

Technical Writing in Modern Times and its implications in Social Media

Ekta Bhagia

New York Institute of Technology

Abstract

Social Media is built around the art of storytelling, but most readers prefer valuable facts and ideas rather than the whole story. Enter the technical writers, who are proficient in doing so. This paper reviews the different add-on features incorporated into technical writing due to the emergence of social media as one of the most universal channels used to market products or services for all businesses. Technical writing has evolved over the years and goes beyond the writing of monotonous user manuals. It has given birth to *Subject Matter Experts*, exercised a *conversational approach* and *customer relationship management* with the sole purpose of increasing engagement amongst the online communities to further improve its writing structure based on user feedbacks, reviews and suggestions. It has also improvised the effect of text-based content by complimenting it with the use of various *graphical* options. Technical writing has proven itself to become one of the most exponentially growing fields and has many prospects to be added in the near future, especially within the Digital Domain.

At its core, technical writing is about communicating information. This information in modern times is available in both print and electronic form. This type of writing bridges people and technology to help conduct a business. Most experts believe that technical writing's golden age was marked by the invention of the computer. Joseph D. Chapline was known to be a pioneer in the field of modern technical writing. He was responsible for producing the first manual, a 37-page document ever written for a functioning electronic computer named the *Operating and Maintenance Manual for the BINAC (Binary Automatic Computer)*, built for Northrop Aircraft Corporation. This manual provides the user with a full overview of the machine's construction, operations and maintenance in a step-by-step, readable manner, with clear supporting diagrams illustrating the BINAC's various features. Chapline's instructional, user-oriented approach influenced the pattern for scads of computer manuals that would follow it.¹ It was not until 1975, when the U.S. Government enacted Magnuson–Moss Warranty Act that required manufacturers and sellers who offer written warranties to clearly disclose and describe the terms of those warranties in a definite manner.² This significantly contributed to the increased demand for technical writers.

¹ <http://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?id=661>

² <https://www.proedit.com/history-of-technical-writing/>

Users of both- a technical product and social media can refer to all the digital materials such as news, facts, documentation and data at whichever time of the day they need it and from whichever time period they prize it out, regardless of where they themselves are situated while performing the search online.³ Here, all groups of people get connected online to share information. This information knows no bounds or limits.⁴ They can perform searches within a fraction of seconds for any given product or service and send out comments or ask questions from the SME (Subject Matter Expert) with the convenience of communicating from the comfort of their own homes or offices. Technical writers who create documentation reach out to SME's when they need more information about the product that they need to describe. In literal terms, it can be said that technical writing as a whole gave birth to SME's who in turn produce content to help the technical writers get better insights on certain products. It is a mutual concession between the two, where one provides dynamic possibilities of digital communication and the other produces content to put up on digital platforms, thereby, seeping some characteristics of social media writing into the technical writing field. SME's can be reached via links such as tweets which can be added to the end of documents in order to get immediate responses; especially

³ <https://managementhelp.org/blogs/communications/2012/05/27/social-media-for-technical-writers/>

⁴ <http://www.tcworld.info/e-magazine/content-strategies/article/using-social-media-in-technical-communication/>

for time sensitive situations. Such newly found communication modes also keep all stakeholders in conformity of ongoing critical situations, new knowledge about the latest product updates and details.

This type of a shared technical communication might sound very user-friendly and speedy but there are still downsides to it. Some technical information cannot be placed within social media channels, especially if it is considered a highly sensitive data or corporate confidential information of any sort. It is entirely dependent upon every organization to decide which types of documents can be placed online for social media access, which are supposed to remain on paper format, and which to store elsewhere. If an organization has been storing data within their cloud system, then they can set it up accordingly to retain confidentiality. Using social media is useful for technical writers as it would provide easier accessibility to SMEs, users, and internal communications taking place in a top down organization, however, it is also important for technical writers to discriminate between shareable and non-shareable content.⁵

⁵ <https://managementhelp.org/blogs/communications/2012/05/27/social-media-for-technical-writers/>

Technical writing contributes majorly in the production of content centered around marketing objectives. All these materials add to the credibility of the organization and its products. Social media for technical writers under this light works to improve customer service and sociability. If there is a problem with a purchase or any questions related to the same, the customers can directly get in touch with customer service and the customer service personnel through a single text or tweet. The customers might later consider re-tweeting a positive appraisal about the organization and its efforts in solving their issues.⁶

Both social media and technical writing requires a good understanding of how to write short, concise information. The format of technical writing is no longer confined to lengthy user manuals. Social media restructures the responsibilities of a technical writer and extends it to be beyond just writing. It increases the demand for fluency in the usage of digital tools. Whilst understanding the entire project from start to scratch and counting in all complexities of implementation might still be the primary step for breaking down the information in simpler terms for better

⁶ <https://managementhelp.org/blogs/communications/2012/05/27/social-media-for-technical-writers/>

understanding of a product by its customers; but going beyond basic text editors, creating, annotating, adding graphics in the form of screenshots to compliment the document and extracting data from Excel and further conveying it in charts and tables is new.⁷ Any graphical content is the face of a product. Wise use of Screenshots can make the technical documentation more engrossing as it is the first thing that customers will see when they visit a product's website or blog. Screenshots act as an easily navigating and organic form of resources and also promote ascendant decision making in the customers minds. Therefore, it's crucial to get the perfect screenshot in the correct screen resolution setting and yet there is so much more to explore like authoring, publishing, screen captures, drawing and image manipulation.⁸ Using the right tools for technical writing makes the content more saleable.

Social Media created a sense of community within the technical writing spectrum. This sense of community is established through a two-way communication taking place between the technical writers and the users of their products. Technical writers

⁷ <https://www.instructionalsolutions.com/blog/what-is-technical-writing>

⁸ <https://document360.io/blog/tools-for-technical-writing/>

are now incorporating user-generated content into their design documentation by driving social media announcements in the direction to the links of their documentation sites and wikis, where customers can post feedbacks about their experiences with the product. This can help give structure to the way that social media is used by technical writers, and simultaneously provide the ability to measure the impact of the technical content posted online. Technical writing might change its ways of marketing its qualities, but its main goal will never lose sight of establishing governance and standards for the purpose of enriching technical documentation.⁹

Research is one of the first steps in technical writing. Such a research focuses on collecting the data which may or may not be numerical and turn it into valuable information. The sources for it can come from a variety of places including on-site data, interviews, libraries and research databases and majorly from online publications found on social media. Very often, the technical information you research sometimes must be customized according to the target audience which is determined by certain demographic factors such as age, sex, race, income level and

⁹ <http://www.astoriasoftware.com/the-role-of-social-media-in-technical-documentation>

so on. These demographic factors can be determined using free or paid tools available on social media.¹⁰

In modern times, the majority of professional groups make use of this social media platform including doctors, engineers, lawyers, architects, technicians and designers.¹¹ At this moment, technical writing content does not only cater to a specific target audience, but instead it becomes available to the general public to view and learn. Technical writing has been appended with certain additional features due to its newest collaboration with social media. These features include but are not limited to building and manipulating the correct tone, style, and format for your document, building and maintaining proficiency of evolving technologies and changing business needs, building and publishing of technical content to product wiki and troubleshoot publishing issues on wiki or any other social media platforms for that matter.

¹⁰ <https://www.instructionalsolutions.com/blog/what-is-technical-writing>

¹¹ <http://www.tcworld.info/e-magazine/content-strategies/article/using-social-media-in-technical-communication/>

There has been recent progress in the medical field with improvements in research, medicine and laboratory equipment. With the advent of groups in the form of online communities, it has been possible for doctors and patients to collaborate for providing the technical information upon any given product. It helps the common people to stay aware of these advancements and brings people closer together across the globe. Concurrently, the other side of technical writing is aimed at businesses and organizations who deliver vast amounts of technical writing to explain internal communications and procedures, sell products and services to other businesses, or define policies. A very good example for this would be Microsoft Hololens 2. It uses Augmented Reality (AR) for creating an optical projection system to beam holograms into your eyes. Global Digital Marketing Capabilities & Operations Director at Allergan, a Pharmaceutical Company, said that they deal with various doctors in numerous parts of the world for the purpose of selling their products. They typically hire medical experts to conduct this sale in order to ensure proper delivery of the product's description and usage. These experts are real doctors who use Hololens 2 to display an affected area of the body, while the body part is projected on the other side of the sales location through the Augmented Reality headset. An error-free and accurate communication from the businesses end becomes very vital to make the sales, yet a proper technical documentation such as brochures, catalogs and manuals with step-by-step guide for the Hololens 2 in both print and electronic

versions for the same becomes essential. Thus, inclusion of social media in technical writing fills the gap between the developers' products and consumer psychology; where the preceding part would not be of much use if the latter part does not understand the functionality. Technical writing in modern times connects products, consumers, and businesses in a more conversational manner and enables them to understand each other in a more efficient way. Society for Technical Communication are known to host several special interest groups for these different aspects of the profession.¹²

Customers get prompt solutions to their queries by technical content available on social media. Technological advancements in many devices or equipments that we are surrounded by on a daily basis are becoming more complex day by day. Therefore, it becomes absolutely necessary to understand the correct usage of all such devices to further ensure personal safety and avoid any accidents. For example, household equipment like security systems, automatic electronic locks, televisions, refrigerators, air conditioning systems and coolers require instructional

¹² <https://www.stc-psc.org/what-is-technical-writing/>

manuals for proper installation and maintenance generally done by adults, while these manuals also serve to parents as a tool for educating their children about the same, because in curiosity, children might fiddle or test with the equipment in their absence. In this given situation, parents might read the information available in the product manuals or brochures to learn beyond the general usage of their product, however, they will benefit more from social media applications such as Wikipedia. Wikipedia might help them to know even the smallest of the information related to any technology or device with multiple illustrations in the form of text or image, tables and graphs. The information available in Wikipedia will help people of all ages to understand the information as it is.¹³ This means that the information is written in simple English and uncomplicated use of words, while it is also available in many other languages for easy user accessibility. Through social media, the potential reach, efficiency and effectiveness of technical writing is greatly expanded.

¹³ <http://www.tcworld.info/e-magazine/content-strategies/article/using-social-media-in-technical-communication/>

Technical writing currently seems to be a primal part of business writing as well as social media writing. It cannot be replaced by the latter two, but it surely can collaborate with both the writing styles for optimum results and public outreach.

Annotated Bibliography

N.A. The role of social media in technical documentation. Retrieved from <http://www.astoriasoftware.com/the-role-of-social-media-in-technical-documentation>

Anthony James (September 5, 2018). 3 reasons why technical writers should switch to social media writing. Retrieved from <https://klariti.com/2018/09/05/technical-writers-social-media/>

Ramesh Ramamurthy (January 2010). Using Social media in technical communication. Retrieved from <http://www.tcworld.info/e-magazine/content-strategies/article/using-social-media-in-technical-communication/>

Jeremy Norman (n.d.). Innovative Aspects of the BINAC, the First Electronic Computer Ever Sold. Retrieved from <http://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?id=661>

Theresa Pojuner (May 27, 2012). Social Media for technical Writers. Retrieved from <https://managementhelp.org/blogs/communications/2012/05/27/social-media-for-technical-writers/>

Tom DuPais (March 19, 2018). What is technical writing [New Definition 2018]. Retrieved from <https://www.instructionalsolutions.com/blog/what-is-technical-writing>

Sriram Hariharan (June 11, 2018). 10 most popular tools for Technical Writing. Retrieved from <https://document360.io/blog/tools-for-technical-writing/>