and old ideas within a discipline serve for scholars and practitioners alike “as a departure to critical inquiry and prospective application” (Tham & Thominet, 2022, p. 12). Each point of departure represents a new chapter in that keyword’s history, as well as a new position within the field’s larger web of ideas. Naming public memory as a keyword in technical communication studies, as something germane to the social justice work we do as technical communicators, more thoroughly brings the two together.

To illustrate how naming public memory as a keyword in TPC forwards our social justice mission, we briefly discuss how Florida’s House Bill No. 7, the “Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act” (hereafter “Stop WOKE Act”), and Donald Trump’s executive order on “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schools” (hereafter “Ending Radical Indoctrination”) function as living pieces of public memory. Public memories are narratives about the past that reflect the *ethos* of the present; they tell us more about the present than they do the past. Like a stone cast in water, public memories echo back and move forward, creating a ripple effect in our shared discourse. Hence, our aim is to show how these technical documents extend beyond their legal origins to promote and reinforce broader public narratives that support white supremacy.

The “Stop WOKE Act”: Objectivity and Obfuscation

Since becoming an instructor of record in Florida, Alexander has been directly affected by laws restricting how certain topics are discussed in college classrooms. Notably, the “Stop WOKE Act” has been weaponized by students and parents across the state, often under the misguided belief that it prohibits the discussion of anything perceived as “liberal.” For example, a student in Alexander’s classroom invoked the law to object to discussions about dialects and language diversity. That same student later complained to the Dean of Students about Alexander’s decision to assign texts discussing writing studies within a cultural rhetorics framework. In response, the dean suggested that Alexander revise his assigned readings to include politically conservative approaches to writing studies, something that would have appealed to the complaining student. These and similar experiences inform the analysis that follows, as well as the selection of the “Stop WOKE Act” for analysis.

Signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis in April of 2022, House Bill No. 7 regulates how educators discuss race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other concepts related to an individual’s

positionality, amongst other things. The law creates an environment where instructors must present these topics in a neutral or “objective” manner, even though these subjects are socially constructed. As the bill’s author writes, the “Stop WOKE Act” “may not be construed to prohibit discussion of the concepts listed therein as part of a course or training, *provided such training or instruction is given in an objective manner without endorsement of the concepts*” (WOKE §1.8b; emphasis mine). This language prevents professors from doing their job—that is, from professing knowledge or expertise on a subject—in favor of neutrality. At the same time, the bill contradicts its commitment to objectivity by requiring faculty to reject the idea that an “individual’s moral character or status as privileged or oppressed is determined by race, color, sex, or national origin” (§1.8a), privileging an ideology under the guise of neutrality.

The supposed neutrality on important conversations surrounding topics like race lays the groundwork for the bill’s primary goal: to reimagine the narratives we tell about the past in the present, creating a future free of “woke” ideology. This is where technical communicators might find value in focusing on public memory as a site of study. As Casey (2004) explains, “public memory is radically bivalent in its temporality. Where other forms of remembering deal primarily with the past...public memory is both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) *and* acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that event” (p. 17). Engaging with scholarship like Casey’s (2004) helps technical and professional communicators name how technical documents engage with narratives about the past to influence the treatment of marginalized and oppressed communities. For instance, the “Stop WOKE Act” requires that in K-20 schooling:

The history of the United States, including the period of discovery, early colonies, the War for Independence, the Civil War, the expansion of the United States to its present boundaries, the world wars, and the civil rights movement to the present... shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence (§3.2f).

Such an understanding of American history necessarily erases the country’s history as a settler colony founded on the surveillance of Black enforced laborers, mirrored by the decision to describe this country’s origins as a “discovery.” The act’s stated acknowledgment of “the fundamental truth that all persons are equal before the law and have inalienable rights” (§3.2a) whitewashes the persistence of racist laws in Florida and elsewhere, as demonstrated by gerrymandering practices that disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, and people of color. By erasing the very real differences between how communities are treated on the basis of race, the authors of the “Stop WOKE Act,” writing from a whitewashed past, seek to create a colorblind future.

Colorblindness or the refusal to acknowledge color upholds white supremacy by disregarding the systematic mistreatment of non-white communities based on race. White communities justify their privilege and the oppression of others by attributing success solely to merit, ignoring the structural barriers faced by marginalized groups (Johnson et al., 2008). The “Stop WOKE Act” reifies a white supremacist account of history, entrenching it in the fabric of how public narratives about the past are taught in schools. These narratives forbid educators from expressing

the idea that “virtues [such] as merit, excellence, hard work, fairness, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness are racist or sexist, or were created by members of a particular race, color, sex, or national origin to oppress members of another race, color, sex, or national origin” (§1.8a). Naming the role and function of public memory in technical documents helps us annotate these public/policy documents with information that qualifies, clarifies, or recovers the forgotten or intentionally obscured purposes of these texts. In so doing, technical communicators can foreground the voices of those marginalized or oppressed by these documents, challenging and potentially overwriting the terms of debate they establish.

Technical documents like the “Stop WOKE Act” can shape the future using a colorblind version of the past because public memory sets the terms of our debate. Public memory is “an active resource on which current discussion and action draw” (Casey, 2004, p. 25). For example, when the Florida government defined wokeness as “‘progressive activism’ and a general belief in systemic injustices in the country” (Weinberg, 2022), it created an official governmental position that enables the oppression of specific communities—those that would benefit from “progressive activism.” By positing a view of the United States built upon Enlightenment principles of universal freedom and liberty rather than the material truth that these principles have enabled the oppression of specific communities, the “Stop WOKE Act” attempts to silence narratives pointing out these injustices. These and similar attacks on wokeness and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) make it difficult for scholars and instructors alike to engage topics in public memory studies, making this engagement all the more important.

“Ending Radical Indoctrination”: Suppressing Truth-Telling Efforts

Likewise, as a professor in Texas, April has faced challenges due to recent state legislation. Many of these challenges center around academic freedom and attacks against truth-telling efforts in classrooms. For example, in June 2023, SB17 passed, which banned Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education. This law “prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion (‘DEI’) offices, and the programs, activities, and trainings, among other things, traditionally conducted by those offices. It also prohibits institutions from implementing hiring and employment practices and treating individuals differently or providing special benefits based on protected characteristics” (“Texas Senate Bill”). As a result, April’s work with a college-wide Diversity and Inclusion Committee ended, as the committee was disbanded by the university. Similarly, a transdisciplinary grant involving April was discontinued because it aimed to support truth-telling efforts about the university’s Black history. While SB17 focuses on university DEI work, it does not prohibit faculty from researching or teaching these topics. However, as of 2025, these areas, too, are under attack, as well as decreasing the influence of faculty senates and developing state-level oversight to essentially act as a watchdog over public universities (Priest, 2025). These laws and bills have created a chilling effect on faculty in Texas, and many are frightened of losing their jobs over what/how they teach and research. Thus, it’s unsurprising that Trump’s Executive Order, “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K12 Schooling” has been introduced.

Intentionally or not, Donald Trump’s executive order is in conversation with the work of the “Stop WOKE Act” and Texas’ SB17. For example, whereas the “Stop WOKE Act” prohibits instructors in classrooms from acknowledging that “an individual’s moral character or status as

either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin” (§1.8a), the “Ending Radical Indoctrination” executive order maintains that “[a]n individual’s moral character or status as privileged, oppressing, or oppressed is primarily determined by the individual’s race, color, sex, or national origin” (§2.iii). But Trump’s executive order more firmly taps into sites of public memory, requiring that “patriotic education is appropriately provided to the public at national parks, battlefields, monuments, museums, installations, landmarks, cemeteries, and other places important to the American founding and American history, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law” (§2.d). In this instance, patriotic education entails,

- (i) an accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling characterization of America’s founding and foundational principles;
- (ii) a clear examination of how the United States has admirably grown closer to its noble principles throughout its history;
- (iii) the concept that commitment to America’s aspirations is beneficial and justified; and
- (iv) the concept that celebration of America’s greatness and history is proper. (§2.d)

We observe here the same or similar language and effects from the “Stop WOKE Act,” this time situated in both places of education (e.g., K-12 schools) and public memory (memorials, landmarks, etc.). To try to understand the bill outside of the context of public memory would be like trying to separate wetness from water; it cannot be done. Moreover, the executive order makes a direct appeal to revising public memory narratives that have hitherto been commonplace, labeling them as “indoctrination.”

Public memory, according to Casey (2004), is subject to continual revision, writing that a constant feature of public memory is “its formation through ongoing interchange of ideas and thoughts, opinions and beliefs. It is just because public memory is so much in the arena of open discussion and debate that it is also subject to revision or, for that matter, resumption” (p. 30). Understanding how this process occurs, such as through the reassessment of ethical, historical, or political frames, is essential for technical and professional communicators hoping to call attention to these oppressive systems while also better localizing its advocacy to the particular narratives being circulated within specific local, national, and global contexts.

Conclusion

Since starting the research for this article, we’ve witnessed President Donald Trump pass similar revisionist legislation to the ones above. For example, Executive Order 14172 requires federal agencies to rename the Gulf of Mexico to “Gulf of America.” In accordance with this executive order, the U.S. Department of the Interior published a press release announcing that it “is proud to announce the implementation of name restorations that honor the legacy of American greatness,” with the name change to the Gulf of Mexico “affirm[ing] its central importance to the Nation” (U.S. Department of the Interior 2025). Likewise, companies such as Google and Apple have adopted a similar practice, using the name “Gulf of America” for maps accessed within a U.S. context (refer to Figure 2). With other clearly revisionist documents moving through the legal system—aimed at promoting a specific view of the U.S. while overwriting its role in imperialism and systemic oppression—technical and professional communication is becoming increasingly involved in shaping public memory, if it wasn’t already. While these are large,

broad-stroke efforts, we need to begin thinking as technical and professional communicators about the work we do at the local level to promote social justice through public memory work. After all, these macro-level trends are reflective of the unjust work being done in our local communities, as highlighted through Florida’s “Stop WOKE Act.”

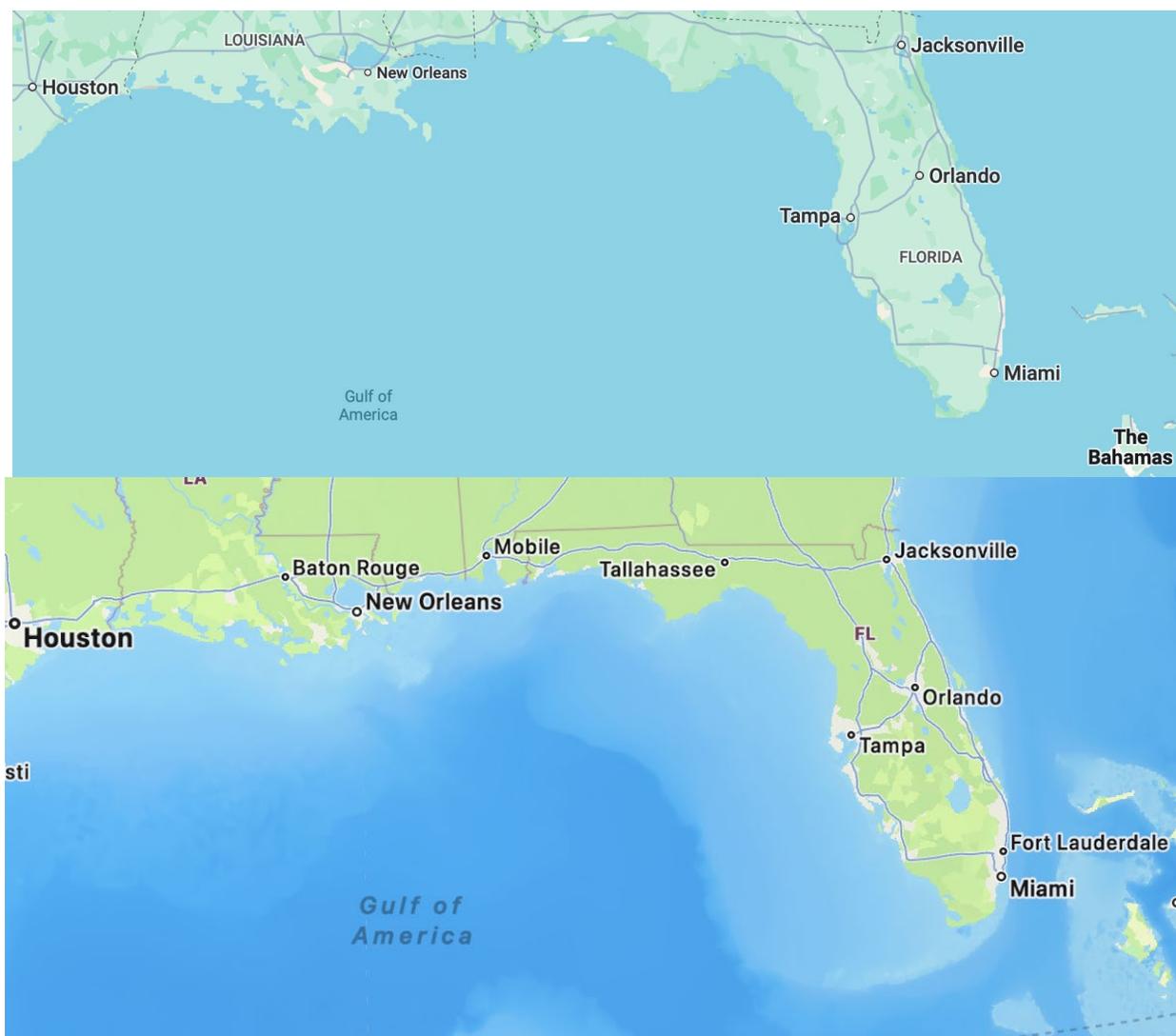


Figure 2. Google (top) and Apple Maps’ (bottom) portrayal of the Gulf of Mexico in the U.S. Both feature the name “Gulf of America” for users in the U.S., though the name is more visible in Apple Maps.

Current attacks on DEI and critical race theory’s illumination on the oppressive nature of key events in U.S. history make the work of public memory even more relevant and vital to TPC. At the same time, studying technical and professional documents as sites of public memory illuminates past injustices to help us better understand our current conditions. For this reason, we call for more work in TPC that explicitly engages or interfaces with public memory. Specifically, we call for work that explores technical and professional communication’s role in shaping public memory narratives and the impacts those narratives have on different people, places, and events. We also encourage work that further explores the scope and significance of public memory in TPC, work that retheorizes and/or historicizes public memory documents as technical and

professional documents (and vice versa), work that uses public memory as a framework for understanding what TPC is doing in the world.

Public memory is relevant to the work *all* technical and professional communicators do. While TPC has long addressed issues related to public memory, directly engaging with public memory studies can make our work more socially relevant and just. It enables us to name and challenge the oppressive narratives—rooted in commonplace beliefs—that shape our actions in the world. As we like to say, “public memory is for everyone.”

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