

# TECHNIQUES

Topics in Technical Communication

Spring 2014

## Technology and Communication

### Challenges for Technical Communicators

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# An Interview with Sandra Davis, Scrum Master

TIMOTHY ANDERSON

*Sandra Davis gives us a glimpse into the working world of a scrum master, providing insight into incorporating agile development and working with technical writers.*

**F**rom the standpoint of a technical writer, software development is a gold mine. As the business world uses personalized software more frequently, the need for user manuals, FAQs, and troubleshooting guides increases. Understanding writers' roles in software development means understanding the process that technology companies and developers use. One of these processes is agile development. Agile development is defined by *PC Magazine* (2014) as "an umbrella term for a variety of best practices in creating applications and information systems. These methods have proven to be more effective in dealing with changing requirements during the development phase, which always seem to occur." A key role in the agile development process is that of the scrum master. A scrum master works as a liaison between product owners and developers during agile projects and is responsible for ensuring the correct use of agile principles.

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To better understand agile development, I conducted an interview with scrum master Sandra "Sandy" Davis via e-mail. Davis is a software developer at Radiance Technologies, a technology and prototype development company located in Huntsville, Alabama, that contracts with the Department of Defense. She received an AA in web development from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Perkinston Campus, as well as a BS in computer science from the University of Southern Mississippi. Davis works on development projects using agile methodologies, and she serves as an agile scrum master.

## Interview

**How were you introduced to agile methodologies? Was it through formal training? Did the company provide this training?**

I was introduced to agile methodologies when I started working on a project at Radiance Technologies. I didn't receive any formal training. Initially, everything that I learned about agile software development was self-taught, specifically by reading books. Additionally, I have gained more knowledge and understanding using agile methodologies daily at work. The role of scrum master has allowed me to dive deeper into the agile software development process; it allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge on why certain documents are fundamental to a successful scrum project.

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**Has agile been accepted by your entire organization, or are there competing project management methods depending on the project?**

Agile is accepted by the entire organization; however, that doesn't necessarily mean that it will be used on all projects. Some projects won't benefit from agile software development.

**Does your organization strictly adhere to agile development methods, or have you personalized your own style based on agile concepts? Do you stick to a strict thirty-day sprint cycle?**

We do not stick to a thirty-day sprint cycle. I have found that with a shorter sprint cycle, you are able to see an increase in development progress. The shorter time frame allows us to create smaller stories (which are the end users' function in a software development project). This in turn allows the development team to see more progress, and create obtainable goals. Finally, it allows us to see issues or problem areas early on. We can then focus on those problem areas in the following sprint if need be.

I have found that with a shorter sprint cycle, you are able to see an increase in development progress.

**One of the benefits of agile over traditional project management is the flexibility to change the product as customer expectations change. Does this happen often?**

I wouldn't necessarily say that this happens often, but it is easier to change the product using the agile method.

**How are roles assigned? Are the same scrum masters used for all projects, or are you a scrum master for some and part of the development team on others?**

No, the same scrum master is not used for all projects. I have worked on projects where I was just part of the development team. I'm currently working on a project where I'm the scrum master, but I'm also part of the development team.

**One of the main roles of a scrum master is to remove any obstacle that interferes with the success of the development team. Do you have examples of what these obstacles are? What obstacle has posed the most difficult challenge for you so far?**

Different types of obstacles can occur during the development process. A few examples include employee illness where a member on the development team is out sick and organizational issues, such as conflicting goals and unplanned tasking.

The biggest obstacle that I have come across was during a sprint cycle. We didn't have enough team members to fulfill the required stories that needed to be completed by the end of the cycle. We couldn't drop any requirements, so the only option was to find someone else who could help complete stories.

**What types of software are used for collaboration within the team to ensure that tasks are completed on time?**

The type of software used varies from project to project. On some projects, we have used Google Docs as a way of editing documents, which allows team members to work on the same document at the same time. On other projects, we have used an online content management system called Forge.mil to keep track of documents, track individual tasks, and improve communication among team members. We also use a subversion repository to manage our code. This allows us to recover older version of our scripts if needed.

**Do your teams include a technical writer to produce manuals, troubleshooting guides, and reference materials? If so, are these documents being created concurrently with the software development?**

Our team does include a technical writer. However, his job is more focused on reviewing documents and technical editing. As a software developer, we know more about what the product should do and how it works. So, our job is to write the manual and then send it to the technical writer to review. Once the technical writer reviews the document, we collaborate to make the document better.

**How often is the experience of the end user considered when developing software? Do you pay more or less attention to user experience when using different project management methodologies?**

End-user experience is always considered and is always important, regardless of what type of project management methodologies you use. The whole point of creating and developing software is for the end user. With the agile software process, you are able to get more feedback. If the users don't understand something, you are able to address that in the future sprint. An end-user's experience frequently comes into play when we are writing manuals on how to use the software; the user is able to gain more understanding about the software by reading this documentation.

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**Conclusion**

Agile software development involves a great deal of collaboration among agile team members and between the end users and the agile team, allowing for a high level of team responsiveness. Sandra Davis and her agile team's flexible sprint cycle increases transparency, allows for changes, and produces a documentation product that will meet changing end user needs. Merging the agile process with effective online tools, team communication, and a sense of community with the user-consumers creates a win-win situation for both businesses and consumers. ■

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# Do Tools Outweigh Skills for Technical Communicators Who Create Web Content?

TINA WALKER

*Online tools now allow novice users to quickly create websites, but is it quality content? This article explores the roles that both tools and skills play in creating successful websites and reveals the implications this may have for career seekers in technical communication.*

**A**s increasing numbers of people turn to the Internet for information, companies continue to develop tools for providing online content. Now any entity or individual can create websites with the right tools. As technical communicators who produce online content, we might ask ourselves whether tools are more important than skills.

## Tools Can Help You Build a Website

There are many authoring and publishing tools designed for technical communicators who create content for various media. However, this article will focus on tools designed specifically to help nontechnical people create and maintain websites. The most common tool is a content management system (CMS), which companies can use to allow their nontechnical employees to contribute content for the companies' websites. A CMS is a scalable tool that is useful to companies large or small. A few employees in a small company can use a CMS for a simple website containing a small amount of content, or a large corporation can easily use a CMS for a complex website with extensive content. CMS users do not need to know HTML or CSS to produce and maintain a website that looks as good as a website built without such a tool. Blogs and wikis are types of CMS that offer specific features for certain types of interaction with readers. Blogs are inexpensive tools for creating web pages where users can post comments and subscribe to notifications of blog updates. Wikis are designed with collaboration in mind and they allow any user to create and edit content (Lynch and Horton 2008).

My first experiences with a CMS were as a student using free blog tools to create websites. First, I followed a short tutorial to create a WordPress blog to document my progress in a website design class. Within a few hours, I went from knowing nothing about creating websites to having a few people following my blog (and still knew nothing about creating websites). The next semester, I used Joomla to create a functional website for a group project in an e-commerce class. It took a few days to find add-ins that worked, but my group created a website for a fictitious bicycle shop that allowed users to buy products and schedule service appointments. When I finally took a website development class, I learned how to use HTML, CSS, and PHP to build web pages from scratch. My classmates and I showed each other the various websites we created. Many of my classmates' websites were beautiful and functional, but the information was difficult to comprehend. Those experiences taught me that the tools that help people build websites cannot help people write good content.

Any entity or individual can create websites with the right tools.

Within a few hours, I went from knowing nothing about creating websites to having a few people following my blog.

## Skills Can Help You Write Content

It is important to have well-written content in any medium, but poorly written content seems to stand out when published online. Websites that are aesthetically pleasing do not mask or make up for a lack of good content. Those websites are not successful because they do not communicate effectively with their visitors and the visitors do not return to those websites. Although being attractive and easy to use are characteristics of a good website, a website that is not as attractive or easy to use, but provides good content, can be more successful than the pretty one (Stone et al. 2010). This is similar to a PowerPoint presentation full of graphics and animations with content that is inaccurate, lacking, or overwhelming. After a while, viewers stop appreciating the bells and whistles and start wishing they were getting the information from another source. A plain PowerPoint with accurate, concise information is preferable to a slew of overly caffeinated slides.

So PowerPoint slides and websites share an important goal: effective communication. Websites and the tools used to create them are “just a means to that end” (Hart 2007). People who use tools to create websites with lots of bells and whistles may lose sight of the reason people visit websites: they want information. Actually, people visit websites to start a conversation—or communicate—with the website owner. Successful websites use people with good communication skills to write content (Redish 2010). This does not mean that people creating websites should only be concerned about content. It simply warns against focusing so much on the features of your website that you forget to provide good content. Writing for a website is not much different from writing for print media and the few differences “have almost nothing to do with Internet technology” (Lynch and Horton 2008). It is important for technical communicators to know how to use tools, but we have skills that allow us to do something no tool can do: “solve communication problems” (Hart 2007).

## Tools and Skills Can Help You Get a Job

Although many people do not know what technical communicators do, it is clearly defined in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The “Technical Writers” entry lists the following key attributes of technical communicators: communication skills, detail oriented, imagination, teamwork, technical skills, and writing skills. It goes on to say that technical communicators have the skills “to take complex, technical information and translate it for colleagues and consumers who have nontechnical backgrounds” (BLS 2014). Table 1 contains information compiled by the Occupational Information Network based on research regarding what is important for technical writers. I should note that the “Details Report” does contain a section that lists tools and technology that technical writers use but does not rank the tools’ importance. However, the items with the highest importance in each category in table 1 paint a clear picture of what is expected of technical communicators.

If you read the requirements in advertisements for technical communicator jobs, you may see a long list of tools and a short list of skills. Some job seekers interpret those requirements to mean employers value tools over skills. However, we should deduce from the requirements that employers want people with technical communication skills who can also demonstrate that they can learn to use tools. Most of the tools listed in technical communicator job advertisements are designed for nontechnical people. If you are a technical communicator, you can learn to use any of those tools. The reverse is not true: knowing how to use tools does not mean a person can learn technical communication skills.

The tools that help people build websites cannot help people write good content.

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The *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, finding that “employers generally prefer candidates with a bachelor’s degree in journalism, English, or communications” supports the idea that employers may value skills more than tools (BLS 2014). Employers hire technical communicators “because we write, and write well, which is something of a vanishing skill in this increasingly post-literate age” (Hart 2007).

**Table 1: O\*NET OnLine Details Report for Technical Writers – Most Important Item by Category (O\*NET 2012)**

Category	Importance	Description
Knowledge	95	English Language—Knowledge of the structure and content of the English language including the meaning and spelling of words, rules of composition, and grammar.
Skills	97	Writing—Communicating effectively in writing as appropriate for the needs of the audience.
Abilities	81	Written Expression—The ability to communicate information and ideas in writing so others will understand.
Work Styles	94	Attention to Detail—Job requires being careful about detail and thorough in completing work tasks.

With the development of user-friendly online authoring and publishing tools comes the mistaken belief that anyone can create online content. But tools cannot replace writing skill; they can only provide the software technology needed to deliver the information. Content creators will continue to need honed writing skills to communicate concise and clear information to website audiences. Even in today’s changing technological world, skills trump tools. ■

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# Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media in Business

MICHELE GIACOMUCCI

*By taking advantage of the current social media frenzy, businesses have the potential to reach millions of customers faster than ever. The key to success is planning and a well-defined strategy.*

**S**ocial media use has become a part of the everyday online experience for both individuals and businesses. Facebook has exploded since its February 2004 launch, and by 2012 it had over one billion subscribers worldwide (Hall 2013). Facebook and other social networking sites provide novel ways to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances. At the same time, however, businesses are scrambling to consider the advantages and disadvantages of these new communication systems. Before companies jump on the social networking bandwagon, they need to understand the impact that the virtual world can have on their real-world business.

## Dynamic Nature of Social Media

“Social media” means different things depending on who you ask or where you look. For the purpose of this article, social media are “platforms for interaction and relationships, not content and ads” (Eisenberg 2008). Social media websites use dynamic web technology that allows users to create, share, and discuss content. Popular social networking sites include Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, which are often used in conjunction with video-sharing sites such as YouTube and photo-sharing services such as Instagram.

## Advantages of Social Media

Some of the advantages of incorporating social media into a business strategy or workplace include the following:

**Public exposure.** The cost of broad public exposure through social media can be much lower than the cost of a traditional marketing approach.

**Customer service.** By establishing and developing relationships, social media improve the insight of businesses into customers’ needs and preferences.

**Referrals.** Word-of-mouth referrals, such as “like” on Facebook and “favorite” on Twitter, do not require additional company resources.

**Expanded reach.** Social media provide a direct channel to communicate corporate social responsibility and values to consumers.

Before companies jump on the social networking bandwagon, they need to understand the impact that the virtual world can have on their real-world business.



### *Examples of Companies Using Social Media with Positive Results*

**Fiskars**, a well-known scissors manufacturer, reached out to its avid scrapbooking customers, asking them to share personal stories. The company's customers responded by sharing their love of the brand not only on the company website but also at their own events and in one-on-one conversations, calling themselves "Fiskateers." This campaign generated a 600 percent increase in online mentions and increased sales (Evatt 2011).

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**Kraft Foods** donated six meals whenever a consumer joined its Facebook page as part of their *Huddle to Fight Hunger* campaign. Through the campaign, Kraft Foods gave away 25 million meals (PR Newswire 2011).

**Zappos** incorporated platforms such as Facebook and Twitter into its marketing strategy and focused on hiring employees with excellent people, social media, and tweeting skills (Kesevan 2013).

**Coca-Cola** sent three bloggers around the world in a campaign they called *Expedition 206*. The young journalists asked Coke drinkers what makes them happy, and they blogged, tweeted, and shared photos on Flickr (Expedition 206 2013).

### **Disadvantages of Social Media**

There are also risks and downsides to the use of social media. Some of these disadvantages follow:

**Negative publicity.** While companies hope for positive online customer feedback, customers also post negative feedback or comments, and any negative publicity can spread or "go viral" quickly, forcing a quick, constructive response to mitigate damage.

**Hackers.** Without proper controls and security, hackers can quickly take over a company's page and post false information (Wiegand 2014).

**Brand maintenance.** The complexity and immediacy of the social media environment often requires a specialized staff experienced with creating and maintaining an online brand presence. With their corporate reputation at stake, businesses need the right person or team managing social media content, to ensure that company tone and brand voice are consistently retained (Norton 2011).

The complexity and immediacy of the social media environment often requires a specialized staff experienced with creating and maintaining an online brand presence.

### *Examples of Companies Using Social Media with Negative Results*

**Qantas**, an Australian airline, asked customers to tweet about their dream flight experience. The timing of this campaign was very poor, as it was also at a time when the airline unions were negotiating their contracts. The contract negotiations resulted in Qantas grounding their fleet and leaving thousands of passengers stranded. The result was a barrage of negative tweets from angry customers (Dunay 2012).

**McDonald's** asked its customers to tweet about their dining experiences. Deluged with tweets about obesity and dog food, McDonald's retracted the campaign within two hours, but the negative tweets continued for a week after the hashtag was removed (Lubin 2012).

**Burger King** had its Twitter account hacked. The hackers changed Burger King's account name to McDonald's, stating that "Burger King sold to McDonald's because the Whopper flopped." An hour after the tweets began, Burger King suspended its Twitter account (Horowitz 2013).

## Building a Social Media Campaign

Even the best-laid social media plans may go astray. Positive and negative responses are a fact of life online. The key to minimizing risk and maximizing results is to have a strategic plan in place before starting a social media campaign. Strategies should include a well-thought-out marketing design as well as a crisis management plan for addressing negative feedback and protecting the company's reputation. Finally, these campaigns don't come free, so businesses should be sure they have the resources available to effectively manage a social campaign.

The key to minimizing risk and maximizing results is to have a strategic plan in place before starting a social media campaign.

## Conclusion

Despite the possible risks and disadvantages mentioned, the benefits of incorporating social media into a company's business plan cannot be ignored. Millions of consumers are connected to social media through various platforms, with new platforms continually in development. Companies cannot afford to miss out on the opportunity to connect on such a large scale with their current or potential customers. Through social media, a company can achieve a global brand presence, engage customers in conversations, and elevate the customer experience to new levels. A solid plan that anticipates the positive and negative aspects of social media in business will pay dividends, and help companies turn their virtual efforts into real-world benefits for themselves and their customers. ■

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# The Online Community of Tumblr

AMANDA GERNENTZ

*In this personal evaluation of Tumblr, the author discusses her experience in a vibrant, sometimes contentious, online community.*

**W**hen thinking of the word “community,” what leaps to mind? There are many possibilities, including college campuses, urban neighborhoods, and groups of friends. Communities—defined as groups of people with something in common—come in all shapes and sizes, and online communities are no different. But with so many options available, it can be a difficult to hone in on the one that best suits one’s needs.

Communities—defined as groups of people with something in common—come in all shapes and sizes, and online communities are no different.

Seeking to become a blog writer, I searched through blog communities, looking for a good fit. Most sites offered just a basic blog structure of blocks of writing space and a few supplemental graphics. But I longed for something more than a blank slate: I wanted an online destination where the entertainment nerd in me could run free. Then I discovered Tumblr, a place where people were already talking about actors they loved, characters they wished would couple up, and quotes from books that they were disappointed didn’t make it into companion big-screen features. A burgeoning graphic-friendly blogging host, Tumblr offered an affable and inclusive reputation. As Tumblr’s CEO, David Karp, said, “I wanted something where I could be free, where I could do anything” (Rose 2013). With Tumblr I found freedom, a little corner of the Internet that I could call home.

After spending two years on Tumblr, I picked up on several patterns: bloggers were quick to defend their friends; when someone had something unkind to say, he or she often did so anonymously, without batting an eye; and bloggers frequently felt more at home on Tumblr than in their lives outside of Tumblr. Wanting to know more about Tumblr and its users, I created a ten-question survey on SurveyMonkey, which polled bloggers about their Tumblr experiences. I promoted the survey on my own blog and then sent private messages to ten of my favorite blogs, asking them to repost the link. I was hoping to get a variety of responses, so I sent the link to a variety of types of blogs. By the end of the open period on SurveyMonkey, I had received 299 responses. I was happy and delighted when 51.4% of the bloggers who responded said they would be interested in a follow-up survey if I wanted more information.

The rest of the survey results were just as intriguing, showing that almost half of the users surveyed (42.1%) spent more than ten hours per week on Tumblr, a healthy use pattern that hinted at a strong sense of community on the site. Fandom-specific blogs—blogs dedicated to a television show, character, movie, musical act, and so forth—were run by 11.7% of users, while 52.4% ran a multi-fandom blog, and 47.2% had a random blog. This spoke to Tumblr’s multi-faceted nature; not only could users make Tumblr into whatever they wanted it to be, but they could also run more than one blog on the site (which was why the survey’s percentages did not equal one hundred). I relished this creative variety, and I still have a random Tumblr blog that I update

sporadically as well as a now-defunct entertainment blog where I used to review movies, television shows, and new music. The community aspect was unique for each of my blogs, and I enjoyed interacting with different people for different purposes.

Particularly interesting were the results of the questions about the sense of community that bloggers find on Tumblr. Blogging, like any hobby or pastime, becomes an important part of a person's life, and the Tumblr community is especially welcoming. To that end, of the users surveyed, 66.9% said that they felt like they fit in better on Tumblr than in their day-to-day lives. So Tumblr is an actual community, irrespective of its online status. It's a destination for bloggers looking for positive feedback, a place where people feel at home.

Like any community, however, negativity exists side-by-side with positivity. On Tumblr, it is called "hate," which can be defined here as negative, often passive-aggressive comments, posted as additional remarks on reblogs, or anonymous messages using the "Ask" feature or "Fanmail." Of those surveyed, 30.6% said they had experienced hate on Tumblr, and of those, 15.6% said it negatively affected their day-to-day lives. There were a variety of responses detailing how the hate disturbed blogger's lives, but the most common response was that it amplified feelings of anxiety and depression. As in any community, there are people who don't get along, but the small percentage of people who participate in Tumblr "hate" perform an insidious form of bullying, hidden behind a computer screen. More research needs to be done, but this is an example of how online communities differ from other communities—people are able to use Internet anonymity to avoid taking responsibility for verbal cruelties.

Tumblr is an example of an online community that is like any other community. It is a place of support, encouragement, and talent where people who have something in common can gather. While there are unique negative aspects, such as anonymous bullying, the positive side certainly wins out. It is promising that online communities can be as beneficial to a person's well-being as any other community. Hopefully, there will be similar websites available to people looking for a positive online community experience in the future. ■

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# Communities of Practice

JULEONNA CHANDLER

*Online communities of practice provide a wealth of opportunity for professional development, but assimilating into one can be a complicated endeavor. The equation for success involves communication, conversation, and collaboration.*

In the classroom, on the Internet, or at work, fruitful communities often achieve more lasting success via collaboration rather than individual effort. Specifically, these social collaborations create communities of practice (CoPs), places where social learning occurs among individuals with a shared interest in a subject or problem who collaborate over an extended period of time to share and exchange information and ideas, find solutions, and expand their knowledge. In today's age of globalization and the rapid growth and accessibility of the Internet, CoPs have been embraced in the virtual environment because they remove physical barriers, promoting enhanced knowledge sharing by allowing those who may have been impeded by proximal constraints to join and participate in communities with global membership (Kirschner and Lai 2007). This article defines community of practice and virtual communities of practice.

Fruitful communities often achieve more lasting success via collaboration rather than individual effort.

## Community of Practice (CoP) Defined

Within CoP communities, members join freely and participate based on their own individual goals. As Oliver and Carr (2009) explained, participants interact informally within a socially structured environment, with the level of participation in the community correlating to how the member forms their identity through managing the demands of the various communities with which they identify. When defining the legitimate peripheral participation in the practices of a community, the authors maintain that the participation must be of genuine relevance to the community, be less intense and more supported than is normally the case, and involve interaction with community members.

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The importance of online communities of practice cannot be underestimated. They serve as important resources for professional development, collaborative and supportive learning, and knowledge sharing, achieving results through the interaction, framework, and culture in which they occur (Zhao and Bishop 2011). These complicated virtual collaborations, however, require sophisticated and frequent assessment to function at maximum efficiency.

In an online community, information shared is perceived as a shared resource that can be beneficial to every member of the group (Cheung, Lee, and Lee 2012). Therefore, to be a successful participant in a virtual practice community, the participant must make an ongoing effort to learn. As outlined in Wenger's (1998) learning trajectories, although members can join communities freely, they are not immediately accepted. Participants start off excluded and make an effort to become members.

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Successful integration into these communities is gradual and accomplished in discrete and varied stages. Based on Wenger's learning trajectories, the levels are

1. peripheral trajectories that provide access to the community, but do not lead to full membership;
2. inbound trajectories that progress from peripheral participation to recognition with the community;
3. insider trajectories that encompass a constant renegotiation of one's identity within the community;
4. boundary trajectories where the member participates in more than one community, sometimes resulting in practice-sharing; and
5. outbound trajectories that involve abandoning one identity to take up another within the community (Oliver and Carr 2009).

Wenger (1998) points out that learning occurs in practice communities when a group of people are sharing common practices to grow their understanding and skill through their interactions. In CoPs, then, like other social interactions (whether online or physical), the individual makes personal adjustments to fit the community; the community does not mold itself to the individual.

Virtual CoPs can also be viewed in the social-constructivist approach set forth by Thorpe et al. (2007). Effective collaboration is imperative in groups such as these where members construct knowledge from one another. This collective effort is a defining characteristic of online communication since concepts and attitudes are dynamically constructed, deconstructed, and rebuilt within the group. In defining the tools used to assess the depth of learning in an online community, Thorpe et al. reference Salmon's model of learning to describe transitioning from "access and motivation, through online socialization to information exchange, then knowledge construction, and finally development" (350). It's a complicated process that needs the full cooperation of all its members to succeed.

### **Understanding the Motivation and Barriers for Participation**

All communities, including CoPs, depend on member motivation to flourish. In attempting to understand why members adopt and share in virtual communities, researchers theorize that individuals are ultimately directed by self-interest and that they evaluate the costs and benefits before sharing knowledge in online communities. Cheung, Lee, and Lee (2012) stated that this cost-benefit approach to social exchange is the most prevalent theory applied to the rationalization of knowledge sharing. Some other factors associated with online knowledge sharing include: developing a status and reputation within the community, which leads to enjoyment and reciprocity; establishing trust and social interactions with others; and gaining financial rewards. Within virtual communities, members with common interests can contribute and share knowledge by posting questions, providing answers to question posed by others, debating issues, discussing issues in forums, providing information to subscribers of a listserv, and contributing or acquiring information on electronic bulletin boards, blogs, and wikis.

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Researchers theorize that individuals are ultimately directed by self-interest and that they evaluate the costs and benefits before sharing knowledge in online communities.

Sustainability is a crucial challenge for virtual communities. Once established, an online CoP must have ongoing participation through members who are willing to contribute their knowledge to retain its value. A fundamental problem Cheung, Lee, and Lee outline is the maximization of self-interest by individuals who consume information, but who do not make a reciprocal contribution to the community. As with all communities, then, CoPs will thrive if all members contribute to the cause (Cheung, Lee, and Lee 2012).

## Conclusion

Online CoPs are virtual social collaborations that bring together individuals to exchange ideas, solve problems, and increase knowledge. The CoP approach to online conversations allows groups of motivated individuals to band together and use an informal virtual platform as a tool for personal and professional development. These important shared resources are complex but valuable, a collective knowledge base that benefit both the group as a whole and its individual members. ■

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# Preserving Fan Culture: AO3 and the New Web

CHRISHANDRA TAYLOR

*Archive of Our Own, a diverse online community of creators and curators from across the world, strives to help fan culture survive and thrive on the Internet.*

**A** middle school girl uploads a musical montage of her favorite One Direction songs to YouTube. A married father of four submits his homemade Avengers artwork to deviantART. A housewife e-mails the next chapter of her Harry Potter short story to her blog followers. Despite their varied backgrounds and interests, each of these individuals is participating in an online fan community. Recent advances in technology allow users to contribute to online fan communities in expeditious and inventive ways.

Formerly the domain of alternative fanzines and printed newsletters, online fan communities blossom in today's technology-driven society. Online fandom began in the early 1980s when a few Usenet groups hosted fan-created fiction, or fanfiction, based on Usenet members' favorite television shows, books, and movies. The mid-1990s saw the arrival of websites devoted to hosting fan works for multiple fandoms. On these sites, users could post fan art, fanvids (fan videos), fanfiction, podfic (fanfiction read-alouds), or other fan materials. Archive Of Our Own ([archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org) or AO3) is a popular fan-run online community that houses fan works in a variety of fandoms. Adopting a *for-us-by-us* approach, volunteers manage AO3 by assuming the site administration duties of coding, testing, and translating.

Prior to AO3, fan communities struggled with technological issues. Early fanfiction sites and automatic mailing list servers deleted content shortly after it was posted to save space, creating a lack of permanence. In addition, early Internet service was slow, choppy, and subject to frequent disconnections.

However, technology has now evolved enough to provide Internet users with faster connections and larger bandwidth, which encourages fans to become more proficient in using graphics software and other fan work applications, such as WattPad and Movellas. Without constant improvements and innovations in technology, fan communities would not be as successful in circulating their creative works. Sites like AO3 recognize this fact by using volunteers to beta-test new site features.

Moreover, the sense of inclusion that site members get by using technology as a platform to interact with other people creates a sense of community in a welcoming online environment, allowing AO3 users to establish conventions and norms that are unique to their fan group. The automated AO3 archive interface provides authors with control over their content but without the vulnerabilities and maintenance issues of personal sites, which must contend with high upkeep costs and lack the significant visitor numbers that popular online fan communities offer.

AO3 simplifies the posting process for users by providing a user-friendly interface. Users submit content in a specific category and tag it as needed, and within seconds, their work is visible to anyone on the site. They can modify or delete their contributions at any time. The volunteer administrators exercise control over what is or is not permitted in the community, but they rarely deny stories. This administrative lenience helps to preserve fan culture because "to archive a story is to contribute it to the memory of fandom, and make it available to those who enjoy the shared source material, whether it be a book or a film or a television series" (Versaphile 2011).

Recent advances in technology allow users to contribute to online fan communities in expeditious and inventive ways.

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Although automated and easy-to-use archives like AO3's benefit online fan culture, there are a few downsides. For example, AO3 is a large, searchable archive, but its search engine is not as precise or robust as those on competitors' archives, such as Fanfiction.Net (FFN), which hosts the largest online fan community on the web. AO3 users cannot limit their search to genre, length, size, or number of reviews. Instead, AO3 relies on its authors to tag their fan works, but because those tags are unique, they are not always useful for locating content on the site. AO3 remains popular, though, because it is a donation-supported, no-ad nonprofit, lending the site an indie quality that appeals to many users.

Participants in online fan communities thrive when their needs are met through social interactions, automated archival systems, and evolving technology. Versaphile states that "participants who enter the fandom are inspired by what they read, learn from what they read, and build upon it, creating complex and ever-deepening interpretations that are shared with those who came before and after them" (2011). As online fandoms grow in popularity, the Internet remains the best medium to deliver, preserve, and enforce the works of fan culture. Fan communities that embrace the diverse technological needs of their fans, engage them actively and inclusively, and adapt to changing technologies will continue to thrive online in the coming years. ■

As online fandoms grow in popularity, the Internet remains the best medium to deliver, preserve, and enforce the works of fan culture.

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