

Guest Editorial

User-Generated Content and Its Effect on Technical Communication

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Somewhere on the world's roadways, a check engine light comes on in a car. The driver asks a passenger to look up the problem on her smart phone. Google returns a mix of results from various sources, including user forums, reviews, diagnostic tutorials, question-and-answer pages, insurance company websites, and a copy of the car's manual in PDF. Online advice runs the gamut from pulling over and calling a tow truck to ignoring the light until it starts blinking. Insights drawn from decades of technical communication research enable us to describe and even predict (to an extent) what the passenger and driver will decide to do. The passenger might chart "self-directed trajectories" through search results [1, p. 32]. The driver will take local conditions and other layers of context into account, and both users will become technical communicators in their own right as they convey information to each other [2]–[4].

We know less about the implications of this mundane scenario for technical communication professionals who are charged with designing effective documentation in a milieu of user-generated content (UGC). This special issue on User-Generated Content and Its Effect on the Profession asks, "What might professional technical communicators do with user-produced documentation?" The question is both descriptive—what *can* technical communicators do with UGC?—and normative—what *should* technical communicators do with UGC? Answering it requires taking stock of the multiple roles that technical writers play within and outside organizations. Technical communicators serve as interpreters of technology [5]; experience designers

and architects [6], [7]; content curators; and user advocates [8], [9]. They represent organizations and products, facilitate or moderate conversations, and design documentation that "accommodates technology to users" [10, p. 118].

To serve effectively in these roles, technical communicators must listen to what users are saying. Yet, despite their best efforts, technical communicators have not always been able to anticipate users' needs [11]—and some users may simply want to learn how to operate the technology in the way that the inventors intended [12]. UGC might offer a glimpse into some users' narratives, but it is up to professional technical communicators to determine how those narratives fit into the mosaic of users' experiences with a product or service. These are the concerns that contributors grapple with in this special issue.

"Finding Stories in the Threads" explores how professional technical communicators might leverage and engage in UGC as a path to career development. Lam and Biggerstaff approached this task through the lens of coding using StackOverflow as a test case. Their study was designed to determine how technical communication students use the forum to identify and engage with the technical content, and whether or not students make meaning and actively fill knowledge gaps. The majority of the participants were unable to solve any of the coding problems using StackOverflow; the most successful students were not the ones with the most subject-matter knowledge, but those who spent time reading and engaging with the stories in the threads.

Lam and Biggerstaff's study illustrates how technical communication has become increasingly intertwined with content development and management on the web. Professional technical communicators are now expected to create and manage content, which may require coding skills. Therefore, the authors argue that engaging in technical forums like StackOverflow allows

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professional technical communicators to access and acquire knowledge about the “language, practices, culture, and problems that the subject matter experts who post on such forums exhibit.” Additionally, to hone students’ problem-solving skills, technical communication instructors can implement a class project that requires the use of this forum to identify a specific technical problem.

In “Waiting for Patients on the Participatory Web,” Bakke juxtaposes the notion of expertise (from technical communication and subject matter experts) versus users’ experiential knowledge in health and medical forums, or e-health resources. Through interviews with community members who self-identified as e-health users, she found that e-health is one resource in a larger health information-seeking process that includes medical providers. Her study participants used a variety of website types, including professionally- and user-generated websites, and those websites were used for different purposes (e.g., education or decision making).

Bakke posits that e-health designers, the technical communicators in that field, can attract readers by understanding their draw to nonhealth expert websites. Based on her study, she identifies four main types of patients: pragmatists, validators, planners, and explorers. She has developed a heuristic of questions that e-health professional technical communicators can ask to account for informational context, emotional context, and the diverse and shifting purposes of their users. These insights for developing purpose-driven personas are particularly important in recent years, especially in light of the rise of controversial user-generated websites such as those created by antivaccination groups.

“Caveat Emptor” explores the notion of lay technical and professional communicators in consumer-to-consumer e-commerce. Specifically, it posits that product sellers’ success in commercial exchange hinges on their ability to accurately and persuasively describe their products. This skill is important because accurate descriptions activate buyers’ trust. However, sellers may be limited or aided in part by the protocols or web forms in the product platforms. Using quantitative content analysis, Robles analyzes several products shared on four product platforms and triangulates that method by examining related documentation and posting processes. He finds that sellers rarely provide content that appears to focus on persuasiveness (e.g., performance capabilities, benefits, or good will), a problem that results from platform design in terms of how much text, how

many images, and how much support it allows for a product’s definitive description.

Thus, if users are expected to contribute quality content that contains both informative and persuasive details, professional technical communicators (and the design team) will need to create web forms that are conducive to an accurate product description. Since these platforms are inherently built on trust, researchers should explore how users define condition categories (e.g., “used-good” versus “used-acceptable”).

In “Boycotting the Knowledge Makers,” Potts, Small, and Trice examine metatags and flair tags in subreddit posts on KotakuInAction to explore “how user-generated organizational schemes of the subreddit assist in both maintaining the culture and curtailing the activities of the subreddit.” As more and more users participate in online communities to provide content, this case study can help professional technical communicators “address disruptive communities by better understanding both their perceived goals and the extent to which they internally honor those goals.”

More specifically, Potts, Small, and Trice found that tags play an important role in forming community ethos and maintaining its culture: Tags are often customized to allow users to “signal the meaning of their contribution to the community”; they are also used defensively (e.g., by avoiding the word *editorial* and using *editorialized* as a critical term to show their distaste for editorial journalism). In addition, the majority of the posts were contributed by a small percentage of power users, a fact that shows the “vital importance of knowing the topics/values important to the community and who the influencers within that community might be.”

Getto and Labriola’s tutorial, “Hey, Such-and-Such on the Internet Has Suggested,” explores strategies for generating and moderating UGC. Although facilitating UGC may seem like an easy task for professional technical communicators to incorporate into their organizations, it is, in fact, a complex process that will involve developing and maintaining technologies that enable user participation, moderating the content, and exerting significant effort to ensure quality. As the authors aptly put it, users these days are “incredibly sensitive to what they are allowed to do within a content network, and what they aren’t.”

Therefore, it is important for professional technical communicators to carefully consider how the avail-

ability of UGC can help solve their organization's problems before setting out to encourage users to generate it. Using iFixit as a model that successfully generates and moderates instructions in a way that meets both organizational and user goals, Getto and Labriola demonstrate the importance of developing

a content strategy that enables interactions among stakeholders, types of content, and technologies within a given content network; building content models into the technologies used for producing content; and using different levels of authority (e.g., administrators, moderators, and users).

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