

10 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SPACE FOR TODAY'S TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION WORK

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The way we communicate has dramatically changed over the past two decades.¹ Not long ago a college student might have taken a break between classes by reading a magazine or talking to friends. Today, when 99% of college students own smartphones (Seilhamer et al.), they might instead view the latest posts on Instagram or TikTok, and they would not be alone in their browsing. In fact, according to a study by Pew Research, 72% of adults in the U.S. are active social media users. With so many people using Facebook, Snapchat, and other social media networks, it is no wonder that they are also being used for less “social” communication as well (see, for example, Bowden and Charles-Smith et al.). Even the field of technical communication has found a way to use social media, and that is what this chapter is going to focus on.

Understanding how technical communication and social media relate is an important topic according to past research. In one study, technical writers were asked what the most important trends or technologies were for the field of technical communication. One of the common answers was “social media,” and specifically Facebook, Twitter (the platform now knows as X), Instagram, and YouTube (Lanier). In another study, researchers looked at job postings for technical communicators to understand the types of jobs they were getting and what skills they needed for them. One of the biggest job sectors was in “social media writing,” and one of the skills required for many of the technical writing jobs included an understanding of social media (Brumberger and Lauer).

This chapter highlights the relationship between social media and technical communication. First, we will define social media so that we have a

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better understanding of what we mean when talk about it. Then we will cover some of the main ways in which social media is used by technical communicators, looking at examples of each used in the real world to help technical writers perform their jobs. By the end of the chapter, you will understand what tasks you may use social media for in the workplace, and how those tasks are performed.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

When people hear the term “social media” they often think of the platforms we use to connect to friends and family, like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. But social media means more than that. In this section we want to try to better understand the meaning of the term social media, so that we can better talk about it in relation to technical communication.

One of the best definitions of social media comes from an article by Carr and Hayes, which states:

Social media are internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others. (Carr and Hayes)

The definition does not name any specific platform, but instead focuses on the functions they have in common and what users do on them. First, these platforms allow users to share content of all kinds, like text-based messages, images, and videos. This content is considered “user-generated,” meaning that the social media users are responsible for creating and distributing it. The opposite might be “corporation-generated,” content that is made by a newspaper or publishing company. This is an important distinction because it means that users can create and distribute whatever content they would like without having to ask permission to post it. It also means the content we receive from social media channels can come from almost anywhere and be created by almost anyone—creating concerns on how accurate and credible information might be.

Social media also allows users to define the audience with whom they share their content, and that audience can be as large or as small as they choose (based on the settings of the user). A typical website, on the

contrary, is either public or private, with no in-between. If you were to put something on a webpage, you have little control over who sees it. It might be seen by people who are not your target audience, or people who you would rather not see it.

People can also interact with each other and the information shared through social media. They can ask questions, argue, give feedback, or provide corrections. And they can do this instantly in real time, as Facebook Messenger demonstrates, or sometime in the future, like days, months, or even years later (e.g., responding to or forwarding a Tweet that went out weeks ago). Conversely, digital media platforms like webpages have little ability to provide interactions, and any they do provide (like comments after an article on a page), are limited to asynchronous (i.e., time delayed) interaction with no ability to have real-time conversations. Still other platforms, like forums, are great at interactivity, but fall well short of social media's ability to feature multi-media (like images or videos), or to broadcast messages (like questions or information) to networks.

So social media is more than the platforms we use, it is what they allow us to do that makes them social media, and what they allow us to do is communicate in ways that were not possible even two decades ago. And while certain platforms specialize in certain types of media (for example, YouTube specializes in videos and Instagram specializes in images), they all share the same features in common. It is these features that technical writers can harness to create better information products for end users. The next section discusses how social media is being used in technical communication, and expands on the idea that through these platforms, technical communicators can do their jobs even better.

HOW IS SOCIAL MEDIA USED IN TC?

Now that we have defined social media, we will turn to understanding how it is being used every day in technical communication. While this section cannot cover every major way in which it is used, it will cover some of the more important areas where social media can help technical writers create better information products for users.

DOCUMENTATION DISTRIBUTION

When people think of technical communication, one of the first things that might come to mind is technical documentation. In this case, documentation means information that teaches or explains to readers how to

use or do something. Examples of the kinds of documentation you, as a technical writer, might create include instruction manuals, how-to guides, and reference books. Technical writers have been creating such technical documents for decades and, in fact, the technical communication profession itself was formed to better study and create such products. These documents were the stock-in-trade of the technical writer, who worked diligently for years to help people better understand how to use their technology product, be it a small software application or a military jet fighter.

For half a century this work was carried out first on typewriters and then on computers. The technical documentation—the instruction manuals and guides—were always intended to be printed. Sometimes the instructions were little more than a single sheet of paper, folded up and included with the packaging of a product (which you can still find today with many small or simple products), and other times they were thick books, bound together on pages with color illustrations. The point is, these *information products* (as items that technical communicators make are often called) were always printed out, always delivered with a specific product, and always meant to be held in the hands of the user.

But over the past two decades, technology has dramatically changed how these staples of technical communication are made and delivered. Not only have specialized software programs helped technical writers create information products more quickly and easily, but they have also transformed the way people read and use them, and little has transformed them more than social media. While *printed* documentation will always have a place in technical communication, more and more instructions and “documentation” are being produced via video, which is then distributed through different platforms, most especially through YouTube.

YouTube is the second most popular social media platform in the United States (behind Facebook) and the most popular video streaming platform in the world. According to the company’s own statistics, over 1 billion hours of video are watched every day (YouTube for Press). And while many of those are fun and entertaining, a good number of them are also videos that provide instruction to users. In fact, there really is not a process or procedure you can think of, whether it is building a model airplane or flying a real one, that does not already have at least a handful of videos on YouTube to tell you how to do it.

And that goes for very complicated, very technical products as well. Tutorials and guides for using complex technology are often uploaded to YouTube by their manufacturers. Adobe, one of the largest technology companies in the world and maker of applications like the Portable

Document Format (PDF), Flash, and Photoshop, created dedicated YouTube channels to help users better understand their products.

The Adobe-run channel, *Adobe Photoshop*, features hundreds of videos explaining the intricacies of their popular graphic editing software. Photoshop is an extremely sophisticated application with a wealth of features and functions. Each feature has multiple settings and can be combined with other features, each with their own sets of modifications and changes. The result is a computer program with thousands of potential ways to be used. Imagine designing a user's manual for that? Adobe embraced social media because they knew that if their users wanted to understand how to truly use their product, they had to move instruction from books to videos, and YouTube allowed them to share those videos with millions (though they also publish numerous books and online articles to help their users as well).

It is not just large companies using YouTube to provide technical documentation, small companies use it too. GeoInsight makes a single product used for obtaining water samples for environmental testing. Though the device is relatively simple, it comes in different designs and there are a number of ways to use it. While the company keeps sets of written documentation that can be downloaded from its website, it also created a channel on YouTube called *Hydrasleeve* to host how-to videos, demonstrations, and studies. It serves a very small population of users, but it provides a different method through which the company can give those users the information they want.

Past studies have shown that there are right and wrong ways to create technical videos for YouTube. Instructional videos should take the time to introduce topics and tell the users what they will be able to do by watching. They should also demonstrate content and both explain and perform the steps (instead of merely performing them) (Swartz). While performing the process or steps, the videos should have a high production quality and use static images as well as video and include textual messages to reinforce the images. Finally, they should have background music but less background noise, and include a fast speaking rate (Hove and van der Meij).

The use of videos, through social media platforms like YouTube, will surely increase as internet speeds become even faster and more people carry devices on which to watch them. They are a convenient and effective way of supporting users of technology.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Social media is also really useful for understanding an audience. Though technical communication is best known for the products it creates, like

instruction manuals or how-to videos, much of a technical communicator's time is spent in the planning process. And within that process, one of the most important stages is understanding the people who will actually be reading the instructions or watching the videos. Without this knowledge, technical communicators may have no idea what or how much information their readers actually need. If a product's documentation does not match a reader's expectations, there could be some very negative results, like bad product reviews or a loss in sales. To make sure that the information they are providing is actually the information the readers need, and to also make sure they are giving the information in the right way, technical communicators will study their audience through a method often referred to as an "audience analysis."

Audience analyses may be carried out in a number of different ways, but they all have the same goal: to understand the document's readers (Ross). Among the many aspects about the audience that technical communicators want to know include how much the readers already know about the product or technology and what they use that product or technology for and how, where the readers are from and what their primary language is, and what their ages are and how they learn new information. These characteristics and many more are all combined so that technical communicators can build a comprehensive picture of what the reader looks like, which is often called an "audience persona." This audience persona is an imagined person (or people, as technical communicators may build 5-7 or more of them) that represents the reader of the documents being created (Lam and Hannah). This helps the technical communicator understand exactly what information should be included in the manuals and how it should be presented.

Conducting audience analyses and creating personas used to be very difficult, time consuming, and expensive (Hovde). Technical communicators had to use methods like surveys, interviews, and focus groups to find out information about their readers. Researchers would send paper-based surveys in the mail or through email, both asking customers about themselves. Unfortunately, this method requires you to already know who your readers are before you conduct the research. Another problem is that rarely do people respond to surveys. In fact, surveys by mail usually only receive about a 50% response rate (Keeter et al.), while email surveys only get about a 24.8% response (Fluidsurveys). Interviews and focus groups present challenges because they require participants to give up their time and provide a lot of information that they might not feel comfortable giving to strangers.

Social media, though, makes the process of finding out about an audience far more convenient (Humphrey). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram help technical writers better understand their product's customers, and can help writers identify important characteristics about them, like where they live, how old they are, whether they have pets, and even what events or news stories they are following or interested in. Information like this and more helps the writer then draft documentation or make videos that better fit the audience, whether by informing writers to use examples and metaphors better understood by people of a certain age, or to use images and colors that are more culturally appropriate. It is not that this information could not be attained without social media, it is that social media makes the process of information gathering much easier.

Twitter (X) and Instagram, because they allow people to see what their users post (as long as their profiles are marked 'public'), can help technical writers build audience personas based on what their readers are talking about (Humphrey). Perhaps the easiest method of using them is by conducting a simple search for certain keywords. For example, if a technical communicator was designing an instruction manual for a SQL database, they might conduct a keyword search for "SQL" or "SQL database." From the search they might see dozens or even hundreds of users who have posts containing the word, "SQL." The list of posts derived from this search could then be narrowed down to the most relevant posts (maybe people talking about using SQL databases). Finally, from that list, technical communicators can look at the profiles of the people who posted them and gain important insights about them, like where they live and what they do. From all this information, a full picture of the potential audience for an instruction manual for a SQL database can be formed, and accurate reader personas can be created.

Facebook provides even more insight about its users, which can also really help technical communicators get to know their own audiences. The first step, as in the case of Twitter (X) and Instagram, is to find the relevant users of the products the technical writer is writing about (Humphrey). Because Facebook includes among its features Pages and Groups for users interested in specific interests, technical writers may need only to find the Pages or Groups related to what they are writing about, and then begin gathering information about the group members and people who like the pages. As in the case of Twitter (X) and Instagram, details like where people live or what they do can be easily found (depending on the users' privacy settings), but Facebook can provide much more than that. An audience analysis using Facebook as a source might also tell us where people work,

what education level they have reached, what their primary languages may be, and even whether or not they like dogs (though that may not always be relevant).

Now, understandably, some might feel a bit creepy looking at all of these users and collecting their information. If that is the case, then these platforms also permit other great ways of conducting reader research. All three of them allow the creating and posting of polls, so technical writers can ask users questions about themselves. These polls can either be included as page posts (or Instagram posts or a tweet on Twitter (X)), or as advertisements to platform-users who have been identified as potential audience members. Whatever method is chosen, all of the information helps technical communicators create better information products that will be more effective and helpful for the readers.

READER FEEDBACK

It is sometimes very difficult to understand whether the information products that technical communicators create are actually effective or not. Is the information in them correct? Is it easy to understand? Does it actually help the readers accomplish their tasks? Aside from conducting a thorough analysis of the audience, as explained in the previous section, how can we find out this information? The easiest way is to get feedback from the readers themselves (Kahn). If we know, for example, that certain steps in an instruction manual are confusing, then we can fix them for the next readers. But unfortunately, getting that information is not at all easy.

Years ago, the only method for getting reader feedback was by phone or email. At the back of most any manual would be found an email address where people could send general inquiries about anything relating to the product, like questions about defects or the product's use. This email address was also where readers could provide feedback about the documentation itself. Once someone sent an email, that feedback would eventually find its way to the technical writers who created the manual, but it could take some time for this to happen (feedback was rarely, if ever, immediate). And if the technical writers needed to clarify the information received, they would have to email the reader back, hoping that the person would then expand on their previous comments. Ultimately, getting information from readers that provided insight about documentation was difficult to do, and so it was rarely pursued.

Today, however, getting readers to provide information about products or technical documentation is far easier thanks to social media (Astoria Software). Social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter (X), and

LinkedIn, allow technical writing teams to gather feedback from individual readers or whole audiences. If the company or product has its own social media channels—like a Facebook Page or Twitter (X) profile—then these can easily be used to request this type of feedback. A post could simply ask readers about their impressions about the product's documentation, interface, or support system, and then note the responses that follow (Kahn). The amount of feedback received will no doubt vary based on how many Twitter (X) followers or Page Likes there are, but even a minimal amount of feedback can alert technical writers to issues or problems with their information products that they had not seen themselves.

Perhaps just as important is the ability of technical writers to more quickly communicate with the readers that actually provide the feedback. In the past, it could take days or maybe weeks for the comments from readers to reach the desks of the technical writers the comments were meant for. But now, the information, comments, or questions that readers post to social media platforms can be responded to instantly (Carr). Technical communicators can ask follow-up questions to clarify or otherwise get a better sense of the readers' concerns. They can also, in turn, address the issue the reader communicated about, and then send it to the reader to make sure the problem that was identified was actually fixed. This type of rapid, back and forth feedback can help advance the usability of a product's documentation immensely, because if a single reader has a problem with the information, then there is a good chance other readers will have that problem too.

In addition to gathering unsolicited feedback from readers, technical communicators can also use these same social media platforms to test out new information products and request information about them (Gearhart). For example, a technical writing group can create a post that features a new software interface on the product's Facebook Page, and then ask the product's users what they think of it. Is the interface better or worse than the old one? Is the information on it easy to find or is it cluttered and confusing? The information they receive can help the writers make changes to the interface (or instruction manual, etc.), and create a better product. This type of usability testing always existed, but it is much easier to carry out now because of the reach of social media platforms.

In the previously noted case, the social media platforms' advertising ability would also be very convenient. If a product did not have a large social media following, but the product's writers still wanted to gather feedback about the documentation, interface or other information product, they can create advertisements that would reach the right people. Using

strategies from the second section (conducting an audience analysis), advertisements could be aimed at the right type of social media user, people who might use the product being designed. Though this method costs money, it is still a much easier, and potentially far less expensive, manner of gaining insight into the effectiveness of the documentation being written.

TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN TC

This section provides some tips for actually using social media to carry out technical communication. This is not at all as easy as you might think. As with communicating through any other media, there are a lot of things to consider before you begin creating a Facebook post or YouTube video. Three specific questions to ask are: When should social media be used instead of other media? What platform might be best to use? How should technical information be presented on them? The following discussions will try to answer these questions in turn.

WHEN SHOULD SOCIAL MEDIA BE USED?

Where technical writing is concerned, what you use to communicate to an audience will depend on the context of the writing situation. If your audience is working in a circumstance where they will not have access to the internet, then perhaps the information they need is best communicated offline, as in a traditional hard copy manual. But if you are sure they will have access to the internet and the ability to stream multi-media, then making information available through social media becomes an option.

Another item to consider is the amount of technical information to be communicated. Social media does not lend itself to large amounts of information with multiple sections, reference items or explanations. According to research conducted by the software company, TechSmith Corporation, 52% of YouTube viewers prefer instructional videos no longer than 6 minutes (TechSmith). And while both Facebook and LinkedIn allow users to write longer posts, they have no way to maneuver or navigate within them (like linked tables of contents or ways to jump to different subjects), forcing readers to scroll down and scan for information needed. Finally, does your audience actually use social media? Each social media platform has specific audience demographics that are easy to identify (for example, see Chen), and if the audience you are trying to reach does not fall into a group using the platform you are considering, then you should find another way to reach them, maybe one that does not even include social media.

WHAT PLATFORM WOULD BE BEST TO USE?

Again, the platform you use to communicate to audiences or use to research your audience or gain feedback will depend on your goals and audience. If you hope to conduct research about your readers to create better documentation for them, then using a platform that allows you to conduct such research would be ideal. Platforms like Twitter (X) or Instagram let you see details about users if their accounts are public, whereas Facebook and LinkedIn may not provide any details at all. However, if you hope to share detailed information with those readers, then you want to choose a platform that allows you to provide longer forms of information, like Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Likewise, if your goal is to share multi-media, like an instructional video, then choose those platforms that allow you to distribute that type of media, especially YouTube, which was designed to broadcast video. Conversely, while YouTube is perhaps the best at distributing videos, it is far less effective at communicating directly to audiences. It does have a commenting feature, but the near real-time ability to converse with customers or product users that Twitter (X) or Facebook offer is much better. So, before deciding which platform to use, try to understand what you want to achieve and who you are trying to communicate with, and then let that information guide your decision.

HOW SHOULD INFORMATION BE PRESENTED?

Finally, you need to understand how best to present information on these various platforms. Because each one is so different, there are different methods and best practices for each, and so a full accounting of how to do it is out of the scope of this chapter. But there are some general rules that can be followed which may help, the most important might be to remember that the information should be brief, professional, interactive, and multi-media. First, remember that social media is not the best platform for long form information (like an installation guide with hundreds of steps). Instead, present information that can be shared in small “bites,” like quick tutorials, explanations, or topics. Alternatively, you can use the post to direct readers to longer forms of information if needed.

Also, ensure that your posts are professionally written. Grammar, spelling, tone, and voice should all reflect the same level expected in other forms of a product's documentation. The type of casual language (not to mention emoticons or funny memes and gifs) you might use when posting on your personal accounts for friends or family to see would be out of

place when presenting the sort of precise information technical writers are expected to relay. An attempt to be entertaining could distract from an important message needed by your readers.

Next, understand that information on social media platforms is interactive. Readers can ask questions about it, comment on it, rate and review it, share it, and copy and change it. Unlike a PDF instruction manual that might be posted on a company's website and then forgotten about, the information on social media platforms could continue "living" for ages afterwards. So, be sure to respond to the interactions; to the questions, comments, ratings, reviews, and changes. Finally, take advantage of the abilities of the platform you use. Each of them allows you to share multi-media, which may make it easier for an audience to understand the information presented. Things like animated GIFS, videos, and different types of images can be easily integrated into posts and tweets, so find opportunities to use them for your audience.

CONCLUSION

Social media is certainly not a passing fad. Though the specific platforms may come and go, there will most likely always be apps that allow people to connect to each other to share content (a very basic, but still very relevant, definition of social media). Some of the biggest platforms continue to remain popular among all age groups and demographics, especially Facebook and YouTube, two of the oldest. And as they continue to be used by so many people, they will also continue to be an excellent space for technical communicators to carry out their work. Simply put, technical communicators go where their audience is. If their audience prefers printed manuals, then that is what writers will make for them. At the moment, much of the audience is spending their time on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube, and so harnessing those technologies for technical communication makes a lot of sense.

"Documentation" is being redefined as technical writers use social media to distribute content, especially video-based content. Gone are the days when someone who purchased software had to rely on a dusty manual to learn about it. Now, quick video tutorials about products and their processes, uploaded by the organizations that made the products, are becoming increasingly common, giving audiences new modes for learning. Much of this content is being designed and produced by technical communicators.

The relationship between the audience and the technical writer is also changing thanks to social media. It is easier to find out and understand who their readers are now. With a simple search on Facebook or elsewhere,

technical communicators can construct a comprehensive picture about who their audience is, what kind of information they need, and how best to present that information.

Finally, social media platforms are placing technical writers and their readers into a much more collaborative relationship. While once they were separated by time and space, and the only way for a reader to contact a writer was through a vague email address at the back of a manual, they can now converse with each other through multiple platforms, like Twitter (X) or Facebook. Readers can point out issues or ask questions about the process of using a product, and technical communicators can ask for feedback about everything from new interfaces to a set of instructions. This exchange of information could lead to better information products that benefit all of its users, not just those the technical writer has been talking to.

The list of ways that social media is changing and helping technical communication is by no means exhaustive, there have been a wealth of studies that show how social media platforms are being used in technical communication in many different ways. And as time passes and more features and functions are added to social media platforms, there is no doubt that they will be found useful in even more ways. And the technical writers of the near future will need to be well versed in using social media, not just for keeping in touch with their friends and family, but for carrying out technical communication as well.

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TEACHING RESOURCES

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

The main point of this chapter is that social media platforms can be used as utilities in technical communication, not just for personal entertainment or marketing. As communication mediums they are uniquely powerful for technical writers because they reach such a wide audience of readers or potential readers.

This chapter would be especially useful to teach when students are discussing audience, the types of media used for technical communication, and the purposes for a technical communication project. And while this essay focused on only a few of these platforms when providing examples, students should be encouraged to think about other platforms not mentioned, and perhaps those they use much more frequently.

Above all, the important items to highlight while presenting this chapter are:

- The platform size,
- Its audience characteristics, and
- The type of media it allows users to share.

All this should really challenge students to think about audience and purpose. The three items listed earlier will depend on what the communication is and who it is for. Once students understand that, they will be able to view social media platforms as simply another way to communicate to their readers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

To help students explore the ideas discussed in these entries, consider having them address—as individuals, in small groups, or as an overall class—the following questions:

1. As best you can, identify the audience of the social media platform you use most? What type of media is best shared on that platform? Based on these answers, what technical communication purpose would that platform best be suited for and why?
2. Are you able to look at the followers of a certain brand on a social media platform – for example, a car company like Tesla, or a technology company like Apple – and find similarities amongst those people?
3. Is there a form of technical communication, or perhaps a purpose, that social media platforms in general would not be suited for? If so, what type of medium would instead be best and why?
4. Think about what an audience is. Now, discuss how you think social media use in the technical communication industry might change how we define audience. Does it change the relationship between writer and reader? If so, how?
5. Can you identify any new skills or knowledge you might need as a technical writer working with social media platforms that technical writers of twenty years ago might not have needed?

Examining these items can help students better reflect upon and consider how to apply the ideas presented in the essay within the context of their own writing processes.