

TECHNIQUES

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Topics in Technical Communication

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Twitter and the Technical Communicator

by Reana Robbins

Okay, I'll admit it. Up until three days ago, I didn't have a Twitter account, nor was I a Tweeples (or I didn't have Tweeples ...is that even right?). At least, I wasn't one until I started writing this article. For the sake of academia though, I thought I might venture into the world of Tweets, which up until this point I thought of just another time sucker; another way to tell people that I was thinking about buying new shoes, or that I was super enjoying my fried pickles at SmashBurger. I really wanted to know if Twitter held any professional benefits, especially for Technical Communicators.

At the beginning of my journey, I thought I could self-discover Twitter by browsing through its pages, help, and past Tweets to learn about it on my own. Bad idea. I was totally lost. As a very computer literate person, that is very tough to admit. I couldn't navigate my way through the tweets from @charliesheen, #haikus, and some girl wanting to hang out at DIA.

So, I contacted my friend Michelle Ufford to get some information about Twitter. Michelle is a big time SQL database administrator, and, as it turns out, quite the Twitter-er (Tweeter?). She has a few thousand followers (whoa!) and tweets multiple times each day. She talked about how she uses Twitter

to reach out to fellow professionals in her field to solve problems at her work. This really amazed me, and I thought this was exactly the kind of thing I was looking for. Through Twitter she gets connected directly to Microsoft product developers; she says that Twitter is one of her first resources she goes to when she is struggling with Microsoft server products. "When I have questions about how something works or what something is doing 'under the covers,' Twitter is one of the first places I turn," she says. Michelle also tries to help others with her expertise in SQL and programming; people will ask her for advice and for her expertise on their own problems and she gives it freely – all via Twitter. With this knowledge in hand, I asked myself, "How can Twitter help a Technical Communicator"? I began with a search for "Technical Writer". To my happy surprise, I got some results! Mostly the results were people who are technical writers (yay! I know too few of those!), or technical writing jobs, but I was encouraged. My next search was for "Technical Communication." The results were amazing. I found @bhanjar with a post to an article about the future of technical communication careers. I find @stc_org, you got it, the Society of Technical Communication! While not a member (yet) – I am excited that I might be able to peek into the organization via their tweets. Through @stc_org I found other technical communicators, all tweeting about technical communication. I admit, I was totally wowed.

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I can reach out and hear what others like me have to say; @ihearttechdocs has a link to his blog with an article “How Tai Chi Can Make You a Better Technical Writer” (I think I’m in love). I found out from @WvdMoolen that Framemaker 10 has a direct connection to SharePoint (I’ll definitely be checking that out!). My favorite find though, was @TC_Chat, a weekly online Twitter discussion specifically for technical communication. I looked through past chats and found discussions on using video in documentation, writing procedures, and even a reach out to technical communication students. Julie Norris, via the @TC_Chat blog, says this to students about Twitter, “[For] Seniors in particular, [using Twitter] might be a good way to start building a professional presence for yourself.” Michelle echoes this statement as well, saying that the best thing about Twitter is “the amount of great folks I have access

to, and the glimpses into the minds of some really amazing people.” I couldn’t help but be excited. Here is the easy networking I had always dreamed the internet should be able to provide.

As with anything though, especially technology, there are some drawbacks. Michelle says the thing she hates the most is what makes Twitter so awesome; it’s public. “Because I use Twitter for work, I often feel like I’m unable to really ‘be myself’ on Twitter. Whatever you put out there is visible to anyone, for all time. So I have a fine line to walk, since I try to appear personable but also remain professional at the same time”. I asked her about maintaining more than one account to represent a person’s various persona. She said, “That’s tricky. Because everything on Twitter is public, unless you are very careful, it is not difficult to search and find someone’s Twitter alter egos. Especially if you are complaining or

talking about work.” There have been many stories about someone who got fired for posting something on the internet about how much they hates their boss, job, co-workers, customers, etc., - does Twitter exacerbate that problem? Is it really a problem, or is there finally a place on the internet where we’ve lost a little of that anonymity and you actually have to watch what you say?

So Twitter is more than just another social networking outlet, and it can be immensely useful for technical communication professionals. In my experience, there are relatively few of us that love procedural documentation and discussing the finer points of Adobe RoboHelp. Any tool that allows us to connect with each other is, in my book, pure gold.

I’ve made my account, and now it’s time to make my first post. Will I blunder and live on in Twitter infamy? Will anyone actually notice? §

Communicating Across Cultures

by Anna Marciniak-Erickson

With technology expanding and in turn considerably diminishing the physical barriers between countries, the logistics of global communication have never been more important. Working as a proofreader at KJ International Resources, a translation company based in Minneapolis, MN, I am subjected to the issues that can arise when communicating with translators from different cultures. Communicating respectfully and effectively with the translator is necessary both to ensure ease of workflow and to ensure that the working relationship between both parties is one based on mutual

respect.

It is paramount that one be aware that communication styles are not necessarily similar across cultures, despite fluency in the English language. On numerous occasions I have witnessed firsthand honest opinions from translators pertaining to how brash Americans can tend to be in their method of communication. This feedback is clear evidence that, although most Americans communicate with each other in a direct and open manner, it can be construed as rude and uncalled for in communication with translators in different countries. Thus, the question is begged, what can we do about this? Obviously, in my work environment, we communicate with

people from so many different cultures it seems almost impossible to narrow down each culture’s particular characteristics in terms of communication. If one is tasked with communicating globally within a certain culture, I feel that much can be gained by researching these particularities before correspondence, if at all possible. It would of course be ideal if a global method of communication could be reached that would neither offend nor confuse any participants, but such a method hardly seems reasonable. Despite this, there are still some things you can keep in mind when communicating on an international level that can help facilitate clear communication.

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After speaking with the Vendor Manager at KJ International (who manages the corporate relations between the company and the contracted translators) about her thoughts on the topic of international communication, she felt that the most important thing to remember when communicating with persons who are not native English speakers is that no slang or casual language should be used. She stressed that a lot of the time we tend to have a US-centric sort of perspective when it comes to global communication, and that this leads to confusion and further blurs the line of communication. When communicating with someone from a different culture it is important to remember to be conscious of etiquette, and to communicate in a formal fashion, as casual communication can a lot of times be misunderstood. Most importantly it is essential to never under any circumstances assume that what you have related has been understood correctly. It is important to follow up to ensure that what was heard by the end listener was what was intended to be relayed, as not all cultural terms and idioms are interpreted correctly.

One of the problems often encountered in the translation industry is that the document intended for translation includes a lot of acronyms and/or abbreviations that are language specific, and do not translate into the target language. In addition to this, a lot of medical and software documents tend to include a surprising amount of US-centric language in that it may not be considered slang but still does not have common, corresponding word in the target language. Because of this a lot of problems can be encountered in a document that is not considered

“translation-ready.”

There are a lot of different ways that language can be misinterpreted across cultures using almost any medium, technologically facilitated and otherwise. Because of this, and because of the increasingly broad lines of communication that have presented themselves with the rise of technology, it is important that companies and/or individuals are aware of the communication issues that can arise when communicating globally. This is especially true as technology continues to infiltrate our daily lives and facilitate easy communication between countries and continents that was previously unheard of. What is considered polite in America can commonly be misconstrued across borders, and this is true for any other person in any other country that is communicating on an international level. Perhaps in time there will become a broader awareness of this across industries and professions; however, it is especially important that the technical communicator be aware of this as a lot of the time, depending on one's profession within the field of technical communication, it is their responsibility to ensure that the message they are sending is being received as intended both within and beyond their native culture. §

The Evolution of Technical Communication in China

by Melanie Cashin

Nearly everyone has encountered confusing or downright amusing instructions accompanying products made in China. Entire websites are devoted to documenting translations gone wrong and include samples like the following: “...the hand is pinch in the use to the not absolutely acceleration, and auspiciously sees shell aspect pattern” (English.com). This excerpt appears on the box of a manually powered flashlight.

Yes, incoherent translations are often good for a laugh—or a groan, depending on your disposition—but, as technical communicators, we are acutely aware of potential problems stemming from unusable documentation. As ties between the U.S. and China strengthen, and China continues to excel in the global marketplace, there is no doubt that we will be buying from, working with, and reading documentation produced by the Chinese for many years to come. So what's a technical communicator to do?

Well, there's good news: the future looks promising. Technical communication as a field, along with its goal of user-friendly documentation, is finally gaining recognition in China, and educators have recently begun to incorporate technical communication into university curricula. However, this does not mean that Chinese technical writers have completely adopted Western methods of documentation.

To understand the differences between technical communication in China and the U.S., we must first examine

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Twitter, the press and the NBA

by Gregg Aamot

Social media tools are increasingly becoming an integral part of the daily work of news reporters. Facebook accounts, blogs and, perhaps most significantly, the quick-texting phenomenon Twitter are all being used to help journalists do their jobs.

Twitter is used by reporters of all stripes in several ways: to promote stories, to provide updates from breaking news locations and to offer links to articles and videos related to the reporter's beat.

A recent incident involving The Associated Press and one of its reporters, however, shows how such new tools of the trade are stretching the bounds of traditional journalism. (Full disclosure: I once worked for the AP alongside the reporter in question).

An NBA referee has sued the AP and reporter Jon Krawczynski for defamation over a Twitter post Krawczynski sent during a Jan. 24 game between the Timberwolves and the Rockets.

The reporter's tweet came after Timberwolves' coach Kurt Rambis complained to the referee, Bill Spooner, about a foul call and asked him how his team was supposed to get back the points it gave up because of the foul, according to the lawsuit.

Krawczynski, sitting courtside to cover the game, then posted the following tweet to his Twitter followers: "Ref Bill Spooner told Rambis he'd 'get it back' after a bad call. Then he made an even worse call on Rockets. That's NBA officiating folks."

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the history of technical communication in China. Once we understand how technical communication developed in China, we will better understand how and why the practices that we follow in the U.S. do not always work for our Chinese counterparts. This information will better prepare us for our inevitable work in cross-cultural contexts, especially those involving the Chinese.

A Brief History

Technical communication in China can be traced back to the Yi Jing, a 3,000-year-old document that provided "context-oriented remedies" for daily life on such topics as animal husbandry and military expeditions (Ding 2003, 329). However, for thousands of years, the majority of technical information in China was conveyed orally. Only recently has the increased wealth of many Chinese and the increased availability of new products created a demand for technical documentation (St. Amant 2001).

As demand increased in the 1980s and 1990s, technical communication courses began to appear in universities, though the practice, teaching, and research in the field was scattered at best (Chengzhao 1994). The next step was to determine the role and importance of technical communication in China. Students studying science and engineering often took a technical writing course in Chinese (Chengzhao 1994). Student studying English received instruction in technical vocabulary and translation. Even today, research indicates that those who practice technical communication rarely have formal education in the field (Cen and Zhang 2004) and the education that Chinese students do

receive continues to focus on vocabulary and translation (Ding 2010).

Common differences between U.S. and Chinese documentation

Research has repeatedly shown that Chinese technical writers tend to emphasize the context in which a task will be completed rather than how to complete it. For example, the Yi Jing explains that, "a war must have a righteous ending," though it provides no specific instructions for waging or winning a war (Ding 2003, 326). Similarly, while American manuals provide task-oriented visuals and language, Chinese manuals typically use visuals to display the item in its environment, and Chinese manuals provide such steps as, "4. To install outgoing hot water line: The hot-water outlet is a G/2 threaded line" (Ding 2003, 335). This information, while valuable, fails to lead a reader through the actual installation process.

Most Chinese technical manuals better serve the product engineers or service providers because the manuals include complex technical data or describe the ideal scenario for use or installation. This is likely the result of several factors. First, the product engineers sometimes write the documentation, as technical communication remains an emergent profession in China. Second, the authors may not conduct audience and purpose analysis prior to creating the documentation. Third, Chinese culture, which "encourages a more contextual thinking style" (Ding 2003, 341), influences the writing of technical documents.

One final difference is simply a matter of language. Most technical communicators in the U.S. write in their

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native language, while many technical communicators in China write in or translate documents into a foreign language (i.e. English).

Conclusion

Although translation obviously poses its own problems, as demonstrated above, indecipherable instructions will become less common as the number of fluent English-speakers in China increases and Chinese companies continue to forge relationships with American and European companies.

Therefore, the true challenge is to understand and adapt to technical communication practices in China. Though we may never find a way to incorporate the word auspicious into our own documentation, by studying the evolution of technical communication in China, we become better equipped to work with the Chinese and appreciate the differences in documentation style. §

Rapid Community Building with MediaWiki

by Joe Sass

Thanks to the popularity of Wikipedia.org, wikis have established themselves as the go-to tool for community-based knowledge sharing on the web. A wiki, whose namesake means “fast” in Hawaiian, is “a website that allows the creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages via a web browser using a simplified markup language or a WYSIWYG text editor.” Although there are over a hundred wiki platforms to choose from, MediaWiki (the driving force

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behind Wikipedia.org) has established itself as the leader of the pack.

MediaWiki, which is open-source and available for free at <http://www.mediawiki.org/>, is based on a PHP and MySQL platform. Using a basic web server, such as the open-source Apache server, it is possible to create a functional, running MediaWiki site in under 30 minutes. From there, it is the responsibility of the wiki administrator to begin creating content and building the community. Content is developed within the MediaWiki site using Wikitext or Wiki Markup language.

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In the lawsuit, which was filed in federal court, Spooner claims the tweet basically amounts to an accusation that he conspired to fix the game.

An AP spokesman said the news agency stands by the accuracy of the reporting from that game.

Defamation lawsuits against the media are rare yet not uncommon. So why would this case, in particular, be important for media watchers?

Most significantly, they fear that if Krawczynski and the AP are found to have defamed the referee, it could lead to what journalists and media scholars call a “chilling effect”: undue restrictions on the press that would make it difficult for reporters to do their jobs.

At any rate, the case suggests the perils – as well as the advantages – that social media have created for reporters. Krawczynski would have been unlikely to send such a message just a few years ago during the pre-Twitter era. Moreover, the information may not have made it into a final, traditional game story without subsequent reporting and elaboration.

Twitter’s characteristics – 140-character bursts of information, often sent in the heat of the moment – in some ways work against journalism’s long-standing traditions of dispassionate, sober and careful reporting. This is certainly the case in the realm of print journalism.

Yet, if anything, the case involving the NBA and the AP provides an example of how social media tools have – for better and worse – accelerated the pace of an industry that was already built for speed. §

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The strength of using Wikitext as an alternative to the more traditional WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) HTML editors found in other wiki systems, lies in that its simplicity enables the writer and editor to focus on the content itself, rather than format and presentation.

As the documentation specialist for a small software company, it is my responsibility to create, manage and share knowledge throughout the organization. Using MediaWiki, I quickly launched an internal website (available only within my company's net-

work) and enlisted the assistance of a coworker to help with content entry. Together, we created a knowledgebase containing roughly 300 content pages in a matter of days. Since then, the site has continued to grow organically as my coworkers visit and participate in the site. As the content manager of the site, MediaWiki's native content-approval and change-tracking features are a dream come true, enabling me to concentrate on growing content and cultivating the community.

MediaWiki is the quickest and easiest way to create and publish information within a work environment. The approachable and bare-essentials pre-

sentation allows the both the writer and the reader to focus on the content, rather than format. Moreover, creating a community in which everyone within the company can participate, ensures a rich set of authors and editors who will bring their diverse knowledge with them to create a vibrant and ever-improving resource.

For more information on MediaWiki, please visit <http://www.mediawiki.org/>. The WikiMatrix site, <http://www.wikimatrix.org/>, is also a great resource for additional information regarding MediaWiki and a multitude of other wiki platforms. §

What do Technical Communicators Do?

by Brock Delia-Shea

What exactly is it that you do? This is a question that gets asked rather often around my house – probably too often. I have the privilege of being married to an Instructional Designer, who happens to be the daughter of an Instructional Designer. The running joke is that they went to school to learn to do nothing.

Instructional Designers, who frequently work closely with Technical Communicators, are what I call the “Wedding Planners of the corporate world.” They will often go into a company and determine what needs to be fixed. Next, they get the company in touch with those that can fix said problems. This is similar to how a Wedding Planner tells a bride-to-be that she needs invitations or a bouquet – without being the one who creates them. They don't actually do anything.

That is not the case with Technical Communicators. When asked what it is that I do, my most common (albeit sarcastic) answer is, “I write the manuals and instructions that you don't read.” While this is a fun answer that gives people a general idea, it is not necessarily accurate. Within the field of Technical Communications, there are several opportunities available for specialization.

The most commonly recognized of the Technical Communicators is the Technical Writer. This is the person who writes various types of documents – from the quick start guide for your new Blu-ray player, to the assembly instructions for the bookshelf you just bought, to the instruction manual Continued on for the new EKG machine purchased by your local hospital. Additionally, with the increased use of on-line tools, a Technical Writer may also be in charge of creating and/or maintaining a company's/product's Social Media page or Wiki. Technical Writers often have experience in healthcare, engineer-

ing, or other various fields that may require industry-specific knowledge.

There is also the Technical Editor. This person may be anything from a copy editor to the editor-in-chief for a major newspaper or magazine. Responsible for everything from reviewing a single document for accuracy to the content of an entire publication, Technical Editors – like most Technical Communicators – have a wide range of opportunities and responsibilities.

For those fluent in multiple languages, there is also the opportunity to become a Technical Translator. This person would translate technical documents, whether written by him/her or others depending on the size of the project. While regular translators are available, the Technical Translator understands the subject matter, as well as any terminology specifically related to the document.

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Technical Communicators are not limited to the written word. For those that are more artistic, there is also the possibility of becoming a Technical Illustrator. Whether it is sketching a circuit board, taking a picture of the inner workings of a machine, or using CAD software to show the path of electricity, the Technical Illustrator uses images to clarify steps in a technical document.

While these examples certainly do not cover all of the possible options for Technical Communicators, they demonstrate several career paths that can be pursued. So the next time you buy the newest gadget on the market, and have to look at the fully illustrated, multi-language user manual, be sure to thank a Technical Communicator – or 4. The document that you are holding in your hand was written, illustrated, translated, and edited by Technical Communicators. That is what Technical Communicators do. §

Technical Communicator as Web Typography Expert

by Annemarie Chapdelaine

In 1969, Swiss typographer Emile Ruder stated, “Typography has one plain duty before it and that is to convey information in writing. No argument or consideration can absolve typography from this duty. A printed work which cannot be read becomes a product without purpose.”

The study of typography and even the ability to select a typeface, it could be argued, seems to be relegated to graphic design programs and merely get a passing mention (if at all) in most Technical Communication and English programs. Why is this the case?

As society (and especially) the workforce moves from a print based to primarily web/mobile based culture, it can be argued that Technical Communicators need to have a more solid understanding of typography as it relates to Information Design and User Experience. Technical Communicators don’t need to become extreme experts, however they do need to have the ability to select a typeface and integrate it accordingly depending on medium of delivery, subject matter and audience.

Many guides, manuals and other pieces of information are placed online in a centralized location. In addition, most companies are moving towards paperless operations. Therefore the work that technical communicators used to do on paper, are now online. The current convention is that typical individual doesn’t read information on the web, but scans instead.

Another interesting development is

the advent of mobile devices, tablets and even Amazon’s Kindle. Does this create a new dynamic in information architecture and design as well as, conceptually, as well as the blending of old/new methods? If anything it will largely depend on the circumstance, and the information architect/technical communicator will need to evaluate how and when the reader is using this information. The mobile experience is completely different than the desktop experience.

In his article, “The Web is 95% Typography”, Oliver Reichenstein explains that “macro-typography (overall text-structure) in contrast to micro typography (detailed aspects of type and spacing) covers many aspects of what we nowadays call ‘information design’. So to speak, information designers nowadays do the job that typographers did 30 years ago”. He goes on to cite Cameron Moll who said, that a good web designer “treats text as a user interface”. While Cameron Moll was referring to Web Designers, the same must be applied to information architects and technical communicators.

Typography vs Ability to Select a Typeface

Typography is typically defined as the study, design and use of typefaces. A typeface is typically defined as a set of one or more fonts. A typical class in typography involves physical typesetting and creating fonts (using software such as FontLab) in a lab environment. Since a typography course isn’t a formal part of the curriculum, a technical communicator can still learn through a variety of sources and become an expert.

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The technical communicator, when designing for print and especially web, needs to understand how to select a typeface and on content arrangement. Says Reichstein, “Information design is not about the use of good typefaces, it is about the use of good typography.” Here we understand that it is more than just simply selecting Helvetica for the header and Baskerville for the content.

The technical communicator needs to understand the behaviors and personalities of each typeface and how it interacts on the page along with how the medium and reader will interact with that typeface. Herbert Spencer’s book, “The Visible Word” “proposes that the eye uses both outline word

shapes and their internal patterns to move along a text line and steps and groups text to form comprehensible phrases of information.” (Visual Design Principles for Usable Interfaces; pg. 337). “Sometimes during this process, the eye regresses and returns to what has been read. Optimal typography allows for fewer backward movements”.

Understanding this concept will empower the technical communicator, when planning out web content, to study and select the appropriate typefaces. §

Resources

The following resources will aid the technical communicator in understanding concepts and theories pertaining to typography and typeface

selection for both the web and print.

The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook: Fundamentals, Evolving Technologies ...
by Julie A. Jacko

Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, & Students
by Ellen Lupton

The Non-Designers Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice
by Robin Williams

Information Architecture for the World Wide Web
by Peter Morville, Louis Rosenfeld

The Technical Writer’s Influence on Social Media Strategy

by Fer O’Neil

Social Media Specialist Wanted: Technical Communicators Need Not Apply

Would you like to find a technical communications position working with social media making between \$75k and \$100k a year? Of course you would, but you will not find one advertised on Craigslist (or any other job search). There are hundreds of new social media positions available but nearly all are offered within the “Marketing/Advertising/PR job category. Then why are you reading about a job search for a job that does not exist?

Current Social Media Trends

Within many organizations, technical communicators must continuously

prove their worth to the bottom-line. It is difficult to measure case deflection from support pages and to determine the value of technical writers’ work, namely customer-facing documentation, to the overall user experience within a company’s support structure. It is not surprising then, when companies plan their social media initiatives, the Technical Communications department is not even invited to the meeting. The return on investment (ROI) that Marketing, Sales, and Public Relations departments can demonstrate through sales and clicks is favored over the technical writer’s more difficult to calculate contributions using social media.

Traditional Support Metrics

No panacea for proving the ROI of social media channels exists. For technical communicators, however, traditional support channels such as knowledgebases and support docu-

mentation have historically shown to decrease costs by deflecting support requests². Additionally, metrics that show conversion rates for clicks or downloads from documentation pages is measurable as well. For instance, at last month’s STC-San Diego chapter meeting, MindTouch’s VP of Marketing, Mike Puterbaugh, acknowledged the importance of content and those who produce it. His research found that 20% of their sales leads came from users who visited the support page. Although this percentage does not reflect a majority or provide a definitive conclusion, it is nonetheless a significant number.

Consumers have many choices and oftentimes, they will not choose the product that is advertised or priced the best, but will base their decision, in part, on customer support. For

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example, there is myriad of free Linux distributions available, so why then do so many organizations pay to use versions such as Red Hat? Because of the support it offers. In summary, potential customers will visit a product's support page to glean an idea of the company's commitment to customer support or lack thereof.

How this relates to Support 2.0

Technical communicators can demonstrate notable ROI using traditional support channels, but does this convert to the Social Web? Users turn to social media support channels (aka Support 2.0) because they want accurate, timely, and available support. With a few notable exceptions, users will not find the aforementioned support from most companies' primary social media channels. Since providing traditional support that users expect does produce an ROI, a social media strategy that does not include customer support or focus on user experience may be shortsighted.

Real-world Example of ROI

I work for a security software company whose primary program is installed on Microsoft Windows systems. When Microsoft releases updates, the program displays an orange notification icon until a user downloads the Windows updates or unless he or she performs a procedure to disable the notification. Beginning the Tuesday that Microsoft releases the updates, the customer support volume for this one issue increases drastically. However, Tweeting about the Windows release and including a link to an existing knowledgebase article that explains the orange icon and what to do about it, has yielded a measurable number of deflected

support cases. The average of clicks per link received for other Tweets is 3 but for this issue it is 25. This case deflection is measurable ROI that has helped substantiate the addition of the Technical Communications department into my company's social media strategy.

Effective Social Media Strategy Includes Customer Support

As companies begin to recognize the value that technical writers can provide to a social media strategy that focuses on support and user experience, the need will grow for technical communicators who are trained to provide the content users have come to expect from the Social Web. First, technical communicators must establish their value by providing measurable ROI, and next they must claim a position within the social media strategy to include their customer support contributions and user experience expertise to the overall social media strategy. §

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1 <http://www.mindtouch.com/blog/2010/07/29/the-most-influential-technical-communicator-bloggers/>

2 Improving Call Deflection with Your Knowledge Base: <http://www.allthingscrm.com/crm-news/customer-service/improving-call-deflection-with-your-knowledge-base/>

Sources

34 case studies that prove social media ROI: <http://barnraisersllc.com/?p=2460>

Social Media policies by industry: <http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies.php>

Why study International communication?

by Amy Tidwell

I think we are past the naïve belief that we in the West do not need to adapt to the non-English speaking world, even though the world is increasingly globalized and the language of technology tends to be English. However, we might wonder why we need to study international communication, as opposed to audience analysis. After all, any attempt to communicate involves knowing an audience, and what we might call cultural differences exist even within apparently homogeneous populations.

I contend that studying cultural differences under the umbrella of International Communication, rather than Audience Analysis, focuses our attention on the larger variations in communication styles that exist between people of different countries. We can then see how those differences, in less extreme forms, exist within borders. That is, looking at larger cultural differences sensitizes us to them so that we can see them in their subtler forms.

The concepts we learn when we study international communication can open our eyes to cultural differences wherever we find them—across the ocean or in our own backyard. In today's globalized world, we can never be sure of where our audience comes from. Nevertheless, we can be sensitive to some of the factors that influence how audiences receive and interpret our messages.

From people like Harry C. Triandis we learn about Individualism and

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Collectivism, Vertical and Horizontal Cultures, Active and Passive Cultures, Universalism and Particularism, Diffuse and Specific Cultures, Instrumental and Expressive Cultures, and cultures that express or suppress their emotions. We then go on to put meaning to these concepts and, with any luck, put what we have learned into our communication efforts.

As we continue to study international communication, we add additional concepts to our vocabulary—such as Power Distance and Immediacy—and become familiar with the names of people who spent their lives studying cross-cultural communication. These are people such as Edward T. Hall, with his work on cultural perceptions of space, and Geert Hofstede, with his studies of national and regional cultural groupings.

We try to define and understand topics like Worldview and Religious Perspective, with the same goal of applying our insights to our messages, and all of this knowledge helps to transform us from mere writers and editors into true communication professionals. In addition, studying cultural differences makes us more aware of some of the vast cultural variations that can exist within a country's borders—even within our own borders.

Once we've struggled to effectively convey a message for readers in another country—Mexico, for example, with its collectivistic cultural and strong sense of power distance—we can better identify our own cultural biases that can interfere with our efforts to convey our messages.

For example, we might think of the

people in Texas as seeing the world from the context of large, open spaces, a hot dry climate, and a history rich in “Western lore.” We have our own notions of what that means and may try to address a Texas audience as if they were first-hand spectators at the OK Corral.

However, the reality is that many of the people in Texas live in places like Dallas or Houston or Austin, which are major urban centers. People there do not necessarily see the world through the eyes of those living in “large, open spaces.” In fact, many of the people currently living in Texas have moved there from somewhere else, such as New York or even Minnesota, and do not necessarily share the connection to the heritage of “Western lore.” In addition, they bring with them their own history and culture, which influence their identity as Texans and the notion of a “Texas culture.”

Our study of international communication, which helped us navigate the situation with our Mexican audience, makes it easier for us to see how communicating with our Texas audience requires the same approach to cultural differences. Our studies also teach us that cultures are in constant flux, with swirling changes that have a direct impact on us as professional technical communicators. That's because what we know of our Mexican or Texan audience is not static; we need to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate our messages and who will receive them. By studying International Communication, with all its concepts of cultural variations, we are better positioned to appreciate the complexities of the entire human interaction process, especially those complexities associated with differences in language, customs, and styles of communica-

tion.

Within the international arena, differences in the way that people approach life can be more pronounced and easier for us to recognize. This, in turn, can show us more clearly how messages are made up of more than words. What we communicate is influenced by our own backgrounds, as well as our audience's history and expectations. What is heard is not just what we say or don't say; every message has an unspoken component made up of factors—often nonverbal factors—that come from both the writer's and reader's backgrounds. We can take the lessons learned through studying international communication and apply them to our communication efforts, demonstrating a fuller understanding of our audience's needs and adapting accordingly, thus making what we actually communicate more nearly what we intend. §

Ethics in Technical Communication

by Josh Lauener

Current State of Ethics in Technical Communication

Technical writers do not have the luxury of simply taking an oath and having their work be called ethical, as is the case with doctors and lawyers. The reason for this is that a writer's audiences have the final say in whether or not the writer's work is ethical or not. Furthermore, in this day and age there are so many different audiences that even if one group finds the work to be ethical, another group may not. For this reason, technical communicators "...need to develop our own voice and sense of ethics" (McBride 3).

In today's world with communities becoming more and more fragmented every day, the assumption can no longer be made that just because someone has credibility with one audience the author is acting ethically. Stephen Katz beautifully proves this point when he shows that even though a document written by one of Hitler's men during the Holocaust to expedite the process of killing Jews was technically sound, the horrifying purpose of the document made it unethical to anyone outside of Hitler's army.

Keeping this in mind, technical communicators in the workplace must be cognizant of their audience and understand that their work may be used outside of the organization. So, while a technical communicator's work might adhere to the ethical standards of a company, he/she must also keep in mind the bigger picture in the event the work is used elsewhere. This is where an industry standard "sense of ethics" would be useful.

Writing With an Ethical Purpose

"Conservation writing is an umbrella term for a range of writing about ecology, biology, the outdoors, and environmental policies and ethics" (Johnson 10). Technical communicators involved in these types of subjects have a broad range of audiences, both public and professional, so therefore must be able to relate this technical information to virtually anyone. Conservation writing, historically, focuses on the natural world as the center of the audience's attention, and also frequently focuses on sustainability as a main ingredient to conservation.

The history of conservation writing is immense, but Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" is given credit for "...sparking the revolution that led to events like Earth Day and the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the late 1960's" (Johnson 16). The creation of the EPA and a new focus on environmental laws sparked a demand for different types of conservation writing to be done by government employees. From here conservation writing morphed into Environmental Impact Statements and grants. Also, conservation writing began to encourage our citizens to adapt practices which we now would call sustainable.

Today, conservation writing has taken on an entirely new direction as businesses have come to see the importance of lessening their negative environmental impact and strengthening their public image. What used to be strictly a type of writing done by government employees has grown to include virtually anyone who can relate technical information within organizations, and to the masses.

What This Means to You, the Technical Writer

A growing trend in big business is the concept of environmental responsibility. Companies are focusing more attention on environmental regulation, environmental issues in marketing, and ways to still make money while being environmentally conscious. When companies adopt an approach that claims to be environmentally responsible, "...communicating and processing technical and environmental information is important. Although often relegated to the 'mechanistic' (and outdated) perspective, information flow within and among organizations is critical to environmental management" (Bullis 463).

With environmental problems gaining importance to Earth's survival, businesses must explore ways they can refocus their communications with the best interests of the planet in mind. As organizations explore these new methods of communication, new roles within these organizations are being created specifically for the purpose of creating this new environmentally responsible communication. As long as this pattern continues it will mean good things for both our environment and our industry. It seems the only way to truly write ethically is to write for a universally understood ethical cause – like environmental responsibility. §

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Reflections of a Software Tester

by Douglas L. Jones

"Never expect a usability test to find all problems" (Molich 2010, 7). The same can be said for any test. Taken on its own, that statement can seem a bit defeating. However, from experience, the team I am a part of knows that is the nature of the business. We test as much as we can under the schedule provided, and aim to catch as many problems as possible before the product is made generally available to customers.

Although the majority of the testing we do cannot be defined as usability or user experience testing, it is incorporated into the work we do. "Usability is related to a software system's ability to help specified users achieve specified goals in a particular environment in an effective, efficient, and satisfying way" (Høegh, Nielsen, Overgaard, Pedersen, and Stage 2006, 174). That definition is in agreement with my experience in usability testing. As a test team, we consider ourselves the first customer of the product being tested. As such, we attempt to channel a set of characteristics that define what we believe to be the "typical customer" for our product (as defined by marketing) and run the product through its paces with that "customer" in mind. We focus on the entire package (hardware, software, documentation), and aim to minimize the number of problems that ultimately reach the outside world.

A significant portion of the testing we do targets areas of the system that are brand new with regards to functionality or that have undergone significant changes between releases. This approach is espoused in the literature

as well. "In general, whatever you try out as new, as innovative, or as different – which should make up a lot of your efforts – should get tested. Whenever you go out on a limb with your designs – set challenging objectives for yourself and your work – you need to test" (Barker 2003, 243). Given my experience, both of these statements are true. In fact, we refer to these areas as "target-rich environments" because it is just about guaranteed that we are going to find problems in these particular areas.

Is it a perfect test? No, it isn't. No matter how hard we try, customers will always use our product in ways that we didn't envision. Working under tight schedules doesn't help either. Reality doesn't allow us to test as long or as extensively as we might like. That being said, the test team has a pretty good track record for picking out the areas where we will have the most "bang for the buck" with regard to improving the quality of the product, and our results speak for themselves.

The test team also has good relationships with management and the development organization. Management recognizes the benefits that we produce during each test cycle. In addition to improving the quality of the product, those benefits also help ensure that the test mission continues to get funded from year to year. Our relationship with development is just as important. Given that our mission is to find issues with the deliverables they produce, one might think there would be an adversarial component to that relationship. Just the opposite is true. Development understands that every problem we find during

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a test cycle is one less problem that will need to be fixed later at a higher expense to the organization.

I'd like to conclude with a couple examples of the types of usability problems that I've personally been involved in discovering recently:

1. Help text for an error message specified a return code that was not documented. This particular problem will be fixed in the next release of the product because of translation constraints.
2. Information not being updated in a timely fashion, if at all, in the graph-

ical user interface used to manage production machines. This problem is still being actively debugged and is on the "must fix" list for the current release.

Testing can be a frustrating occupation at times, but it is also quite rewarding. At the end of the day, you can say that you were instrumental in improving the quality of the product and the experience of the end user. I've been doing this type of testing for over twenty years now, and the satisfaction of a job well done never gets old. §

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HR use of SNWs in employment selection

by Bob Furu

Social networks used for screening

With the rise of popular social networking web sites (SNWs) like Facebook and Twitter, organizational institutions are finding the vast amount of personal information currently available online to be particularly valuable when it comes to making hiring decisions. As a result, human resource (HR) personnel are using these sites to selectively screen applicants, often without their knowledge or even consent. A 2008 CareerBuilder.com survey of 3,100 employers found that 1 in 5 employers use SNWs to research job candidates. One-third of those who did use SNWs reported they found content that caused them to dismiss some candidates (Anonymous 2008).

The amount of personal information available, even when the applicant

utilizes stringent privacy controls, is enough that HR departments are finding SNW screening practices to be helpful in the pre-hire stages for many reasons. At the same time, however, there is certain potential for organizations to use this information for the purpose of illegal and unethical discrimination. The fact that many SNWs offer freely accessible background information that includes indicators of a person's age, race, religion, and marital status, for instance, means that if companies are screening these websites in their hiring practices, then they must be aware of the potential for abuse and even scandal in regards to employment selection. In fact, some organizations have already been investigated based on these issues, and have subsequently altered their current hiring policies or instituted new ones. Whether due to previous litigation or in order to preemptively avoid allegations of discrimination, organizations are beginning to consult with outside professionals (investigators,

attorneys, etc.) as they look to employ sound hiring principles when accessing personal information via SNWs.

Kluemper and Rosen (2009) highlighted the subject area of employment selection methods that use SNWs as one in which little academic research currently exists, and they suggest there is a need for further research, especially in terms of potential adverse impacts that can result from using SNWs to screen applicants.

The "privacy paradox"

Barnes (2006) called attention to the "privacy paradox" that occurs when users of social media sites divulge detailed personal information in the public sphere of sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and the now-defunct Friendster. The author explains the term social media as "an umbrella concept that describes

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social software and social networking.” Barnes presents her concerns with the privacy paradox and how at the time of her research, considerable attention was being called to online sexual predators, but not to the protection of privacy among a larger group of online users in more general terms. Today’s job applicants may suffer from this privacy paradox because they might not realize that the small amount of information they set as “public” on their SNW profiles is likely to be combed by HR professionals as they make their hiring decisions.

Are hiring practices threatened?

Tichy, Tushman, and Fombrun (1979) pointed out that because sociometric data are relatively easy to collect, an overabundance of data can occur (512). The fact that information is so freely accessible and readily available anytime and anywhere almost beckons the HR professional that it be reviewed. There may be a possibility then that SNWs offer an overabundance of information at the organization’s disposal. As a result, previously established, sound hiring principles may in fact be taking a backseat to SNW screening practices simply because SNW screening methods are less expensive and less time consuming.

A series of newspaper articles by Ricker (2009) reports on how several officials (city manager, assistant city manager, fire chief, and human resources director) within the City of Bozeman, Montana were either suspended for one week without pay or put on probation for six months for their role in a city policy that required job candidates to provide log-in codes

to email accounts and social media sites such as Facebook and eBay.

Three of the employees voluntarily chose to tell the reporter how the Facebook policy came about. The policy had been in effect for years before it became public in June 2009, causing a public outcry regarding privacy concerns. The article made international news, and the city officials were lambasted for what appeared to many to be a significant lapse in judgment.

The fact that a city policy would require its applicants to hand over such valuable information is conclusive evidence that organizations are watching associations among individuals very closely.

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