

# GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

## Professional communication, social justice, and the Global South

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**Keywords.** Social justice, Global South, Fourth World, Development, Colonialism, Decolonial, Unenfranchised populations, NGOs, Multinational corporations, Corporate social responsibility.

In a nutshell, the “Global South”—like democracy, development, and many other concepts—is now the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom. From the perspective of the global north, the global south needs help. From the perspective of the inhabitants of those regions that are not aligned with the global north, the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging (Levander & Mignolo, 2011, pp. 4–5).

Professional communicators are working all over the world. They practice in business, industry, government, charitable nonprofit organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations. And yet, nearly



**CONNEXIONS • INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL**

2015, 4(1), 3–17

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21310/cnx.4.1.16savetal>

ISSN 2325-6044



all of the research on international professional communication has focused on corporate contexts in the “developed” world. Consequently, international technical communication practice and research tends to focus on barely more than half of the world’s nations included in the 2013 United Nations Human Development Index. These are nations ranked as “very high” or “high” on the human development scale. Only a few nations ranked as “medium” receive much notice—China (Ding, 2003; Hansen, 200; Yu, 2010), Thailand (Sriussadaporn, 2006), Philippines (Nardo & Hufana, 2014), and South Africa (Meintjes, Nimann-Struweg, & De Wet, 2008) are the most prominent. Even so, the status of some of these “medium” or “developing” nations is not clear anymore. For example, a 2013 United Nations Development Programme report ranks China with India and Brazil as the leading developing nations with significant economic growth. By 2020, the combined wealth of these nations will surpass that of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the US put together (UNDP, 2013).

It’s probably the case that these nations regarded as “low” on the Human Development Index have received little attention in professional communication scholarship, because conducting research may be too costly or these marginalized contexts are not sufficiently industrialized to attract attention. However, many of these nations are sites of transnational corporate activity, of which a significant amount involves various kinds of resource development of questionable benefit to the people of those nations. They tend to be seen as sources for the raw materials of Western industry—pharmaceutical plants, rare metals, forestry products, and food crops. Western industry employs growing numbers of workers in the Global South, of course. The garment industry is one that has earned a great deal of negative attention over the past decade or more, but such work is outsourced through lengthy and complex supply chains which distance Western corporations from their labor sources (Bais, 2005; MVO Platform, 2012; Trócaire & Consulting, 2010). For these reasons, we usually become aware of diversity issues that may arise from business interactions with unenfranchised populations only when activist groups and organizations expose abuses or when disasters such as the recent factory collapse in Bangladesh make international headlines. Too often,

the social justice response to such events is in the form of compensation that is not necessarily adequate and at best only token reforms.

A great number of NGOs throughout the world, however, pay close attention to the unfair, unjust, and environmentally detrimental activities of exploitative transnational corporations among indigenous and marginalized populations. These NGOs' work includes research, legal action, and extensive reporting. Some transnational corporations also document their development and other business activities in sensitive areas of the world, some of them for purposes of accountability for their efforts at corporate social responsibility, others for purposes of denying or whitewashing egregious activities. To be sure, the Global South, which constitutes three quarters of the world's population, has access to only one fifth of the world's income, lacks the requisite technology, and depends primarily on export products (Mimiko, 2012). As Kathleen Malley-Morrison et al (2015) have argued:

researchers have paid little attention to the Global South, which is an area that has been subjugated and exploited by Western powers since colonial times. The Global South has also been afflicted by violence and oppression from within, as members of privileged classes often oppress their poor and disenfranchised counterparts (p. 9).

This lack of attention by researchers is certainly true for professional communication, and especially troubling, considering that a wide range of other professions have given relatively more attention to their roles in the Global South: engineering, medicine, agriculture, economics, business management, computer science, and geography. Only a handful of studies in professional communication, published over the past fifteen years, have addressed these issues (Agboka, 2013a, 2013b); Durá, Singhal, & Elías, 2013; Ilyasova & Birkelo, 2013; Smith, 2006, 2012; Vijayaram, 2013; Walton, 2013; Walton & DeRenzi, 2009; Walton, Price, & Zrally, 2013).

Professional communication scholars and practitioners have taken great pride in the part played by communication professionals in all of these fields, but

we have not kept pace with the awakening global social consciousness these other fields have demonstrated regarding the impacts of their work beyond the industrialized Global North. If professional communicators have roles in these contexts, for good or ill, we know almost nothing about them. Agboka's (2013a, 2013b) work is one of the few studies we have. We believe that research studies and activities involving professional communication scholars in the Global South offer some of the most important and interesting, and the least investigated work, to be done in our field. We believe there are practitioners who are doing socially just work and who have much to teach us. There are, unfortunately, also many egregious examples, as Agboka has reported. In our own field, both Durá et al. (2013) and Walton (2013) have provided some initial insights on social justice communication in NGOs and there is vastly more to be looked at. Such work has great promise for our students who are excited about professional communication but disenchanted with the prospect of compromising their need for a secure job in exchange for serving the interests of employers willing to take profits at the cost of human dignity, rights, and even lives.

The articles in this issue focus on areas and populations of the world variously referred to as the Third and Fourth Worlds, Developing Countries, or the Global South. "Global South" and "Fourth World" are terms intended to include populations that are not necessarily in the southern hemisphere and that also do not include only nation states. Thus, the terms can include populations within "First World" nations, or the Global North, including the US (In this issue, see the article by Ding, Li, & Hagler). It is important to understand that nearly all of these terms have been coined from a Northern—even a Western—perspective. According to sociologist Raewyn Connell (2013):

South and North are not so much geographical categories; they are relationships. They are the name for a bundle of economic, military, and cultural relations marked by centrality and marginality, by global structures of domination. And like all major social relationships, this is not static. This is a dynamic relationship (p. 8).

The term Fourth World arose from various indigenous and other unenfranchised groups in resistance to the persistent tendency in Northern thinking to conceptualize the world in terms of nation-states. Such views generally failed to acknowledge the concerns of indigenous or unenfranchised populations throughout the world, who are commonly subsumed within—and disregarded by—the national governments within whose borders such populations may happen to exist. In many instances these groups transcend national boundaries owing to decades or centuries of Northern colonization, deracination, and postcolonial divisions of Southern regions into national political entities that disregarded ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other precolonial cultural factors. For indigenous perspectives, see, for example, First Peoples Worldwide (<http://www.firstpeoples.org/>), Fourth World Movement (<http://4thworldmovement.org/>), or Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) (<http://www.unpo.org>).

The Northern interests and prerogatives that have designated such global categories have also largely determined the policies and programs for economic, social, and political interactions between North and South. It is Northern nations and intergovernmental organizations that have defined the status of economic and human development for each Southern state. It is the North that determines what the North's commitments ought to be to "advance" the South and what the South's obligations to the North will be in order to receive the "necessary" assistance. Even in cases where the intentions are charitable, as with some NGOs committed to social, environmental, and economic justice, a Northern worldview may determine how needs are defined, what remedies are appropriate, and whose voices will be heard in intervention processes.

Resistance from the South has come from various quarters. It is not necessarily antiglobalization nor is there resistance to every aspect of development called for by Northern entities. It does, however, emphasize that the South must have a significant voice, and even the final say, in what advancement and development in their communities should entail (Rizvi, 2005). Some even challenge the Northern terminologies that have defined the "Others" of the planet. Feminist postcolonial scholar Chandra Mohanty (2002) complicates the

various terms currently in use by playing them against one another. “First, let me say that the terms Western and Third World retain a political and explanatory value in a world that appropriates and assimilates multiculturalism and 'difference' through commodification and consumption” (Mohanty, 2002, p. 505). However, she also favors the terms “One-Third World” and “Two-Thirds World” (Esteva & Prakash, 2014), which represent what they call the “social minorities” of the North and the “social majorities” of the South (ibid). Mohanty employs all of these terms, finding them “particularly useful, especially in conjunction with Third World/South and First World/North. . . . The advantage of One-Third/Two-Thirds World in relation to terms like Western/Third World and North/South is that they move away from misleading geographical and ideological binarisms” (p. 506).

Perhaps one of the most effective movements to resist globalization driven by the North is the “globalization from below” movement, sometimes also described as “alter-globalization.” This movement arose from a wide range of organizations and groups around the world, many of which would seem to have few interests in common, but which found common cause in economic injustices they perceive to originate in policies and actions of governments and intergovernmental organizations such as WTO, World Bank, etc. in support of neoliberal economic development that impacts Global South populations. Characterized by protests against deregulation of markets in the name of “free trade,” this movement gained international attention on occasions such as the so-called “Battle of Seattle” at the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle for the WTO Ministerial Conference’s Millennium Round in 1999.

No fewer than 1,387 groups—including nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], trade unions, environmentalists, and a number of religious organizations—signed the call to demonstrate against the Millennium Round. The protest events were prepared in thousands of meetings in many countries and by a global campaign of information (Porta, Andretta, , & Reiter, 2006).

Similar protests occurred in subsequent years around the world, at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa and the 2002 European Social Forum in Florence, and in Paris in 2003. “After Seattle it was said that protests, if nothing else, had

had the immediate success of bringing international summits out from the shadowy world of reserved agreements between diplomats and technocrats” (Porta, Andretta, & Reiter, 2006, p. 7).

## **Social Justice Implications of Professional Communication in the Global South**

With the advent of concerns for corporate social responsibility in the 1990s (Columbia U, 2014) corporations have increasingly, although not necessarily with enthusiasm, adopted policies for proactively recognizing their duty to conduct business in ways that do not cause economic, environmental, or social harm. Responding to the spread of global capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century, the United Nations led a multinational effort to formulate guidelines for corporations operating beyond their home countries (Sapp, Savage, & Mattson, 2013; Trocaire, 2010). Over a period of more than thirty years, at least two UN-sponsored efforts have resulted in the Global Compact, implemented in 1999, and the UN Guiding Principles implemented in 2011.

As a global standard applicable to all business enterprises, the UN Guiding Principles provide further conceptual and operational clarity for the two human rights principles championed by the Global Compact. They reinforce the Global Compact and provide an authoritative framework for participants on the policies and processes they should implement in order to ensure that they meet their responsibility to respect human rights (UN, 2014).

A number of INGOs, civil society organizations, and intergovernmental organizations have become involved—sometimes in concert, sometimes in opposition—in monitoring and critiquing the conduct of multinational corporations, governments, and other INGOs and IGOs in the Global South or conduct that impacts people, economies, and environments in the Global South. These efforts virtually always involve many forms of communication, much of it extensive and much of it complex and more or less sophisticated in the ways that media and genres are deployed. A staggering number of NGOs and INGOs

operate in Global South countries—in 2005 it is estimated there were nearly 100,000 registered NGOs operating just in South Africa (Smith, 2010). Of course, not all NGOs are specifically concerned with social justice, and many do not deal with Global South issues. Nevertheless, professional communicators have for many years been involved in social justice work in the Global South and little of that work has had attention from scholars in this field. This may be particularly true in the US. Indeed, the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs recently observed that “the commitment to CSR, and hence the supply of related jobs is, at present, more developed in Europe than it is in the US, although the market is growing rapidly on this side of the Atlantic” (Columbia U, 2007).

The communication work done by such organizations includes reports, press releases, promotional materials, and educational materials. For example, a 2011 report published by DanWatch, a Danish INGO, reports on the environmental and health hazards of electronic wastes from European nations and the US that are processed by low-income adults and children in Ghana. The report includes investigative journalistic research, summaries of scientific studies by government and other agencies, interviews with officials and e-waste workers, and medical information drawn from medical sources. The title of the report, *What a waste: How your computer causes health problems in Ghana* (Frandsen, Rasmussen, & Swart, 2011) indicates clearly that a key audience is computer users primarily in Western countries.

Such reports often target social justice abuses by specific companies. Finnwatch, for example, explains the purpose of its work this way: “Our research findings form the basis for our participation in public debate. We communicate our findings regarding the impacts of the overseas operations of Finnish companies directly to the consumers and engage in dialogue with the companies. Our goal is to encourage companies to embrace positive change” (Finnwatch, 2016). See the interview with Finnwatch executive director Sonja Vartiala in this issue for a detailed discussion of this INGO and the role of communication in the organization’s work.

The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) is an INGO based in Amsterdam that often collaborates with other NGOs in Europe and the Global South to monitor and investigate practices of large corporations operating in the South. The methodology of these NGOs appears to have become fairly standardized, although particular methods depend on the scope of the study and the nature of the investigation. Typically, preliminary drafts of investigation reports are provided to the target company. The company's responses to the reports are then included in the published versions. It is also common to conduct follow-up studies several years later to check on conditions that the company had agreed to remedy.

We believe that professional communication scholars have vital roles to play in advancing research, public policy, and social justice in and about the Global South. We see room for a lot of research that addresses issues within the Global South as well as opportunities to position professional communication as advocates of social justice.

### **Articles in this Special Issue**

This special issue of *connexions* is an attempt to encourage scholarly discussions and publications about the important role of professional and technical communication in the Global South; promote communication practices that project and advance issues about populations within the Global South, and provide resources (e.g. theories, methods, and cases) for addressing the challenges raised by research in and about the Global South.

Five articles and two interviews make up this special issue. Aside building on and complementing one another, the articles uniquely complicate the notion of Global South, contest constructed knowledges, and magnify the agency of populations in the Global South. For example, the first article by Ding, Li, & Hagler discusses ways in which social injustice may manifest itself in epidemic control, by examining issues of social injustice that medical care workers (MCWs) encountered in the SARS outbreaks in Canada and Singapore. They apply the theoretical frameworks of *oppression*, *civic-based networks*, *access* and *social*

*justice* to their historical cases to investigate potential connections between communication and social justice. In doing this, Ding, Li, & Hagler expertly offer interconnections among these theoretical apparatuses to highlight possible ways for professional communicators to help promote access and thus social justice for marginalized and powerless groups. As you will see, the context of their research challenges traditional notions of the term “Global South,” because it doesn’t necessarily take place in a nation state within the southern hemisphere—it focuses mostly on Asian immigrants in North America and Southeast Asian immigrants in Singapore.

Keeping to the theme of social justice, Lucía Durá introduces the theory of *positive deviance* (PD), an asset-based participatory, inquiry-driven approach, that offers new perspectives about ways in which professional communication can engage in community-based work. PD captures how researchers reinforce what local people are doing right without necessarily seeking outside help. Drawing from an instrumental study on the reintegration of child soldiers in Northern Uganda, Durá demonstrates how PD can work as an alternative research framework or interventional methodology to advance transformational research in professional communication.

Mukherjee and Williams provide an investigation of how local, indigenous industries in the Global South construct and negotiate their digital identity, while also seeking to create authenticity around their products. Focusing on localized handicraft organizations (NPOs) in India, they conduct a thematic analysis of two Bengal (Indian), handicraft NPOs’ websites in relation to handicraft authenticity, global-local tensions, and digital presentation. Their analysis highlights the role of digital technology in marketing authenticity, contemporizing traditional arts, while balancing organizational commitment to social justice.

On their part, Opel and Stevenson reflect upon the exploitation of girls in global development initiatives usually captured in digital storytelling. The authors do this through a case study of *Women Win*, a transnational NGO’s digital storytelling (DST) project in which they analyze 37 DST videos. The authors conclude that the girls in the DST project only labor to produce affective evidence for *Women Win* that circumscribes them as postfeminist development subjects,

reproducing ideals that originate in feminism of the Global North. They conclude with a call to international professional and technical communicators to find approaches to DST training that are local in nature, and examine how training initiatives might be more sensitive to non-Western contexts.

Finally, Rebecca Walton reports the findings of an exploratory study of how nonelite youth in Kigali (Rwanda) appropriate computers and cell phones in their everyday lives. She demonstrates how technology use in a nonformalized workplace context not only challenges norms about sites and contexts of traditional workplace studies, but also magnifies the agency of oppressed people. Walton warns that our field's overemphasis on formalized workplaces in the Global North only offers a narrow scope that can lead to oppressive, normalizing assumptions. ■

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