

ADOBE® TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SUITE 3

Efficiently author and publish documentation to multiple channels and devices



50% less than buying individual products

3 ways to work smarter



Stretch your limits. Shrink your hours. Save your money.

Adobe® Technical Communication Suite 3 is a complete authoring toolkit with multichannel, multidevice publishing capabilities. Develop standards-compliant content, publish in a variety of formats, collaborate with reviewable PDF files, incorporate images, and add demos and simulations.

Try the full functionality of Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3, plus tutorials, in minutes without downloading the software.

Visit: <http://bit.ly/gsj7WV>

View Technical Communication channel on Adobe TV

Visit: <http://adobe.ly/gdfYUJ>

View On-demand eSeminars

Visit: <http://adobe.ly/hAz0he>

Included



Learn more about Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3,

Visit: <http://adobe.ly/guEXDb>

BY CONNIE P. GIORDANO | *Member*

TECHWR-L at 18: An Early Social Media Tool Grows Up

IN 1993, MEDIA BUZZ concentrated on such items as Bill Clinton following George H. W. Bush into the White House, *Jurassic Park* making it to number one at the box office, and Microsoft's release of its state-of-the-art computer operating system—Windows 3.11 for Workgroups. Back then, the words “social media” might conjure thoughts of newspaper stories on parties and bridal photos of the uber rich—not particularly relevant to technical writers tucked away in university labs and corporate cubicles around the globe. For one such writer, Eric J. Ray, the need to connect with professional peers inspired a request for an electronic mailing list space on a server, and thus TECHWR-L (**tech** writer list) was born.

Ray, one of the “lone tech writers” for which STC created a Special Interest Group (SIG), searched for ways to obtain substantive feedback on his technical writing projects for his employer, Oklahoma State University's (OSU) Computer and Information Services (CIS) Department. “I had very few opportunities to interact with other technical writers and to get substantive feedback on my projects,” Ray recalls. “I knew I could not get this interaction with CIS, so I turned to the Internet, which was

budding with bulletin boards and listserv lists.” When he could not find a resource to meet his needs, he did what all innovators do: He created it himself.

Well, almost. Ray enlisted the system administrators at OSU, who agreed to create the listserv™, as long as he maintained the traffic and fielded the technical issues. While he wanted the mailing list to be called Techwriter, computer-related naming conventions were still saddled with an eight-character limit, and list servers added the requirement of a dash and the letter L (for list) at the end of the name. The outcome was TECHWR-L.

By March 1993, 90 people had subscribed and the first posts began appearing in email boxes. “Growth was fast and steady,” Ray notes, with the first sizable bump occurring when Binion Amerson, Region 5 Manager for STC's 38th Annual Conference, began promoting on the list and then suggested Ray write an article for *Intercom*, which appeared in April.

By the end of its third year, TECHWR-L grew to more than 2,300 subscribers who posted an average of 40 messages a day that were read by thousands more through the newsgroup bit.listserv.techwr-l. Like other electronic

mailing lists (e-lists), TECHWR-L faced the growing pains of a new medium. There were endless debates about what was on-topic and what was off, flame wars, and recurring topics on how to find a new job, how to gain respect from engineers, and whether Framemaker or MS Word worked better. The thankless task of moderating an active and passionate e-list rested squarely on Eric Ray's shoulders.

Deborah Ray, co-owner of TECHWR-L, describes how its early growth helped focus its purpose. "The early growth of the TECHWR-L list was a clear indicator that tech writers had needs, questions, goals, and experiences in common, and that sharing all of these aspects via a near real-time forum was empowering. I think those years of setting the rules and sticking to them were key. In managing the list, Eric didn't ever back away from the core values and core characteristics of TECHWR-L: A focused forum to discuss technical writing related topics. Sometimes that meant having difficult email exchanges with people. Often that meant referring people to the posting rules—for the billionth time. And sometimes that meant getting hate mail, nasty phone calls, and even letters from attorneys."

So, is TECHWR-L a form of social media? A great deal depends on the definition, and like so many topics related to communication, TECHWR-L members diverge in their views. "What the forum means most to me is the opportunity to exchange ideas with other people in the field," says frequent contributor Gene Kim-Eng. "Since I live fairly far away from the nearest professional society meetings, yes, I consider it social media of a sort."

"A TECHWR-L post is a bit like a tweet ... but without the character limit," claims Chantel Brathwaite, a 15-year veteran in technical communication. "I would argue that the perception of TECHWR-L as social media might depend on how it is accessed. If messages are delivered in real time to an email account that can be checked in real time, it 'feels' a bit like a Facebook or Twitter update. However, if you access TECHWR-L from your desktop, start your mail client, and read the digest that is delivered once a day, it might feel less so."

Electronic mailing lists (listservs™) and newsgroups, two of many buzzwords attached to the new, exploding concept of the Internet, helped form the basis of early social media. They served a critical role in connecting people around the world, and such connections were vital to technical writers making their livings by communicating and informing. To Ray and many other early subscribers, TECHWR-L provided a range of valuable resources related to information on the profession, networking with like-minded communicators, and knowledge of tools and techniques for doing their jobs. As Brian Butler noted in research on online communities,

the availability of a resource pool is essential if a social structure is to be sustainable. For example, to provide member organizations with access to new technologies, a research consortium must have financial resources and expertise; to encourage information sharing, an

online interest community must have members who are knowledgeable about relevant topics; to provide emotional encouragement and/or counseling, a support group must have members who are willing to expend the time and energy to be supportive. (Butler, 346)

While TECHWR-L was not a "research consortium," many long-term members describe the benefits of membership and participation in similar terms. "Even though I've been a technical writer for many years now, I still learn something new from TECHWR-L posts just about every day," says Brathwaite. "Watching the career development of other writers helped me to think differently about my own career and to also value my own contributions. Posters on TECHWR-L have written articles and books, won awards, moved into and out of the technical writing field, and much more."

Defining "technical writing related topics" continues to be a source of debate. A lot of members see the debates as having as much value as knowledge sharing on tools and trends. "I'll often use the list to help me formulate an opinion that I want to present at my job by playing the devil's advocate. I'll post using opposing positions because I know I'll be getting to see what points I can add for my side," says John Posada, senior knowledge management analyst with Vonage.

The community aspect of the e-list and the website continues to drive its ability to survive and thrive after 18 years. "All things considered, TECHWR-L is a remarkable success based on any measure of traffic, people affected on information provided," Eric Ray notes. "TECHWR-L has certainly fostered a close-knit community online." Today the TECHWR-L subscribed community has grown to more than 3,000 members, and the website has more than 50,000 visitors each month.

While the TECHWR-L website may seem to be a natural outgrowth of the list, in fact it began as a project for a graduate course Deborah Ray took at Utah State University in 1997. Moving from support for the list to a full-fledged "magazine" site by 2002 presented technical and cultural challenges as well and, as it had from the beginning, TECHWR-L reflected the technical and social changes occurring in the wired world at large. From Perl scripts to generate topic summaries, through JavaScript to a content management platform, the TECHWR-L site became a repository for the "timely and the timeless" information that a constant flow of technical writers were seeking.

Once referring to it as her lifeline, Deborah Ray demonstrates how the site and the Internet as a whole continue to change every aspect of her life. "It allowed me to continue in my chosen profession, keep a sane schedule (mostly), and most importantly, work from home where we had two young kids. Working from home was isolating—especially at a time when few people did so—but working on TECHWR-L enabled me to be a part of a larger community."

In 2004, Robin Teigland and Molly McLure Wasko defined Electronic Networks of Practice (or ENoPs) as

having five characteristics, chief among them being the notion that “participants interact with one another to help each other solve problems.” They list the other characteristics as knowledge exchanged via asynchronous, text-based, computer-mediated communications; participation open to anyone with a desire to interact; voluntary participation; and participants as typically strangers. While the term EnoP never caught on, a forum such as TECHWR-L meets the definition, and social media shares most of these characteristics.

One exception, especially true in purely social networks, but often true in knowledge sharing networks, is the concept that participants in the community are “strangers.” In fact, Yi Zhang and Starr Roxanne Hiltz note the importance of interpersonal relationships in online communities: “It is very critical for an online community to help its members establish interpersonal relationships. This is so crucial that it directly affects the satisfaction of its members, and satisfaction is a potential predictor of continued participation in the online community.”

Whether TECHWR-L is a network, a community, or a social media tool, it continues to reflect the times. “Social Media is hardly new. Remember party lines? How about old Usenet groups? Hell, what about chain letters or post card swaps?” Bill Swallow has commented. A well-known blogger and founder of the HATT listserv, Swallow believes, “If you’re using media (letters, phone, computers) to interact with others socially, guess what? You’re using social media.”

TECHWR-L is now poised to transform once again. In April of this year, Eric and Deborah Ray passed the torch to new owners Connie Giordano and Al Martine of INKtopia, Limited. Under Martine and myself, TECHWR-L will continue to be a community of professionals, with all the expertise, innovation, infighting, collaboration, and support that community implies. In the same way technology continues to morph, so will TECHWR-L, but two things will remain constant: TECHWR-L will provide relevant, useful content; and it will foster lively community debate.

As TECHWR-L moves into its third decade, we look forward to leveraging a range of social media tools to continue empowering the technical communications community. “We want to encourage the online conversation and debate through blogs and discussion forums,” Martine says. He likens the future TECHWR-L to a social media “ecosystem” designed to engage newer communicators in ways that are comfortable to them, while

maintaining “classic” tools for the veteran members and using the expertise and resources of volunteer members to strengthen the whole community.

At the same time, we are exploring the huge potential in helping “Whirlers” (TECHWR-L is changing its name to TechWhirl in June) gain additional skills and exploit new user support media through podcasts, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, viral videos, and community-maintained knowledge bases. As much as we want to roll out a whole array of tools immediately, we know that a thoughtful and planned approach to expanding TECHWR-L will provide the most benefit to the TECHWR-L community.

When I joined TECHWR-L in 1998, I was amazed at how many other writers out there faced the same problems I did. We debated constantly on how *technical* technical writers should be—content versus structure, the best ways to bribe SMEs, and whether professional certification was even possible. Those topics reappear every so often, right next to questions about how to manage knowledge bases, implementing DITA, using social media to support users, and ways to make the latest versions of our tools work better.

We plan to keep pushing TECHWR-L to do what it has always done so well: Engaging and connecting with professionals and providing a forum to share ideas and experiences. When the Rays started it 18 years ago, it was called “networking”; now it’s called “social media,” and 18 years from now another term may define what TECHWR-L does. It may even come around full circle and be called engaging, connecting, and networking once again. Regardless of the name, those involved in TECHWR-L, from the past, present, and future, understand that it is and always has been a community, and community is at the core of social media in all its variations. **■**

CONNIE GIORDANO (connie.giordano@inktopia.net) is a partner in INKtopia Limited and owner of The Right Words of NC, LLC. She manages content and moderates discussions for TECHWR-L in addition to consulting with a wide range of financial services, telecommunications, software development, and other companies on documentation and content management, technical and marketing communications, change management, information design, and knowledge management. She wrote her first user manual in 1994 and has been an advocate of help that helps, sensible support, good design, and all forms of well-written content ever since.

REFERENCES

- BUTLER, BRIAN S. 2004. “Membership Size, Communication Activity, and Sustainability: A Resource-Based Model of Online Social Structures.” *Information Systems Research* 4 (December): 346–362.
- DENHINBO, JOHNSON. 2010. “Contributions of Traditional Web 1.0 Tools e.g. Email and Web 2.0 Tools: e.g. Weblog Towards Knowledge Management.” *Information Systems Education Journal* 8.15 (23 April): 313.
- RAY, DEBORAH. 2011. “TECHWR-L Site History.” *TECHWR-L.com, The Official TECHWR-L, the Internet forum for technical communicators*. Downloaded 8 March 2011.
- RAY, ERIC J. 1996. “TECHWR-L: A History and Case Study of a Profession-specific Listserv List.” *Technical Communication* 4.43 (November): 334–338.
- TIEGLAND, ROBIN, AND MOLLY MCLURE WASKO. 2004. “Extending Richness with Reach: Participation and Knowledge Exchange in Electronic Networks of Practice.” Pp. 230–236 in Paul Hildreth and Chris Kimble, eds. *Knowledge Networks: Innovation through Communities of Practice*. London, UK: Idea Group Inc.
- ZHANG, YI, AND STARR ROXANNE HILTZ. 2003. “Factors That Influence Online Relationship Development in Knowledge Sharing Community.” Proceedings of the *Ninth Americas Conference on Information Systems*. 410–417.