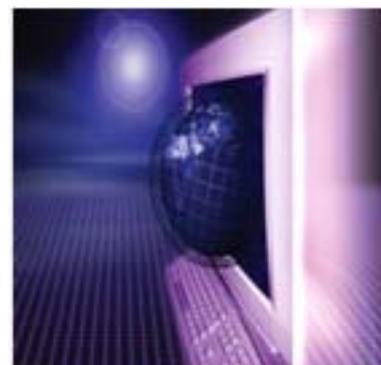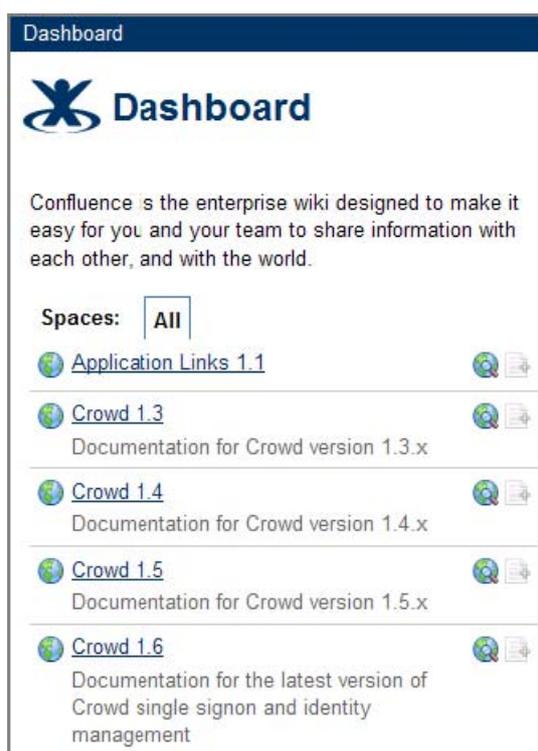## Trends in British Technical Communication

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Trends in British Technical Communication

by Marian Newell

Marian edits *Communicator*, the quarterly journal of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators. She has been a technical author since 1985, half as an employee on IT projects and half as a freelance with a varied portfolio. She has an MA in Technical Authorship from Sheffield Hallam University.

This article discusses the current status of technical communication in the UK by looking at current developments and possible trends. It is based on my experience of working here and liaising with contributors to *Communicator*, supplemented by a survey of members of the ISTC's online groups (thanks to my 40 respondents) and my recent visit to the Technical Communication UK conference (TCUK).

There are two facets to my topic. The first, *trends*, immediately makes me cautious. In these turbulent financial times, we only have to look back a year or so to see how much the opinions of pundits are worth. Many trends are, I suspect, talked up by organisations with a vested interest in their adoption. Others are exciting but never catch on commercially. The second, *British*, may be irrelevant. I've no reason to think there's anything unique about what we're seeing here, although there are probably some differences in the European experience compared with the Australasian or North American.

Still, I have worked in technical communication for a quarter of a century and always in the UK, so I'm probably as well-placed as most to speculate!

Roles and job titles

Debate about changing how we describe our roles has recurred often throughout my career and the options remain remarkably stable. Titles that some consider new-fangled, such as information developer, have actually been around for decades. The ISTC's policy is to refer to practitioners of technical communication as technical communicators in generic contexts (its membership is strongly biased towards *technical* despite the presence of *scientific* in its name). Within this, we most commonly refer to technical authors and technical illustrators in specific contexts. However, where appropriate, we use a wide range of other titles.

I've often used the term 'content creator', especially if I want to be more generic

My own experience, supporting by web searching, confirms the popular view that those specialising in the writing aspect of the job are more often called technical authors than technical communicators here. I've seen people argue that authors are more skilled than writers but my belief is that the title used has more to do with the origins of the organisation than the skills of the title holder.

In my survey, I asked people for their current title and their preferred title. About half were currently technical authors of varying ranks and most were happy with the title. A few were writers rather than authors, and a few would prefer to be communicators rather than authors. Only one expressed a dislike of the author or writer title. Many of those working for themselves noted that they're free to use whatever title suits the circumstances best, often business-oriented titles such director, partner or consultant. Several information-based titles were cited: manager, designer, architect and engineer. Department managers were Head of Technical Communications and Manager, Technical Publications Department.

One of my respondents noted that, despite a move from technical communication to information architecture and design: "I still consider myself a writer and technical communicator, just coming at it from a slightly different angle. I think it's interesting that the skills, attitudes and approach I developed as a writer transfer comfortably into a different type of role."

I've often used the term 'content creator', especially if I want to be more generic and include all who contribute content. However, it raises a question of whether we create or publish content. It seems as if many of those involved in technical communication now do more publishing and less creating.

Deliverables and workplaces

I asked in my survey about current workloads. The answers were too diverse to summarise, including the collection, organisation and delivery of varied technical and business information. Many respondents produce both printed and online deliverables, with some using video and some no longer delivering printed manuals.

I initially wondered if this variety was indicative of a trend. When I joined the ISTC in the 1980s, more members seemed to work for long periods on major projects for large organisations, often in the engineering, aerospace and defence sectors. It now seems as if many members work on software products, with others combining a variety of smaller projects as I do. However, at TCUK I talked to many people involved in complex solutions for large organisations, so I think it depends a great deal on the people whom you ask.

One question I didn't think to include in my survey was about the groups in which people work. However, I think I'm safe in saying that the large technical publications department has had its day. When I started work as a technical author, groups of ten or twenty people were far from unusual. I've heard their decline lamented often since and most of my respondents spoke in terms of working for themselves, as sole authors or in departments of two or three people. I think the effect of this change has been to reduce specialisation—many of us are jacks of all trades—and to reduce the training and mentoring given to people joining our profession.

We used to run a member profile in *Communicator* that included questions on the changes that had happened in the last five years and that were expected in the next five years. A recurring theme in the responses was the shift from paper to electronic delivery. Single sourcing was the industry's initial response to the need to do both. Maintaining two variants seems relatively simple now, when we're faced with more electronic channels, more languages and more product variants, all under the added pressure of shorter product lifecycles. Despite the relatively slow adoption of XML-based publishing, modular content and content management systems, I'd have to put my money on these technologies gaining ground in the future. With fewer technical communication staff struggling to deliver more in most organisations, it's hard to see how we can do it any other way. I know of one ISTC member who has recently taken his company down this route and, although it's a fair-sized company, the technical communication department is small and the strategy is very much to do more with less.

Tools and methods

A complaint often made by technical communicators here is the over-emphasis in recruitment on tick-lists of particular tools. We argue that the core communication skills required remain unchanged and we can learn to use different tools. It was interesting to me, therefore, to see how much more my respondents talked about tools than methods when I asked them about both.

Where respondents described their approach to collecting, organising and delivering information, it was much the same as when I joined the profession. We read the information we're given, use whatever product or service it describes, interview experts (and sometimes representatives of our audience), and then create content that we submit for review before finalising. Several people noticed that their basic approach to the work had remained unchanged, often over as much as 20 years.

The boom years before the latest bust made more tools available to technical communicators. Existing tools were enhanced and new ones were launched, often converging in the process. With that in mind, it's perhaps surprising that several of my respondents reported little change in the tools they use. Nonetheless, many use a wide variety of tools, emphasising how versatile the modern technical communicator needs to be.

Tools from Adobe and Microsoft featured strongly in past and current use, with Adobe's Technical Communication Suite popular for the future. Arbortext, Author-it, Doc-To-Help, ePublisher Pro (WebWorks), Help and Manual, and XMetaL all had their advocates. A range of graphic tools were in use, including Axure, CorelDRAW, Corel Paint Shop Pro, Jing, OmniGraflle, SnagIt, Unigraphics and Wink. One respondent is considering Quark's products. Tools that were mentioned only in past use were Corel Ventura, DemoShield and SmartDraw.

A few respondents had expertise in niche areas, using specialised tools augmented by utilities and macros they'd created themselves. One or two would prefer to use Macs but find they have to use PCs. A notable omission from the responses was MadCap's products, admittedly relatively new but highly regarded.

Methods, for want of a better word, cited by respondents included Information Mapping®, structured and topic-based authoring, markup languages (such as HTML, SGML, XML), controlled languages (such as Simplified English), controlled vocabulary and minimalism. XML was most often cited as an interest for the future, along with DITA. There were sessions on most of these topics at TCUK and it's clear many are widely applied. What becomes evident when you attend an event like that is the sheer scale and complexity of some publishing solutions now being adopted. The keynote speech from Peter Anghelides underlined this: IBM publishes more information than anyone except the US Government.

Peter Anghelides...
IBM publishes more information than anyone except the US Government.

Topic-based authoring is nothing new. User assistance for software products has been designed that way for years. I think it will become more prevalent because it is a logical approach to information architecture as well as

being well suited to multiple outputs and automated workflows. There's no reason why you can't use it for linear printed documents, even though you don't have to, and the way it requires you to analyse your content is likely to improve the way you structure it.

My overwhelming impression from attending TCUK was how computerised our profession has become, both in the tools used and the topics documented. While I know the world is headed this way, it's not there yet. My clients often have limited resources and expertise to maintain or use publishing solutions. They're not unusual—the vast majority of UK businesses are small- to medium-sized, most employing less than 50 people although together accounting for nearly 60% of the private workforce. The consultancy approach, providing ongoing services and support, creates dependency and overheads that may not always be in a client's best interest. Similarly, some of my audiences have other limitations, whether in their facilities (service engineers in developing countries) or their computer skills (gardeners and caretakers). I'm 47 and, while many people younger than me are at ease with digital media, many people older than me are less so. In our eagerness to converse with those who are connected, we must not forget those who are not.

Generalisation and specialisation

Since the advent of desktop publishing in the 1980s, a movement from specialised skills towards generalised skills seems indisputable. Some of my respondents said they do their own illustration as well as layout, and none of the authors mentioned working with illustrators or indexers. I've worked with an illustrator for one client but recent budgetary constraints have favoured photography over illustration. I've never worked with an indexing specialist, now or in the past, as an employee or as a freelance, so there may have been no change there. Contact with members of the Society of Indexers has suggested to me that their work more typically comes through commercial and academic publishers. I know of several ISTC members who have trained with and joined the Society of Indexers to improve their own skills.

The demand for illustration varies with sector. Instructions for software often contain only screenshots and diagrams, and the weakness of the manufacturing sector in the UK's service-based economy may have contributed to the decline in illustration work. The sophistication of modern design systems that support the whole product life cycle has also had an impact. It has become possible for designers to output drawings that are adequate for documentation, albeit without the refinements that a proficient illustrator could make. One of my respondents referred me to the blog (http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/robertpeston/2009/08/) of Robert Peston, BBC Business Editor, which

likens the varied workload of the modern journalist to the versatility of the 1970s Dutch football team (total football). My respondent said: "This is how my career is progressing – I am becoming a 'total author' and I would encourage all technical authors not only to learn how to use the tools at their disposal but to learn to use them professionally. There will always be a need for people who can do something to a professional standard, because there are increasingly so many people doing it so badly, whether it be writing, illustrating, photographing or web designing."

If content management continues to grow, however, we may see new specialisations emerge. With information architecture, content creation and deliverable design once again being separated—different people can take responsibility for them. For me, one of the saddest losses from departments was the technical editor and yet now I'm seeing suggestions that this role may return, perhaps more relevant to managed content from multiple sources than an author. This may be one of the cycles we see, where change is more circular than progressive. At the ISTC Conference of 2008, Horace Hockley award winner Matthew Ellison gave an entertaining talk about trends in user assistance. He compared its evolution to that of the bicycle, not only highlighting some blind alleys in feature design but also how 'best' is not absolute but relative to your needs—if you want to cycle to the shops, a racing bike probably isn't the best choice.

On the subject of separating the creation of content from its presentation, I noted with interest that one speaker at TCUK thought there was no need to worry about the output format or media used for your information, while another said it was important to preview content on the output device to check its usability, while another from outside our profession expressed surprised that we were even considering delivering information without seeing it in its final form—food for thought there, perhaps.

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Translation is a specialisation that has grown throughout my career and remains strong today. Alternatives such as word-free instructions suit some products, and provide valuable opportunities for illustrators, but they can't fulfil all information requirements. It's difficult to imagine that the demand for translation will decline any time soon, although I wonder if a globalised world will eventually settle on a single language. The use of controlled language makes this more feasible.

Surprisingly, few of my respondents reported direct involvement in translation. This would have been true for me until a few years ago but I have since been acting as the liaison point for one client. That's brought home to me the challenges that arise in translation and the importance of terminology management. As a freelance, working outside an organisation with translators who are also outside the organisation, I find it difficult to impose the degree of control and consistency I would like.

Sophie Hurst of SDL, a provider of translation products and services, has written two articles for *Communicator* over the past year based on surveys about authoring and terminology management. She reported the UK results for us (full results are available at www.sdl.com – registration required). Trends she noted included a move towards XML and a growth in the geographic dispersal of authoring teams, with the latter giving rise to concerns about quality and consistency that the respondents did not have the tools to manage. In both cases, the trends were less pronounced in the UK than the US. That may not be a bad thing for the UK profession, in that new approaches may be tested well in the US before they reach us. There was an awareness of the importance of terminology, its connection to brand and its effect on the whole global content lifecycle, from creation to translation. However, most respondents said they were not managing terminology effectively, if at all.

Fads and fashions

At the ISTC Conference of 2007, Scott Abel gave a keynote speech on TechComm 2.0 (http://www.slideshare.net/abelsp/techcomm-20-what-you-need-to-know/1) in which he swept through a plethora of mobile devices and web tools as potential delivery media and techniques. No one would deny that publishing channels are proliferating, or that some can be useful in technical communication, and yet many technical communicators still work in controlled environments that restrict their adoption. As I've said, many of my respondents have seen less change in their tools and methods than one might expect. Most are responding to users and clients who are still focused on the content rather than the means used to deliver it. However, I know from articles written for *Communicator* that people are now using wikis and podcasts for some types of information and this seems set to become more common. The role of user-generated content is growing and I agree with those who say technical communicators will need to focus on more specialised content that the audience cannot, or will not, readily create for itself.

Bogo Vatovec ...we need to be realistic about delivering appropriate levels of quality, rather than striving for perfection.

In his closing presentation at TCUK, RJ Jacquez of Adobe focused on the potential of social networks for delivering information and suggested that technical communicators should become 'information facilitators', getting into online conversations and ensuring that users are finding the information that's available. It's clear that interactive media can help us understand audiences and to provide more targeted content, and many technical communicators are enthusiastic about this opportunity. I think it will be most helpful to those writing for mass audiences rather than for specialised ones. I often write for clients' staff, which makes conversation easier.

Larger organisations, especially those that need to translate into several languages, seem more focused on managed, modular content. There is a criticism that such methods respond more to the publisher's needs than the audience's needs. From what I've read in articles from many sources, I believe there's some truth in this. However, it's also true that providing something to everyone who needs it in a language they can read is better than providing carefully crafted information products for a small subset of the people who need them. A meticulous author at one of my clients laboured long and hard on every manual he produced; I'm sure his results were excellent but they were of no help to the users of all the other products that weren't documented through lack of time or budget. That moves us on to…

Quality and productivity

I've mentioned the need to do more with less in the context of tools and methods. At the ISTC Conference of 2005, Bogo Vatovec gave a keynote speech on trends in technical communication (http://www.istc.org.uk/Events/Conference/Papers/ISTC_Trends.pdf). One of his points was that we need to be realistic about delivering appropriate levels of quality, rather than striving for perfection. His advocacy of 'good enough' was controversial but I've come around to thinking that he might be right. In fact, it's more or less how quality was defined 30 years ago when I served an apprenticeship at an MoD quality assurance directorate: fitness for purpose, including commercial considerations.

One of my respondents has found the same: "I have had a few contracts in the past few years where a company has realised that it needs to provide decent documentation but wants to do it as cheaply as possible. Thus my job has been to produce a basic user guide and what they call a maintenance guide for their programmers, so that the programmers can then maintain the document and keep it up to date with their changes."

Another respondent highlighted the risk that the result may not be good enough: "More and more people and businesses are coming to realise that having poor, or no documentation, does actually cost them more money in the long run than it would to employ or sub-contract a professional technical author to do the job properly. However, straitened financial circumstances cause unpleasant compromises to be made. I think that many organisations would like to use professionals for their documentation needs but simply haven't got the money to do so. Instead, they struggle on with their existing staff (engineers, programmers or marketing people, for example) producing poor quality support materials. They then have to live with the increased support costs and negative end-user reaction. Pity, really."

One change I've noticed that could have a positive effect on quality in the future is the popularity of post-graduate qualifications in technical communication

One change I've noticed that could have a positive effect on quality in the future is the popularity of post-graduate qualifications in technical communication, launched in the UK since I became a technical author. This can only be a good thing for the profession, with the potential to raise both profile and standards. The course itself is only half the story: what I believe is equally important is that we're taking ourselves seriously and obtaining a standard qualification that puts us on a par with others in business. The ISTC has launched its own open learning course and examinations, replacing those dropped by the City & Guilds Institute. This, too, is a step forward for the profession here. One of my respondents said: "I am active in the ISTC and other organisations, and involved in teaching, because I want to improve the recognition and value of technical communication."

Economic and commercial factors

Times are tough here in the UK, as in many places, and I doubt technical communication has been exempt from economic pressures. I checked some job sites and found the number of jobs and contracts were down on 2008, both absolutely and as a proportion of the total. Contract rates had fallen, while salaries had risen only slightly.

One of my respondents said: "I am aware of many self-employed writers who have not had contracts renewed and are finding it tough to gain new ones. The number of job advertisements both permanent and contract has diminished significantly. In addition, the salary offered seems to have dropped, with employers preferring to go for less experience and therefore lower salaries."

The last point correlates with the current demand for technical authors with one to three years' experience noted by a specialist agent in an article I wrote for the Australian bulletin, Words in August 2009 (http://www.abelard.com.au/words-1-3.pdf).

We are fortunate to have some good specialist agencies in the UK but, of course, not all work goes through them. One respondent said: "My last contract was direct and, although it proved difficult at times to negotiate the corporate maze, worked well. I am now using agents and find their lack of knowledge, and their failure to return calls and provide updates, deeply frustrating."

For those of us who work as true freelances, from our own premises and for concurrent clients, agencies are rarely a source of much work. The specialists use some freelances to resource their own managed projects but most general agencies handle only full-time contracts.

On a related theme, one of my respondents said: "I have been trying to get a permanent part-time job or job share and companies seem less open to these opportunities, as human resources departments see them as expensive and inefficient."

Most of my respondents have been affected by the business climate in one way or another, even if only in reduced budgets, although some are as busy as ever. Many reported redundancies, fewer enquiries, lost clients and delayed projects. One, an employee, said UK staff are voluntarily matching a compulsory four-day week introduced for US staff. Another, a freelance since 1984 who has now taken on part-time employment in another field, said it is 'by far the worst recession I have worked through. One regular client (property-related) closed suddenly leaving a big hole in my workload, and another is definitely cutting down on outside work."

In the midst of all this gloom, one respondent turned a threat into an opportunity: "My position had been under threat for a couple of years. The company had already reduced my pay and was starting to make redundancies. The other author was sacked, leaving me as sole author. I seized the opportunity to change my working conditions and quit, saying I was going freelance and would be pleased to quote for the work if the company wanted to retain my services. I increased my hourly rate and now work from home, so I'm happy. They have one less person as an overhead and have retained my product knowledge and authoring services, so they're happy too."

The picture was less clear when it came to the impact of outsourcing or offshoring. Of those affected, as many had gained work through these routes as had lost it. One of those who'd benefited from offshoring said: "I think in the long term outsourcing and offshoring could really hit some technical authors hard. Many have skills that are not as unique as they think they are. Many are not as good as they think they are. Why pay £30K a year plus all the associated costs when a freelance in India (or several other countries) will do it for US $5 an hour?"

Another respondent alluded to downward pressure on remuneration, suggesting contract rates might have fallen by 50% and senior posts might be paying the same as junior posts did 15 years ago.

I'm inclined to agree with these comments, even though early fears about offshoring have yet to become reality.

British people are eager to buy cheap goods made in places that pay low wages but expect high salaries here, a situation that seems unsustainable in the long term. Examples of failed attempts to offshore are often cited but I believe it's worth noting the progress that IT service providers in India have made over a short period: you can now procure effective, competitive services from companies with high levels of process maturity.

Another respondent, who has diversified from technical writing into knowledge management in its widest sense, said: "The freelance work I do now is geared towards this enterprise-wide way of capturing, processing and disseminating information and hopefully creating knowledge. As an aside, I think this is where professional technical communicators need to aim for. I personally sense that salaries in the narrow technical writing field are now less than what I was earning ten years ago and, with Google now often being my first point of call rather than a manual or help file, I wonder if traditional technical writing, as a discrete profession, is in terminal decline. And I really do think technical communicators need to get over the quest for perfect grammar. As a user (rather than producer) of information, I really don't care so long as the content is designed in a way that I can use it: think macro design not micro design."

As Editor of *Communicator*, I have to admit to seeing work of a poor standard from some experienced technical communicators. While not a purist, I do believe that someone claiming to be an author (which not all our contributors do, of course) should be able to write well. However, I doubt that standards of written English are falling: I've seen that complaint in periodicals so old that today's complainers would have belonged to the generations criticised by their predecessors. More to the point, though, it's not just a question of grammar. When I see articles that are inaccurate, incomplete and muddled, I have to wonder what kind of deliverables their writers are producing in the workplace.

The ISTC was as concerned as any organisation by the threat of falling revenues, both from current activities and from lower returns on investments. It's been fortunate in that membership has held steady and both affiliates and advertisers have maintained their support. You can imagine the apprehension about launching the Technical Communication UK conference in such a climate but it was a great success, with positive feedback coming in on comment forms, online groups and social networks.

Conclusion

When you ask around, there does seem to be a certain amount of struggling going on throughout the profession. I think this is not unlike the stress of modern living, about

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which one often hears complaints in wider contexts. People feel under pressure to do more for less, with aspects of their former roles being automated to cut costs. I'm not sure whether that's a genuine trend or just the way people always feel. I've read accounts from the late nineteenth century that make me suspect the latter.

Certain pressures are clearly new. Until about 1980, both authors and illustrators would probably work with pen and paper, needing to know little about graphic design, typography, reproduction or anything else that came after it. A technical communicator today may well have to learn a new tool or technique every year or two, making it no mean feat to keep skills current. Similarly before the world became so small, many would work in their own language with no thought of controlled language, translation or other localisation issues.

I wonder if some pressures arise more from greater knowledge than lower standards. We're more aware of inconsistencies between projects, products, offices and countries but is it that the inconsistencies are new or just that we know about them now? Similarly, we're more aware of the times that we fail our audiences but might that be because we're doing more to measure the success of our outputs and to elicit user feedback? That may be a pressure we should get used to now, as it seems likely that having more conversations with our audiences will give us longer to-do lists in our work.

I don't believe there's been a major change in what we're trying to do or our commitment to do it as well as we can. I do think that more choice in *how* we create and deliver content means more effort in learning about the options and implementing the selected ones. We have to be more flexible and we won't always have the jobs we expected. That can be hard: those who were happy to be technical authors or illustrators (emphasis on *author* or *illustrator*) may feel uneasy, or dissatisfied, in other roles. In that sense, technical communication is like any other occupation and must change with the times.

However, I doubt things change as fast as some would have us believe. There are fresh opportunities for those who want to use new channels to reach people, just as there were in the 1980s and 1990s for those who wanted to become involved in design and typography, and that's great. Equally, there's still work for those who want to create and deliver content in more conventional ways. It seems reasonable to assume that some of the new will eventually displace some of the old, so we must keep informed if we're to make career decisions appropriate to our skills, knowledge, interests and aspirations. In an age that attaches such a premium to choice, perhaps we're lucky to have so many options open to us.