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Introduction to Special Issue on Unjust "Permission Structures" in/as Technical Communication

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We are thrilled to share our special issue of *Technical Communication and Social Justice* on the topic of Unjust "Permission Structures" in/as Technical Communication. In recent decades, the term "permission structure" has been increasingly popularized to describe a specific rhetorical strategy whereby communicators use the audience's existing beliefs and values to persuade them to change their original positions and/or take actions they otherwise would not (Samuels, n.d.). This intentional strategy of structuring permission to persuade opponents and build consensus originated with presidential aide David Axelrod and came to prominence in 2013 with second-term president Barack Obama's "use of the phrase permission structure at a press conference in order to explain how he hoped to break an impasse with congressional Republicans" (Samuels, n.d.). As explained contemporaneously by Obama aide Dan Pfeiffer, "Sometimes there is an issue that seems intractable and in order to help someone find a path your point of view, you have to build in a process that helps them see your point of view more clearly" (qtd. in Holland & Bolan, 2013). In other words, during a time of marked political polarization, Obama and his advisors believed that political opponents were more likely to change their minds if a seemingly disagreeable policy was first "structured" to align with components of their existing beliefs. Even in its political uses, permission structuring may be usefully understood as a form of technical communication by which audiences are strategically persuaded to accept or reject complex policy, scientific, and legal topics.

This special issue emerged from our panel inquiring into the real-world implications of unjust permission structures at the 2024 Rhetoric Society of America Biennial Conference. In our panel presentations, we argued that the emergence of permission structures as a novel political, corporate, and/or pedagogical strategy addresses a frustrating truism: merely presenting accurate information is rarely sufficient for changing beliefs and inspiring action. In fact, the opposite may often be true when exposure to new evidence causes people to "dig in" and justify their original beliefs (Pennycook, 2020). As we demonstrated at the conference in our analyses of permission structuring in socially mediated COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy (Lambert), climate science and evolution discourse (Monty), anti-trans and anti-immigrant political rallies and policy (Morquecho), and the disparagement of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in postsecondary public education (Warren-Riley), examples of unjust permission structures pervade contemporary educational, public policy, and political landscapes. In this way, permission structures are clearly imperative to social justice because they persuade audiences to either accept or reject expert knowledge and lived experiences, and the resulting beliefs and actions often impact individuals and communities on matters of import surrounding public policy, public health, and human rights. As such, this special issue aims to both complement and extend prior work in this journal about vaccines and public health (Agbozo, 2023; Vail, 2023), pedagogy and education (Clem, 2023; Dayley, 2023), the socio-politics of technologies (Lawrence, 2024) and design (Lane & Moore, 2023), "colonial logics" (Homer, 2023), and political and historical "truth telling" (O'Brien, 2023).

The origins of permission structuring as a persuasive strategy have been alternatively attributed to the disciplines of marketing (Holland & Bolan, 2013; Swain et al., 2023) and behavioral social psychology (Genovese et al., 2014), yet there is surprisingly limited scholarship on the concept in any critical discipline, except insofar as Obama's public introduction of the phrase informs discussions of contemporary American history and politics (Samuels, n.d.). Outside of politics, the term is most widely used in computer science to describe the computational logic by which

permission is structured for users to access files, folders, and systems (Parkinson & Crampton, 2016) and in game theory, where scholars describe hypothetical relationships and actions via permissions that are granted through communication networks and hierarchies (van den Brink, 2012). In the social economies of game theory, "Many economic and political organizations have some relational structure, meaning that participating agents do not only differ with respect to certain individual characteristics such as wealth and preferences, but also belong to some relational structure in which they usually take different positions" (van den Brink, 2012, p. 721). The relational metaphors from game theory and computational logics granting users access to files therefore offer a useful lens for linking permission structures, technical communication, and social justice, as agency is often mutually associated with access to information and resources.

Article Summaries

To demonstrate the complexity and generative potential of permission structuring as a dynamic rhetorical strategy, we sought submissions that investigated unjust permission structures in/as technical communications. While the concept of permission structures is neutral, we were specifically interested in submissions that explored how permission is structured to *unjustly* deny legitimate evidence, to draw false comparisons, to perpetuate inaccurate beliefs, and to justify discriminatory and damaging practices. By "recognizing" and "revealing" the structures behind unjust policy arguments, we echo Walton et al.'s (2019) efforts "to dismantle some barriers to coalition building" (p. 12). To begin this work and better understand the multitude of ways that permission structures can be deployed in/as unjust technical communication, we invited a range of fitting methods/methodologies and topics of inquiry.

The seven articles included in this special issue exemplify permission structuring that contributes to unjust ends. This said, the ways each author identifies permission as being unjustly structured varies by rhetorical context, object of analysis, and intended audience. Because there is neither an established definition for permission structures nor disciplinary consensus of what constitutes injustice, each of the following articles adds to our burgeoning understanding of the concept of permission structures while contributing to a more holistic picture of the ways in which technical communication may both advocate for and help to realize social justice.

The first three articles in this special issue trace permission structures emerging from governance, lawsuits, and legislation. First, Ryan Cheek and Isidore K. Dorpenyo analyze how "deny, defend, and depose," a common insurance company tactic to reject claims, creates a permission structure for the Trump administration to undermine social justice DEI initiatives. Next, Sara DiCaglio examines how anti-abortion judicial opinions like *LePage v. Center for Reproductive Medicine* structure science fiction futures that permit present-day law-making to divorce pregnancy from the birthing process and perpetuate harm on pregnant people. Third, through an analysis of 16 state-level anti-DEI bills, Nick Sanders investigates how white supremacist permission structures stoke white fragility and narcissism while also denying the legitimacy of lived histories, ultimately encouraging racism and racialized violence.

The subsequent two articles grapple with permission structures and structuring which contradict key constituent values. S. Marek Muller and David Rooney analyze cultured meat bans, which structure permission for conservatives to violate core values such as free enterprise. Their

analysis identifies “reciprocal permission structures” and mutually reinforcing discourse communities that connect anti-cultured meat legislation to populist conspiracism. Sarah Riddick investigates how clothing companies create a consumeristic permission structure by promoting a donation program. Using Trashie’s “Take Back Bag” program as an example, Riddick highlights how the company uses a “contradictory and incoherent permission structure” for climate-conscious customers to participate in cycles of overconsumption.

The final two articles examine how various media distribute and circulate permission structures. Elena Kalodner-Martin calls attention to how social media shaped public health conversations and understandings of risk regarding COVID-19 vaccinations. Through an analysis of data from a multi-year study, Kalodner-Martin identifies dominant themes framing public health communications that align with audience values and avoid alienating or disenfranchising marginalized groups. Finally, Courtney Fallon illustrates how journalistic media like *The New York Times* used “pinkwashing” as a permission structure for the genocide of Palestinians by publishing a photo of Israeli soldier holding up a rainbow flag.

Conclusion

In the 2020 and 2024 elections, the phrase “permission structures” appeared widely in news and social media to describe mainstream attacks on civil rights and democracy, portending a flattening of the concept. As prominent politicians and public figures in the United States have increasingly weaponized permission structures to spread misinformation, normalize bigotry, and sow disharmony, the discussion of the term is often relegated to describing how radical views are normalized or destigmatized (Lemire, 2020). Although its popular usage may provide the viewing public with new ways to understand political rhetoric and related phenomena impacting their everyday lives, scholars must resist popular jargon outpacing and superseding the use of technical concepts and critical discourse. Taken together, the articles in this issue potentiate multiple critical, pedagogical, and practical applications for permission structuring as a technical communication strategy. We therefore intend for this introduction and each of the following articles to inspire further research into, and articulation of, the many possible uses and understandings of permission structures within the field of technical communication.

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