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Queering Tactical Technical Communication: DIY HRT

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ABSTRACT

Given the barriers for transgender people to access affordable gender-transition care, online environments have witnessed a rise in user-generated instruction sets providing direction on the self-administration of hormone therapy. These ethical forms of tactical technical communication demonstrate the need to consider a new materialist approach to queer theory, which refuses to align queer agency with stable identities. Drawing directly from these user-generated instructions, this article articulates a theoretical framework for queer, tactical technical communication.

KEYWORDS

Health/medical communication; cultural studies; digital technologies; critical theory; gender research

Given the barriers for transgender people to access affordable and comfortable healthcare, especially for gender-transition care, many have sought means of self-administering hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (note to our readers: this article uses *trans* as an umbrella term to mean *transgender*, *transsexual*, *nonbinary* and other *gender expansive identities*). As a result, certain online environments (anonymized in this article to protect individual identities and the communities in which they operate) have witnessed a rise in user-generated, do-it-yourself (or DIY) instruction sets that provide direction on obtaining, administering, and monitoring HRT. From one perspective, these writing activities participate in “tactical technical communication” (Kimball, 2006) to potentially further the field’s interest in social justice. According to Kimball (2006), technical communication is tactical when everyday users appropriate “technology to increase their freedom of agency and their involvement in shared cultural narratives,” especially when institutional communication channels fail users and their communities (p. 68).

However, and from another perspective, the social precarity of many trans users who rely on DIY HRT manuals requires a supplementary framework to the field’s past (Ding, 2009; Rice, 2009; Seigel, 2013; Towner, 2013) and resurgent (Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017; Kimball, 2017) work on tactical technical communication. This exigence must take into consideration the subject of analysis and the concept of queer. In terms of subject matter, the broader field of technical and professional communication (TPC) has limited its research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) populations and issues to AIDS/HIV research and communication (Bowdon, 2004; Brouwer, 1998; Grabill, 2000), with few exceptions (discussed below) (Cox, 2018; Ouellette, 2014). Although AIDS/HIV research is a compelling and vital area within the field, other aspects of LGBTQ + identity or queered communication, such as the creation of DIY HRT manuals in online spaces, need to be investigated as subject matter.

Secondly, the field tends to understand LGBTQ+ communication practices through identity politics (discussed below) to form strategic but exclusive political alliances. We suggest that examining the tactical writing practices of trans individuals’ DIY HRT manuals can also benefit from engaging with an alternative understanding of *queer* grounded in the work of queer theory. Although the term *queer* – as a noun or adjective – was historically used to denigrate LGBTQ+ individuals, queer theorists reclaimed the term positively to disrupt dominant gender narratives (cisgendered and/or heterosexual) and celebrate practices of queering. However, rather than being a term that describes an identity (some individuals claim *queer* as their identity, for example, the Q in LGBTQ+),

more recent queer theorists (Barad, 2015) view queer as an ontological condition that is irreducible to a particular identity. Instead, *queerness* should preserve the singularity (i.e., ontological uniqueness) of a given trans communicator as she, he, or they create, distribute, and operationalize DIY medical instructions. In other words, we suggest that certain forms of tactical technical communication are “queered” not because people who identify as queer create or use them, but rather because these forms are noncentralized, participatory, democratic, on the margins, ludic, harm reductionist, resistant, and accessible to aid in supporting a wide range of queer spaces, bodies, and communicative practices.

In this article, we first offer an overview of the exigency for trans individuals to seek or compose extra-institutional forms of technical communication for HRT. Secondly, we offer a literature review of past and current work in the field on LGBTQ+ in terms of research topics covered and with a particular focus toward establishing the use and limitations of identity politics, including a necessary form of essentialism often grounded in gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities that tends to explicitly or implicitly exclude alternative forms of queerness. Thirdly, we offer an alternative approach to queer technical communication by turning to Barad’s (2015) new materialist philosophy. This approach is predicated upon viewing queerness as ontological and the practice of queer theory as an ethical endeavor. In brief, Barad, like other new materialists (Bennett, 2009; Coole & Frost, 2010), has explored queer (“aleatory” and “monstrous”) activities of nature beyond human control, such as a lightning strike, as an analogy for how queer is a condition of being in the world, irreducible to anything other than a singular state of identity – and, to be clear, such an approach in no way reduces the Other to an inhuman subject. Rather, it is predicated upon a reclamation of what *inhuman* means in its entirety. Finally, we use this theoretical approach to explore how a queer approach to technical communication—and tactical technical communication in particular—can highlight how trans individuals share DIY medical communication in social media spaces. By examining publicly available user-generated trans DIY HRT instructions and troubleshooting (forms of technical communication), we identify two major categories of tactical technical communication documents on DIY HRT forums: (1) primary source DIY tactical technical communication and (2) tactical referrals that point to secondary sources. We use this analysis to suggest answers to the following: the unique tactical technical communication that occurs in DIY HRT forums enables the beginnings of a theory of a queer technical communication, which we articulate in this article. Such a theory of queer technical communication enables scholars and practitioners alike to recognize spaces that house queer tactics while also avoiding the reduction of such tactics to identity politics.

Institutional and informational erasures: barriers to healthcare

Broadly speaking, trans experiences in and alongside medical institutions represent a critically important research area. In a statement aimed at medical researchers across multiple disciplines, Hughto, Rose, Pachankis, and Reisner (2017) tellingly commented in a summary of existing work in this area, “Future research would also benefit from examining the role of health literacy in access to transition-related care for transgender patient populations” (p. 115). In fact, access to proper healthcare is a critical concern for trans people and their families, reflecting ideological and material barriers (Bauer et al., 2009; Gehi & Arkles, 2007; Wong, 2012). These barriers prevent many from receiving adequate, timely, affordable, and compassionate care. Bauer et al. (2009) noted that healthcare for trans individuals is remarkable in its institutional and informational erasures, erasures that produce a system where a trans individual is “an anomaly” (p. 348), a disruption.

Even though some trans people are able to access and afford care, their negative experiences with the medical profession have a lengthy history. Exclusions are systemic within the medical profession: “Not a single medical school in the United States has a curriculum devoted to LGBT health issues, much less transgender health issues” (O’Hara, 2015). Generally, healthcare inequality for trans people falls along two lines: medical diagnosis – an issue “reflecting ideological concerns” – and delivery of care, especially with matters of gender transition:

Once transgender individuals have been diagnosed, they must find a medical professional who is willing and able to provide treatment. Considering the fact that transgender individuals tend to face outwardly hostile, aggressively invasive, and/or exclusionary healthcare settings, this step can significantly restrict accessibility. Finally, even after establishing eligibility and locating a provider, problems with delivery often persist because many transgender individuals cannot afford the costs of transition-related care. (Wong, 2012, p. 474)

Although more research needs to be done, past research points to this inequality as pervasive. A 2003–2010 study by Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco and Hoy-Ellis found LGBTQ+ Americans were less likely to be insured and more likely to experience barriers to care than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco, & Hoy-Ellis, 2013). That same year, Bradford, Reisner, Honnold, & Xavier, 2013) published a multiyear study from the Virginia Transgender Health Initiative that suggested “transgender Virginians experience widespread discrimination in health care, employment, and housing.” Bradford et al.’s (2013) summary of findings of other US-based LGBTQ + research paints a bleak picture of healthcare access in major US cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Note that many of these studies were conducted prior to the Affordable Care Act’s provision against discriminating against a person due to their sexuality or gender identity (“Accessing Coverage for Transition-Related Health Care,” n.d.). Nevertheless, trans people have a greater risk of unemployment than their cisgender counterparts, much higher than the national average (Bellis, 2017). So, though healthcare has improved, trans people still face significant barriers to accessing it. Given these barriers, it is not surprising how many trans people, especially those marginalized financially or otherwise, turn to DIY communities for health care, especially in the path to gender affirmation (Hughto et al., 2017).

Distinguishing queer and LGBTQ+ research in technical communication

Technical communication research has not always sought to examine trans experiences as a subject matter. In an article on advocacy and technical communication, Jones (2016) wrote, “unfortunately, the existence of scholarship that examines technical communication from an *LGBTQ perspective or a specifically queer* theoretical perspective is sparse. More is needed” (p. 356, emphasis added). To further these ends, we want to highlight the significance of Jones’s comment by distinguishing LGBTQ+ identity politics and the approach of queer theorists.

LGBTQ+ politics is distinct from queer theory, though the former is definitely influenced by the latter. Broadly speaking, LGBTQ+ identity politics is largely category-based politics invested in “traditional lesbian and gay activism” (Cohen, 1997). Identity politics presupposes that people are in part defined by their sexuality. For example, a man who is sexually attracted to other men is labeled gay and therefore occupies that identity. This type of politics, which arguably has been quite successful in the last couple decades, is invested in civil rights, inclusion, and demands that the dominant system of power recognize specific categories of identities. The progress of identity politics can be seen most often in pop culture, from chart-topping songs such as Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” to the approachable gay couples in the TV show *Modern Family* (and its historical precursor, *Will and Grace*), as well as the recent successes of the gay marriage movement.

Our goal is not to criticize but to distinguish identity politics from the goals of queer theory. To give a brief history of the development and divergence of queer theory as distinct from LGBTQ+ identity politics, the movement first known as the “homophile” movement and later as “gay liberation” was first marked by a move toward acceptance in straight society (Jagose, 1996), evolving after the Stonewall Riots to an understanding that society could “never be transformed by those invested in it” (p. 36). Trans women of color, drag queens, and radical feminists were influential in forming one of the foremost strategies of queer theory: the dismantling of fixed, essential identities (Jagose, 1996; Roberts, n.d.). As it developed over time, queer tended to be anti-assimilationist and committed to challenging any assumptions we have about sexuality, desire, companionship, and bodies. The trail of queer theorists who have challenged stable identity politics, even those politics invested in gay and lesbian experience, is long, including Ahmed (2006), Anzaldúa (1987), Foucault

(1990), Butler (1990), Berlant (2011), Warner (1993), and many others. Queer theory seeks to destabilize categories of sexual identity and challenge the very terms we use; queer is “transgressive” to any stable gender or sexuality politics (Wilchins, 2004). Within queer theory, even the categories of gay, lesbian, and bisexual are unstable (Cohen, 1997).

With this distinction in mind, we want to examine how these models play out in LGBTQ+ in TPC. In terms of traditional TPC genres, there are two articles that we might argue extend such concerns to LGBTQ+ communities. Grabill (2000) argues that professional communication sites are great for activist research. He uses as an example his work at an HIV/AIDS services organization in Atlanta, focusing on technical writers’ abilities to do institutional critique in such spaces. Similar to Grabill, Bowdon (2004) discusses her research in an HIV/AIDS prevention program and critiques common misconceptions about the gay male community as they relate to HIV/AIDS. Bowdon argues, that as technical communicators, we have the ability to produce texts with ethical implications. In a comment we mean in no way to be critical, these articles do not have an intention of interrogating what “gay” or “queer” mean in great detail, and one might even question if they are even taking part in LGBTQ+ politics. However, both are included in Cox and Faris (2015) *Annotated Bibliography of LGBTQ Rhetorics* likely because Grabill (2000) and Bowdon (2004) are advocating for institutional critique in case studies that include LGBTQ+ populations, from which a reader could infer an LGBTQ+ identity politics in these articles.

Beyond these two articles, there is more research that we might consider TPC, especially if we are open to broader definitions of what TPC means. Brouwer (1998) looked at individuals who are HIV positive but are asymptomatic and who mark their HIV status on their bodies with tattoos. He argues that this action is a kind of text that conveys technical information, information that rejects cultural expectations of shame over diagnosis and that challenges perceptions of health. More recently, Ouellette (2014) examined how gamers can use a type of constrained agency to give queer readings of video games, which then result in the production of other genres, such as fan fiction and DIY magazines. Scott (2014) examined the problematic history and arguments surrounding HIV testing in the United States – for example, the potential harm the public association of testing with gay lifestyles has had on LGBTQ+ communities. Similar to Grabill’s (2000) and Bowdon’s (2004) research, Scott’s work is informed by concern and advocacy for LGBTQ+ populations; however, Scott’s Foucauldian methodology is directly associated with queer theory in its explicit attempts to disrupt the narrative of stability surrounding scientific and popular views surrounding those communities. Finally, Frost (2016) explicitly refers to queer theory methodologies as a way to interrogate gender in technical communication.

At the time of this writing, we are aware of at least one scholar who is turning explicitly toward queer theory in TPC. Cox (2018) acknowledged that queer theory and rhetorics in professional communication “resist essentialization and defining.” “Queer rhetorics asks what are the unique approaches and strategies that queer, LGBT, and nonnormative individuals and communities have employed and are employing to make meaning within their communities and survive and advance in wider cultural and socio-political contexts” (p. 10). Our summary of TPC research potentially related to LGBTQ+ politics and/or queer theory is not to place any of their work in neat categories of “in” or “out.” However, we hope to demonstrate TPC researchers are engaging in LGBTQ+ politics and queer theory on various levels that do not simply reduce queerness to identity politics and, of course, a great deal more work remains to be done.

Queering tactical technical communication

To offer an alternative (and not a replacement) for identity politics in the context of trans DIY user manual creation and social media, we propose combining an older concept – tactical technical communication – with a newer cultural studies research framework – Barad’s (2015) discussion of queer via new materialist philosophy. To review, “tactics,” as defined by de Certeau (1984), stand in contrast to “strategies.” Strategies are authorized sets of instructions and

practices by institutions often in the service of defining, controlling, and policing how bodies speak, write, and interact in space. Although *control* has a negative connotation, it is critical to note that we all participate in negative and affirmative strategies in our daily lives from filling out census categories to district mapping to sanctioned voting protocols to bureaucracy in higher education and much more.

By contrast, tactics are individualized appropriations of strategies as implicit forms of resistance. Two related terms from de Certeau (1984) that can help us understand tactics are *bricolage*, making do with what's at hand, and *la perruque*, or borrowing official tools, such as a wood lathe from one's place of employment without permission, for personal, family, or political use. As Kimball (2006, 2017) notes, tactics are important for technical communicators because they reveal a shift from passive consumers (or readers/users) of technical documents to active user-producers in extra-institutional spaces, even for those who do not see themselves as technical communicators.

A number of researchers have taken up Kimball's (2006) work across a diverse number of conversations, including debates surrounding the SARS virus (Ding, 2009), folksonomies in new media (Rice, 2009), 19th-century womens' technical writing on bicycles (Hallenbeck, 2012), DIY and craft instructions (Van Ittersum, 2014), medical communication such as patient repurposing of expert or official health discourses (Fuller, 2013) or pregnancy manuals (Seigel, 2013), ethics of care in Anonymous' hacktivist manuals (Colton et al., 2017), psychiatric patients' navigation of strategic information (Holladay, 2017), participation in Reddit forums (Pflugfelder, 2017), resistance to institutional appropriation of user-generated content in the game sphere surrounding Mass Effect 3 (Reardon, Wright, & Malone, 2017), and, finally, how the ethics of Jihadists use tactics to enable bomb-making (Sarat-St, 2017).

Theorizing a queer approach to tactical technical communication requires an explicit discussion of the ethics of tactical action. Ideally, tactics are ethical forms of resistance to inegalitarian strategies of control. Ding (2009) observes that de Certeau hopes tactics will function as an "art of the weak" (p. 39) wherein tactics "vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of" dominant power structures (p. 37). However, tactics do not have to be progressive or leftist, demonstrated by Sarat-St's (2017) discussion of Jihadists' use of tactics to enable bombing in support of unethical political aims – by some accounts – such as maintaining an oppressive patriarchal religious order.

For this reason, Colton et al. (2017) highlighted the need to supplement de Certeau's (1984) thinking by drawing on a specific ethical framework, such as their use of Cavarero's (2011) ethics of care, which enables researchers to identify tactics in terms of caring and wounding.

In other words, discussions of tactical technical communication require the use of supplementary ethical frameworks to identify whether a given tactic is ethical or unethical or somewhere in between. In no small coincidence, we believe that queer theory can be thought of as an ethical practice committed to the perpetual destabilization of identity norms through critique, performativity, and play. The articulation of this prior and more expansive foundation is arguably the primary work of a great deal of queer theory. In the ethics of queer theory, all individuals – self-identified as queer or not – are singular. As a result, queer theory works at once to argue that there are no inherent reasons to exclude any trans individual from a legal category. However, queer theory does not typically want to endorse a specific and/or fixed definition of trans. For example, not all trans persons desire gender transition surgery. Therefore, *trans* is a term that cannot be defined as a universal identity category. In de Certeau's (1984) terms, even when more inclusive forms of queer identity are established, these forms invariably become – in effect – strategies that may end up excluding a wider range of sexual practices and differently sexualized bodies.

By comparison, consider the user description of the hybrid DIY HRT manual *Mascara and Hope* (2013), a document we discuss in depth below. *Mascara and Hope* can be found in online trans forums and offers advice and instructions for HRT transitions outside of institutional spaces for trans women in the United Kingdom. In a style, content, tone, and purpose a trans patient would never encounter in any institutional manual, the author stated:

What's that? Not all trans people need medical transition and how dare we implicitly support the binary of 'true, medicalised primary transsexuals' and pretenders, how very dare we?! We know, truly we do. Hush your buns, little snowflake. We're writing this hackery for those who do need medical transition, because medical transition is what the official barriers are blocking ... if all you need is a haircut and some good books to calm your dysphoria, get on with it (and acknowledge your privilege). (p. 2)

In other words, this manual explicitly acknowledges that queer is not synonymous with trans individuals undergoing HRT alone. It signals an implicit awareness that queer as an ethical practice should not advocate a particular fixed identity that all queer individuals should fit into.

Similarly, medical procedural manuals often presuppose some sort of universal user and are aimed at instrumental ends. Institutional medical manuals are not typically designed to be sensitive to the complex cultural and political milieus in which patients find themselves. By comparison, *Mascara and Hope* (2013) is ethical in a queer sense because it acknowledges the complexity of queer vis-à-vis transitioning. As an ethical activity, it strives to enable queer beings (in an ontological sense) to remain singular, adaptive, and changeable, to avoid being reduced to any one particular identity even if that particularity could be used to achieve strategic political ends or institutional goals.

To further establish such a framework in the context of trans DIY tactical technical communications practices, we turn to Barad's (2015) queer new materialist thought. Although names such as Butler (1990), Warner (1993), and Sedgwick (2015) are more recognizable scholars of the queer canon, Barad's (2015) more recent work on queer new materialism is particularly apt for identifying how queer tactical technical communication functions in online forums. Although its various articulations differ, a common thesis in many new materialist accounts lies in a commitment to destabilizing human agency. Although technical communicators have encountered challenges to humanistic agency in the past through ideas such as "post-techne" (Hawk, 2004) or "speculative usability" (Rivers & Söderlund, 2016), new materialism claims that previous challenges to the human agent ignore the agencies of nonhuman actors. In other words, poststructuralist or postmodernist challenges still reinscribe a nature/culture dichotomy.

By contrast, new materialists like Barad feature the unpredictable agency of nature or technological/material actors in large networks or assemblages as a way to remind the human that existence is constituted through our entanglement with the unpredictable agencies of other animals, plants, rocks, and technologies. As Bennett (2009) puts it in one popular articulation: "Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (p. xvi). Working from theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari and Latour, Bennett situates agency as an emergent property of a "human-nonhuman" working group.

Barad's (2015) work overlaps with science and technology studies scholarship (Latour, 1993, 1988, 1999) as well as rhetoric's (Lynch & Rivers, 2015; Rickert, 2013) and technical communication's (Graham & Herndl, 2013; Rivers & Söderlund, 2016; Spinuzzi, 2008; Teston, 2017) interest in the nonhuman and posthuman (Richards & Moore, 2018), agency (and to be clear, actor-network theory and new materialism are by no means identical positions). Barad's (2015) unique approach focuses on quantum entanglements as an analogy for defining "queer," arguing that new materialism shares a strong point of overlap with queer theory's interest in the singularity of queer individuals and practices.

Given the liminal or marginalized status of queer bodies, a good deal of queer theory has unsurprisingly found critical salience and empathetic solidarity with cultural representations or practices that are considered inhuman or monstrous. For example, Barad (2015) draws a comparison between such figurations of queer and lightning's (i.e., "nature's") untapped and uncontrollable energy, wherein matter continues to seek out every "un/imaginable path, every im/possibility" as a form of nonhuman/inhuman intentionality. If queer cannot actually take a (relatively) stable or essentialized form like homosexual or lesbian, then "Like lightning, [queer imaginings] entail a process involving electrical potential buildup across buildups and flows of charged particles: neurons transmitting electrochemical signals across syntactic gaps and through ion channels that spark awareness in our brains" (p. 387). Such a comparison is not merely an

analogy. Rather, electricity connects disparate human and nonhuman queer actors: virtual particles, queer touching, monstrous re/generations, frogs, Frankenstein, and queer self-birthing (Barad, 2015, p. 388). The emphasis on electrical potential is important to describe the type of users for online trans communities who circulate manuals such as *Mascara and Hope*. Not all trans users will wish to undergo HRT processes, but some will. Thus, the particular version of queer supported by manuals that do, in fact, target a particular group will often try to signal their ethical commitment to keeping the space of potentiality for trans bodies open.

To extend this line of thinking, Barad (2015) contemplates the monstrous figure of Frankenstein who is animated to life by electricity. The reason that electricity – itself a synecdoche for nature’s aleatory character – is an apt comparison for queer is because of its dual nature. A lightning strike can certainly take life. However, in the case of Frankenstein or heart attack sufferers, electricity can also stimulate life through charges from an emergency medical technician’s paddle. To be trans and queer is often to exist in this dual space of potentiality, a point Barad (2015) highlights by examining an older but highly relevant audio performance piece by the artist Stryker, (2006) on monstrosity, transgender, and Frankenstein. In her essay, Barad quotes Stryker at length:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. Like [Frankenstein’s] monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker, as cited in Barad, 2015, p. 392)

Stryker goes on to define the affinity of transsexual bodies:

I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. (Stryker, as cited in Barad, 2015, p. 392)

Stryker’s work establishes a clear link between figurations of nonhuman and inhuman and the aleatory untapped agencies of nature (i.e., lightening). Before it strikes or emerges in the world, Barad (2015) argues, “Materiality in its entangled psychic and physical manifestations is always already a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts,” with the “anarchic womb” in Stryker’s exhibit serving as a generative space for non-heterosexual birthing (p. 393). For example, and in an existential sense, some trans bodies undergo the emotional pain of lack of fulfillment. The process of gender transitioning has considerable cultural and political obstacles. Even worse, this process may not result in the ideal type of body desired or imagined. Under a category called “Things to Know” in *Mascara and Hope* (2013), consider the advice, “No epiphany. Like hormones, the body changes come in time. Until it’s healed in 8–10 weeks, you’ll have a wound, not a vagina. You’re not quite at the end of your journey” (p. 29). Other advice cautions trans women users to avoid (2013, p. 29) rushing out to fill their wardrobes during the first 6 months of transition and instead to wait until their transitioning bodies emerge as a more stable configuration.

In turn, a transgender anger emerges from this kinetic space which becomes, in turn, a space of re-birth of queering. Barad (2015) writes, “this radically queer configuring of spacetime mattering constitutes an uncanny topological dynamic that arrests straight tales of birthing and kinship, and gives birth to new modes of generativity, including but not limited to the generativity of a self-birthing womb” (p. 393). In turn, this queering process has entanglement with the aleatory properties of matter, such as the Genesis story in the Bible of the emergence of the earth from the chaos of the voice (of God). Electricity (a spark) emerges self-birthing out of a “raging” nothingness. In this regard, queer origins are always already originary birthings cum re-birthings, as Barad argues: “an originary repetition without sameness,” which, in a nutshell, is precisely what queer theory hopes to enact as an ethical practice (p. 393).

In summary, we take from Barad’s (2015) new materialist approach that nature’s agency in new materialist thought is always already queer, and it is within this ontological understanding where we

see some of the limitations of identity politics as a model for assessing the technical communication practices of trans DIY HRT patients. Furthermore, new materialist thinking can serve as an ethical supplement to tactical technical communication insofar as we can absolutely establish whether a given tactical action is offered in support of this ethical vision of queer.

Case study: tactical technical communication in an online forum for DIY HRT

We have established that tactics are not inherently progressive in a political sense or even leftist, even though de Certeau (1984) is optimistic that everyday resistance may translate to resistance to oppressive political regimes. Thus, we believe a queer new materialist approach offers precisely an ethic to alert ourselves not just to any tactics but the openings and slender intervals through which cultural practices emerge tactically as “queer” forms of resistance. In other words, queer theory helps technical communicators to identify the spaces in which tactical queer actions occur and to implement frameworks that resist reducing queer tactics to identity politics. This shift may also mean that all queer actions are tactical, even if they are not specifically about sexual identity.

Like the aleatory behavior of lightning, queer refuses to normalize into stable processes of repetition – or strategies of control – for all trans bodies, as they exist on a continuum of existence and enactment. Instead of looking for spaces all the time (or looking for ways to create them, and not that these goals are not desirable for technical communicators interested in social justice), perhaps the lesson of queer new materialism is that these spaces are always already unfolding around us all the time if we begin recognizing different ways they emerge.

A new materialist focus on technological agency can also add new dimensions to previous work in online writing, including Loudon’s (2014) study of how Redditors resisted the Stop Online Piracy Act. More recently, Pflugfelder (2017) has already explored tactical technical communication in Reddit in the ELI5 subreddit, focusing specifically on how the genre of informal technical description has enjoyed a resurgence. In the case of the DIY forums, trans people who seek gender transition outside of medical institutional strategies similarly “identify, rearrange, circulate, abstract, and broker” medical information (Pflugfelder, 2017, p. 255). To better understand how trans individuals have used these tactics to gain access to affordable, effective, and compassionate medical care through this new materialist-informed queer theory lens, we turn to publicly available user-generated transgender DIY HRT instructions and troubleshooting. These publicly available artifacts provide instructions or information on how to procure, self-administer, or monitor hormones with the aim of transitioning. In looking at these posts, we excluded from our examination any posts hidden behind a login or paywall or otherwise not public.

Although these forums are public, it is important for researchers to be cautious about how we study and represent them. A recent article in a news magazine about a similar forum – both anonymized here to further distance user identities – explicitly mentioned one such forum. Users expressed dismay at how they were represented and feared the article would bring unwanted attention and threaten their ability to access necessary medication. Scholars interested in these practices should not compound damage for an already marginalized group of people who often have to resort to noninstitutional mechanisms to become who they desire to be. Knowing this fact, research on these forums must be as careful and respectful as possible, as any threat to the forum could be a threat to their access, and, in a very real sense, an existential threat to their mental and physical well-being.

Many types of tactical technical communication documents can be found in public online communities in service of DIY medical transition, including Mascara and Hope (2013). Our goal in this section is to demonstrate, as per Barad’s (2015) lightning metaphor, the “kinetic” (see also Miller, 2007) potential of queer tactical technical communication in this space and, in particular, to gesture toward how emergent agencies function to support even the more instrumental of tactical aims in these spaces, as well as the types of technical documents that are shared in this online community. These forums displayed two major categories of tactical technical communication documents (each with subcategories) on the DIY HRT forums: (1) primary user-created sources

of DIY tactical technical communication and (2) secondary sources, or tactical referrals to professional medical documentation:

1. DIY Tactical Technical Communication (primary)

User-written posts providing medical information or instructions

Links or attachments to user-produced manuals on transgender health management

2. Tactical Referrals (secondary)

Links or attachments to professional transgender medical documents

Links or attachments to professional non-transgender but applicable medical documents

The first category, DIY Tactical Technical Communication, is the exact articulation of some of Kimball's (2006) pioneering work in this regard. In this category, we find instances of informal medical reports by a user, such as "TESTERONE [sic] 1.77 nmol/L 17-BETA OESTRADIOL 175 pmol/L," followed by a request to other users for advice on how to adjust estrofem and Cyproterone Acetate dosages moving forward. Other DIY documents in this category include responses to self-identified new users' inquiries about where to begin and questions about converting dosage units. In effect, documents in this category function as appropriations of medical style. Users who posted lengthier manuals with information about the beginning, middle, and end of transitioning invariably prefaced their work with disclaimers such as, "NOTE I'm not a doctor ... I take NO responsibly [sic] for any bad effects caused, and remind you that HRT, and your body/health are NOT playthings! Be careful!" At the same time, these manuals contain hybrid elements that blend formal and informal (DIY) tones and styles. This queer hybridity is an example of rejecting fixity or even expertise and calls attention to the clearly tactical nature of their information. *Mascara and Hope* (2013) fits into this category as well. In particular, the beginning of the instruction document hails a particular set of users (UK trans women) who seek to transition outside of institutional strategies. As a case in point, it offers a bulleted list of qualities such as, "Confused by or pissed off at the current provision of services" to help a user determine if this guide is appropriate for his, her, or their relative medical needs (*Mascara and Hope*, 2013, p. 3).

These DIY HRT manuals are tactical not only because they helped their users overcome strategies of control across different medical, legal, and insurance institutions, but also due to the hybrid nature of sources that writers drew upon to create their instructions. A different DIY HRT manual, which can be found in numerous online forums, relies upon Wikipedia descriptions of chemicals such as Spironolactone (Aldactone). However, this manual is interspersed with anecdotal observations about DIY HRT that are not copied word-for-word, such as, "It's [sic] side effects include headaches, vomiting, and occasionally leg cramps and liver problems. These, however, happen very rarely. DO NOT TAKE THIS IF YOU HAVE ANY FAMILY HISTORY OF DEEPVEIN THROMBOSIS!! It can make it worse!" Also, unlike a formal medical manual, this creator of tactical content offers not only her, his, or their own ethos and experience, but also an ongoing update of other individuals' experiences in transitioning, "However, I will post people's experiences soon. Stay tuned!!"

These procedural documents function tactically on their own, but they also seek to enable tactical actions of others against medical and governmental institution strategies, enacting queerness in their resistance to normalizing medical strategies. In *Mascara and Hope* (2013), we find instructions such as, "Lower your expectations (even more)," "Ignore bullshit questions. Ask why they are relevant," "Don't mention 'red flags'," "Go to your sister if you really have problems which need sorting," and "Don't give them reasons to delay you. It's shitty. We know it's shitty. We're almost sorry."

The empathetic use of idioms such as "red flag" and slang-filled gestures are aimed at helping individuals negotiate the officially sanctioned medical procedures. They humanize the communicator and the user, in a sense. Also notable is the tactical resistance against medical institutional strategies: ignoring a doctor's "bull shit questions" and turning to a sister trans woman for questions rather than a medical professional. We mentioned previously that *Mascara and Hope* (2013) performs queerness in a Baradian sense despite the fact that trans women in the UK are its primary audience. It acknowledges

not all of its users need to medically transition or should even seek to. Even though a definition of a particular audience (trans women in the UK) is the actual intended user, the manual still supports a sense of queer by refusing to essentialize either its users or, more importantly, other trans individuals who do not seek to enact the procedures that *Mascara and Hope* (2013) offers.

The second category, Tactical Referrals, does not fit as neatly under Kimball's (2006) definition of *tactical technical communication*, as it does not comprise DIY user-created manuals; instead, tactical referrals point users to actual institutional medical procedural documents. However, these referrals function in ways distinct from sanctioned referral protocols in several important ways. Several links point toward unaltered medical procedures designed for trans patients, such as Sherborne Health Clinic's manual for *Guidelines and Protocols for Hormone Therapy and Primary Care for Trans Patients* (Bournes, 2015). We include referrals because it is important to acknowledge not all queer tactical technical communication practices in this space are user-generated or uniform. In this instance, a user recontextualized or repurposed institutional medical literacies to an online space because the Sherborne Health Clinic's type of instruction set would be available to nurses, doctors, or patients if they were transitioning in these institutional medical spaces. However, the mere fact that it has been recontextualized for an online DIY HRT community acknowledges not all trans patients will have this institutional option.

By contrast, other tactical activities appropriated nontransgender medical materials for trans health care. We found evidence of users posting composite texts of medical documentation from institutional sources that were not directly aimed at trans individuals as we saw in the Sherborne Health Clinic's manual. For example, an online writer named Eve appropriated a manual from an athletic treatment program to create her own DIY manual. In another instance, a user posted a video demonstration of self-injecting insulin as a demonstration for self-injecting hormones. In either text, it is important to note tactical technical communication does involve not just the creation of DIY technical documents but also the process of learning how to share institutional information differently to support queer tactical actions.

One necessary feature of using a new materialist approach to queering tactical technical communication lies in an emphasis on how human agency is entangled with nonhuman agency. First, the online nature of DIY medial manuals like *Mascara and Hope* (2013) means reader comments and edits function as palimpsests to the original text, which itself is already stitched together – like Frankenstein's monster – from various official, anecdotal, and informal sources. One of Barad's (2003, 2015) terms, "agential realism," is useful to reinforce this point. Insofar as human creative agency (such as that of the authors who compile DIY HRT guides online) uses technologies of production and circulation, agential realism describes how new and unpredictable forms of interactivity occur as an emergent product of these actions, as well as how technologies also shape and generate these activities in the first place. For any manual posted, it is impossible to call them "finished" or "static" artifacts since online readers helpfully offered a number of expansions and clarifications.

The mere occurrence of user responses is not in itself indicative of a methodological lens of agential realism (i.e., Barad's (2003, 2015) new materialist approach). However, consider what it means to call online responses a "material" activity. It means that researchers do not just focus on an external medium or representation or signifying structure, but on examining the entire concrete physiological apparatus. That is, researchers have to see the artifacts that we analyze beyond representation. Thus, user-generated revisions to online DIY HRT manuals are not preexisting or distinct entities through which an instrumental human user posts a query through a neutral or passive technology. Instead, user, computer, network, self, and post emerge through an entangled assemblage. There is no author, text, and reader that exist as distinct preexisting entities who then interact with one another once a manual is posted to an online community. Rather, agential realism describes how online tactical technical communication forms are always already enacted and performed through material-technological-discursive entanglements. The way that *Mascara and*

Hope is written, for example, reflects its orientation toward a network. Consider its request to its readers:

The latest issue is available as a pdf on the website where you can also help us by pointing out spelling mistakes and general errors. If you can draw or write a new hack please send us your fine works. We would also welcome contributions which would translate this zine into a format which would be helpful for trans men. (Mascara and Hope, 2013, p. 38)

Just as queer individuals are never found fully formed in the world, no technical writer – tactical or otherwise – is ever a priori separated from their means of communication. What we perceive as a separate use of technology or as a bounded post in an online community is never a natural series of separations, but rather emergent products of a complex enactment, or what Barad (2007) calls “phenomena” (“the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting agencies,” p. 139). It is more useful to think about different conversation threads about medical literacies as what Barad (2007) calls “agential cuts,” which are not a product of any one individual or technology, such as the template which enables a user to post or reply. Rather, these acts are better thought of as “boundary-drawing practices” (p. 140) that make a channeling cut. This means a new materialist framework helps to explain how the technologies that enable DIY tactical technical communication subsequently enable and constrain users’ communicative efforts.

The act of boundary drawing can be quite basic manifestations of queer tactical technical communication. Users are able to make popular posts more prominent within this particular online forum as well as in other online forums that feature them, which helps certain manuals become more popular than others. Over time, for example, *Mascara and Hope* (2013) became so popular that a second updated edition is in the process of being created in response to its unexpected popularity among online users. Yet, it is important to note such an occurrence is not designed to merely register the presence of “algorithmic actors” such as “templates” (Gallagher, 2015; Gallagher & Holmes, 2019), which play a structuring role in enabling tactical actions. In addition, agencies of individual contributors in these spaces emerge not as a group, but as part of the network of relations overlapping and divergent, institutional and extra-institutional contributors that work in queer ways. Users seeking to assert their singularity to transition in a particular way can find or inquire (safely) about information to support their particular institutional or extra-institutional needs. As *Mascara and Hope* (2013) suggests, there is not any singular purpose for this community and, indeed, many users take on an ethical stance of the tactical actor: DIY manuals are not for everyone, but they are written in a way that anyone who wishes to tap their queer kinetic potential in a certain way will find a hospitable and accessible form of literacy to enable them to get to where they want to go.

Conclusion

Our analysis confirms queer is not just a theory but an actualized state of existence for many individuals who exist beyond narrow binaries. Importantly, queer also characterizes the types of kinetic and potential practices that they enact and perform alongside the tactical technical genres that support their efforts. We want to close this article by affirming again Jones’s (2016) distinction between LGBTQ+ and queer. This distinction is one that needs to emerge as an important part of technical communicators’ turn to social justice, as well as an operationalized research method to guide the analysis of any form of technical communication – tactical or strategic.

A queer new materialist approach to tactical technical communication means realizing a critically important claim: it means that researchers should understand that what makes DIYing one’s gender transition and tactics “queer” is that these practices work outside of institutions precisely because institutions are necessarily invested in the heteronormative project (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 552–553). To be clear, this institutional investment is not an abstract idea alone but instead constitutes actual barriers that make it legally or psychologically difficult and (potentially) damaging to someone transitioning. Institutions are invested in heteropatriarchy and do not want individuals

to change their gender “on a whim” or (worse) exist in the slender intervals between genders. Thus, as a new materialist lens shows, positing queer as an ontological state is itself an act of resistance to the heterosexual project. Documentation around DIY HRT is one example of a specifically ethical approach to tactical technical communication that participates in that resistance by identifying actual and kinetic potential spaces of community and support for marginalized trans bodies.

This last point is important in avoiding any ambiguity in allowing technical communicators to think that queer – in the end – is solely about identity. For example, we suspect that many technical communicators might again be tempted to conclude that constructing DIY HRT manuals is inherently queer because queer individuals create them and use them. As we noted above, such an approach would once more reduce queer to identity politics. Furthermore, and perhaps controversially, such a realization means that gender transition does not have to be inherently queer. As a case in point, consider the example of trans “celebrity spokesperson” Caitlyn Jenner, whose wealth and athletic fame by some accounts (Hutchinson, 2017; Michelson, 2017) continue to support the heterosexual project. To be queer, instead, is to embody Berlant and Warner (1998) discussion of “queer world making”: “The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies, or, ‘tactics’ by another description” (p. 558). Thus, trans individuals might support conservative politics adamantly opposed to queer and, in turn, it is also possible for nontransgender individuals who identify as heterosexual to participate in tactical technical communication activities that work out of a presupposition of queer. To sum up, such complexities are precisely why we suggest that queering tactical technical communication can benefit from more radically imagining what queer means in the first place and, especially, beyond any straightforward alignment with identity politics and tactical activity.

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