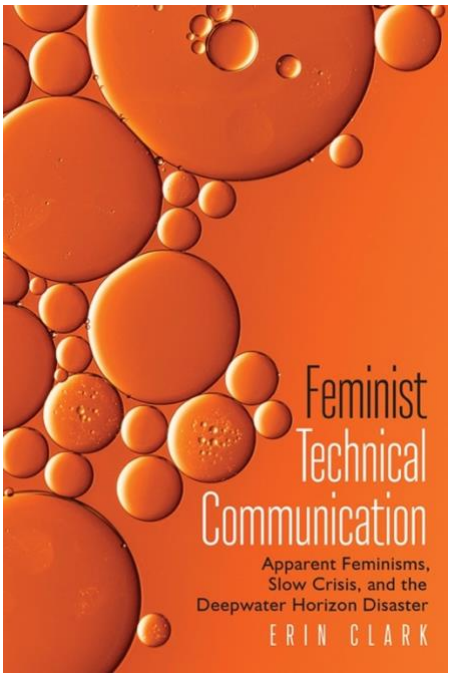

Feminist Technical Communication: Apparent Feminisms, Slow Crisis, and the Deepwater Horizon Disaster

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In *Feminist Technical Communication*, Erin Clark applies a framework of apparent feminism to various crisis communications in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Disaster (DHD). This book argues that traditional approaches to technical communication, particularly those focused on efficiency, are inadequate for responding to complex crises. Clark proposes feminist technical communication as a more ethical framework and, through the establishment of this methodology, amplifies feminist prominence in the field.

Clark structures her work logically, first positioning her scholarship within the discourse of the relatively new field. From a foundation of exhaustive scholarship, she proceeds to define her apparent feminist framework, arguing for its application to an array of situations. While Clark here admits that the applicability of this approach may not be universal, the next chapter demonstrates how it may be best suited for those situations that involve a long tail of effects and impacts, especially on human bodies. In the fourth and fifth chapters, Clark takes an apparent feminist lens to analyze the production, publication, and distribution of numerous documents offering guidance in two regions affected by oil spills left by the DHD. In chapter four, Clark details the case study she undertook, in which she also employs her

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experience as an investigative journalist. Through her apparent feminist approach, the author examines several categories of documents found at various sites and how each addresses the crisis. As Clark emphasizes throughout, each entity behind these publications attempts to communicate efficiently, but nearly all are most efficient at avoiding discussing health impacts on Gulf region residents. This valuation of efficiency, a disciplinary tenet especially important in crisis and health communications, is critical to Clark's apparent feminist framework.

Clark introduces the book by asserting her ultimate goal: to present a work that positions feminist forms of rhetorical analysis as central to the goals of technical communication. More than just another arrow in the quiver, feminist approaches are not only complementary, she argues, but vital to the sustainability of the field. Through the broader recognition of what constitutes efficient communications, feminist criteria for communicators entail an expansion of scope and timeframe. In the case of studying DHD communication efforts, Clark examines publications on mitigating financial and, to a lesser degree, environmental impacts.

In the first chapter, Clark enlists a bevy of critical theorists and scholars to accomplish this task, starting with some of the earliest rhetors, Sappho and Aspasia, building on the work of Cheryl Glenn (p. 13). Clark follows this by citing a more contemporary lineage in Carolyn Rude, Angela M. Haas, and Jay Dolmage. More importantly, however, Clark encourages us to include marginalized voices (such as Nujood Ali and Nakato Juliette) who have used technical communications to advocate for themselves and others. The field is just in being more inclusive but, she argues, we should also be considering the impacts of inclusion when made more apparent (p.15). Cecilia Shelton's *On edge: A Techné of Marginality* (2019) is cited for examples of risk-taking on behalf of these advocates. For the field to thrive, technical communications must continue to wholly embrace "and make apparent the urgent and sometimes hidden exigencies for feminist critique of contemporary politics and technical rhetorics" (p. 31). As part of this endeavor, Clark advocates for those approaches that attend to the slow, the messy, and what is perceived as inefficient.

The second chapter begins with an anecdote (itself a feminist technique unpacked by the author) describing subtle, systemic misogyny and how feminist efforts, through technical communications, might shed light on dominant biases. Apparent feminism, for Clark, is a method that aims to complicate—even negate—the perception of technical communication as neutral (p. 38). Apparent feminist approaches are not merely content with exposing hidden biases but also making essential issues for feminists more visible. This apparency also includes highlighting the value of feminist perspectives, such as the effect of technologies on human bodies, and focusing on diverse audiences as part of the pursuit of short- and long-term efficiencies.

This timeline expansion is central to the third chapter, in which Clark focuses on the slow crisis of events. The author's concept signifies significant events (such as a massive oil spill) whose impacts are revealed over extended periods. This resistance to fast responses contrasts with crisis communications efforts that often warrant immediacy. It is here that Clark eloquently folds in queer theory and the embodiment of crisis as a violent long-tail of oppression. When time becomes unmoored from heteronormative expectations and measurements, one can better recognize alternate moments of significance as well as potential outcomes. This strategy provides Clark with a method for evaluating risk and crisis in terms of multiple temporalities.

With the theoretical frameworks of apparent feminism and slow crisis established, Clark scrutinizes the responses of various parties affected by the DHD in the fourth chapter. Through her in-person investigations of two sites in Alabama, the author discovered that human health impacts were almost entirely ignored by federal agencies as well as BP, the global corporation behind the disaster. Clark curated multiple documents and web pages and their locations to conduct her analysis: federal responses mostly offered standardized bulletins conveying compensation information for citizens; a solicitation for area boat captains to assist in the cleanup from BP; a CDC website was one of the sole items speaking to health but was limited to that of pregnant women and the effects on fetal health (p. 102). Here, Clark demonstrates the disparity between "corporate efficiency" and the more ethical adaptation to accommodate the slow crisis that oil and dispersants have on victims.

The author further distinguishes, in chapter five, between those entities conducting communication efforts. Between these multiple efficiencies, Clark points out, the dominant narrative is generated, shaping how a subject is viewed and discussed. In the case of the DHD, she continues, there were four categories of communications: non-local, local, guerilla media, and transcultural. As Clark reports, various organizations used each of these methods in ways that most supported their priorities. While BP's ostensibly privileged, efficient, immediate communications and the federal response focused on financial compensation, neither elaborated on the long-term effects on health. Local communicators, Clark points out, were more adept at speaking to the slow crisis as it unfolded (e.g., local realtors) but slowly disappeared over time or, in the case of the local clinic, stopped communicating about the disaster altogether. Even guerilla media, once the primary channel for advocacy and activists to respond *in situ*, became exploited by BP.

In the concluding chapter, Clark summarizes the crisis communications efforts surrounding the DHD as the culmination of multiple "extremes of efficiency" (p. 123). An apparent feminist approach, for Clark, is asserting the inefficiency and "messy" process of communicating to humans whose health (as well as financial livelihood) is in distress. The "new efficiency" the author here argues for takes more effort through authentic questioning to address the duration of the slow crisis. Clark's argument—one that many technical communicators may struggle with—is that we might need to set aside pretences of objectivity, neutrality, and efficiency. To accomplish this, Clark concludes, feminist technical communicators must articulate sites where inefficiencies exist as intervention points in dominant, hegemonic, and self-serving systems.

Feminist Technical Communication is a work of scholarship that is dense in detail yet accessible to upper-level undergraduates as well as more established disciplinary scholars, especially those teaching risk and health communications. Although the DHD event occurred over 15 years ago, the disaster offers a clear case for Clark's argument that technical communicators should consider both long-term and immediate efficiencies. Any rhetorical studies curriculum or project will also benefit from Clark's research, further solidifying feminist technical communication.

Reference

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