

# The Independent Perspective

Newsletter of the Consulting and Independent Contracting Professional Interest Committee

**STC** Society for technical communication

## FDA Gags Writers

by Nancy L. Mangini

In a misguided attempt to eliminate bias from medical and scientific literature, the FDA is considering a proposal to restrict employment of medical writers by pharmaceutical companies for the preparation of articles for journal publication. Clearly, the FDA is trying to "gag" the messenger instead of addressing the message.

The exact wording of the Concept Paper being considered by the FDA is:

"Independent scientific and educational articles about a company's drug or directly competing drugs should not be written by medical writers employed by the firm, including freelance writers hired by the firm for specific projects. In addition, medical writers employed by the firm should not ghostwrite, edit or otherwise influence the content of articles, purporting to be independent, on the company's drugs or directly competing products written by others."

Medical writers, like all technical writers, are communication facilitators. We interview content experts; then organize, explain, and summarize data in an understandable, publishable format. If the FDA detects bias in these published materials, it should look to regulation of the cited authors (i.e., clinical investigators) who accept responsibility for the data and claim credit for the publication.

The danger in the FDA's proposal is not only to medical writers, however; it addresses the profession of technical writing as a whole. If the FDA succeeds in restricting employment of medical writers, a legal precedent could be set that would make it

easier for government agencies to restrict the employment of other types of technical writers as well.

In light of the potential for far-reaching consequences, I urge all technical writers to send a letter to the FDA *now* advising them to abandon this ill-advised course of regulatory action. Speak up now for the right to practice our profession without the specter of a government "gag" over our heads!

Send letters to:  
Cheryl Graham, Acting Director  
FDA Division of Drug Marketing, Advertising, and Communications  
Room 11B06  
5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857

For a copy of the FDA's proposal, send a request by fax to (415) 365-1394.

Nancy L. Mangini is a medical/technical writer and principal of NLM Technical Publications. She is a member of the Silicon Valley Chapter of the STC.

Editor's Note: a conversation with David Banks of Dr. Graham's staff to determine current status revealed that, contrary to the intent of the passage quoted above, the real concern of the FDA is to stem "drug promotion in the guise of research." When I opined that I certainly had not understood that concern in the quoted passage, Mr. Banks admitted that the FDA had missed the mark. He mentioned that by October a draft policy should be available, and that it would be widely disseminated for comment. Mr. Banks added: "We need constructive comments and guidance from anyone who might be affected."

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## Writers—Not Computer Operators

by David Brown

Most of my clients have no idea which word processor I use because I supply them with camera-ready copy or finished products. What's important to them is what is on paper—not how it got there.

That's why it surprised me to learn from many of my colleagues that more and more clients are requiring competence in specific word processing and page composition software. Qualifications such as "must know Microsoft Word" and "experience with Ventura Publisher required" are popping up in contractor notices.

A Los Angeles contractor even told me he drew a raised eyebrow from a prospective client when he said he wasn't familiar with the latest version of a popular desktop publisher, although he knew the previous ver-

sion quite well. What's going on here? Not only do clients presume to request an inventory of our tools—now they're trying to qualify us by version numbers!

The implication of such reasoning is that only after clients have narrowed their search to those proficient in certain software, will they begin to examine the contractor's editorial skills. This has become a destructive way of qualifying contractors. Competence in writing is being subordinated to the ability to run software.

The greatest complaint about documentation and other technical material is the way it's written, not the word processor used to write it!

Software is one method of putting text on paper. Let's not confuse the method with

the result. "Must know Microsoft Word" is the logical equivalent of "must know Ticonderoga No. 2 pencil." It's analogous to basing the selection of a contractor to remodel your kitchen on the type (and version number) of the ceramic tile cutter he uses.

Being a cooperative group—and always anxious to work—technical communicators have backhandedly encouraged this type of client behavior. Truth is, most of us enjoy learning new software. Have clients forgotten we are the ones who "wrote the book" on word processors? The client's primary concern should be the contractor's editorial skills. Clients can always hire temporary word processing help, if necessary, to key in the work of skilled writers and editors. There are also dozens of utilities capable of converting word processing files.

Most of us understand the fallacy of such requirements, but for lack of support, we have just nodded and played along. After all, it's nothing to learn a new word processor. Most of us even find it fun. By playing along, however, we are denigrating our greatest talent—the ability to communicate. That's what we do best. We're not computer operators. We are writers.

To this end, I suggest we de-emphasize our competence with word processing and page composition software and emphasize our communications skills. If a client demands that you use unfamiliar software, of course you'll have to jump-start yourself on its requirements, as you would any other unfamiliar subject. There are enough real problems. Let's not waste time and effort responding to irrational demands like this.

## Independents' Issues

### Getting Away From Business When You're the Business

The other night I was doing the dishes at about 10:30, thinking about weighty issues for this column. Serious stuff like developing a business plan. My eyes hurt, my back was sore, and a nagging mental voice kept tediously compiling an oversized list of tomorrow's deadlines.

Suddenly the *real* issue struck me—how can I get away from all this when I need to?

I truly like what I do. And working for myself beats the confinement I endured with past employers. Yet the pressures of self-employment are real. In my small company, my business partner and I are not only CEO, but bookkeeper, art director, staff writer, sales rep, senior editor, credit manager . . . . This kind of schizophrenia creates an overwhelming urge to work all the time.

We need to stay physically and mentally healthy—*balanced*, in other words—if we

want our businesses to thrive. So how can we keep business in perspective and separate work from personal life? How often should we take a vacation? What kind of vacation, and how extensive—one or two long vacations a year, or numerous short breaks? How many hours should we work each day? How do we maintain reasonable hours in a deadline-intensive business? What should we do to relax? How do we stay physically fit?

The questions could continue, but here's the bottom line: How do we get away from business when we *are* the business? I'd like to hear your ideas.

◆  
Kim Shaw is a senior member of STC and co-owner of Words & Graphics, Inc., a Houston firm specializing in technical and business communication.

Please respond! Send copy and an IBM ASCII disk to Susan Witter, Editor, 65A Albany Place, East Greenbush, NY 12061

◆  
David Brown is the owner of TopLogic Communications, a technical communications consulting firm. He has also written for newspapers, magazines and television and programmed in FOXBase and Turbo Pascal.

## Perspectives

by Christopher Juillet, [former] C&IC PIC Manager

It was nearly five years ago (and seems like sometime last week) when a few of us got together at some STC conference or meeting somewhere long forgotten and said, "Gee, what we really need here is some sort of special group or committee to look out for the needs of us independent consultants."

It made sense to me and to a couple other folks, and based on that brief conversation, we started making some calls and getting some ideas. In the year and a half that followed, what started out as a small band of collaborators became a group of nearly 100 STC members who had pledged their support for such a group, should it ever be formed.

Formed it was, in January of 1989, with a charter membership of around 150 and a vision that the newly formed Consulting and Independent Contracting Professional Interest Committee could make a difference in STC and in our profession, a vision that has come to be through the hard work of many dedicated professionals.

Much larger than your usual "committee," C&IC PIC today counts its numbers at somewhere in excess of 1800 members. We publish newsletters and surveys, conduct conferences and seminars, and most importantly, we stand up and state our case, the case for independent consulting in the field of technical communication.

As many of you already know, this will be my final Perspectives for this newsletter, as I recently submitted my resignation from the post of C&IC PIC Manager to accept the newly created position of STC Assistant to the President for Professional Interest Committees.

Of all the STC jobs I have held over the past 12 years, none has been more satisfying than managing C&IC PIC, helping it to grow from a simple seed of an idea into an important part of our society—one

with a voice, a mission, and a contribution. The people I have met and the friends I have made will be with me always, and you will always have my sincere thanks for helping to make this C&IC PIC a success.

I leave this group in the capable hands of Charley McWha, your new manager, confident that you will give her the unqualified support that I have enjoyed. I know that she and you will take this PIC into its next era as a fully institutionalized part of STC. As I watch this unfold from my new perspective, I also know that I will miss being manager of C&IC PIC; in fact, I am missing it already.



## From the Editor

Greetings! The summer has sped by so quickly, I can hardly believe it's fall. In so many ways, fall is a beginning rather than an end. We abandon the frenzied activity (work or play) of the summer and muster whatever energy we can to settle ourselves: prepare for the winter, move on, get focused, build support, take stock.

The articles in this issue reflect that settling: conference opportunity (PCOC); looking out for our rights as independents (Nancy L. Mangini, Jim Stirewalt, David Brown); staying sane and balanced (Kim Young). You contributors have certainly built a solid issue for us to move into this "new" year, and I thank you heartily for these potent efforts. Readers: if any of you have come up with a way to relax that works (!), please respond to the Independents' Issue on page 2. Also, respond as your conscience dictates to the legislative issues brought up on pages 1 and 5.

As your new editor, I look forward to reflecting the energies of the group, whatever the themes. Charley McWha and Christopher Juillet before her have developed an active tradition of keeping our voice alive, and Charley aids me immeasurably in my editing-across-the-miles challenge. With your help (and theirs), I'll continue the tradition.

Good news! Cal Callahan, STC Associate Fellow and multiple-time editor of the award-winning newsletter for the San Diego Chapter, has volunteered to take over both the layout and the graphic design jobs posted in the Summer *IP*. Welcome to the team, Cal.

I'll be calling some of you for submissions to the *Independent Perspective*. But if you think of something you'd like to write about, don't wait! Call me.

—Susan Witter  
(518) 477-2564

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Christopher Juillet

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## C&IC PIC Meeting in Oak Ridge

by Fred O'Hara

The C&IC PIC will sponsor a one-day meeting at the Garden Plaza Hotel in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, on Saturday, Nov. 7, 1992. The meeting will begin at 8:30 am and will feature a series of presentations by experienced consultants and independent contractors. They will speak about various aspects of setting up, promoting, and managing consulting and contract services in technical communication.

The C&IC PIC meeting will follow immediately after the 16th annual Practical Conference on Communication (PCOC) sponsored by the East Tennessee Chapter of STC. That conference will be held at the Garden Plaza Hotel on Nov. 5 and 6 and will cover a wide variety of topics on writing, editing, electronic document delivery, management, and training. Following PCOC, and running concurrently with the C&IC PIC meeting, will be the annual East Tennessee Chapter Roundtable on Teaching Technical Writing.

The program for the C&IC PIC meeting is still under development at the time of this writing. However, several excellent speakers have already agreed to share their expertise with the attendees.

Chris Juliet of Whitmore Lake, Michigan, will present a special adaptation of his famous (infamous???) talk *Kicking Doors and Taking Names: Marketing 101 for Independent Consultants*. Anyone who caught Chris's 1.5-hr presentation on this subject at last year's STC Annual Conference in Atlanta knows how high-powered this talk is and won't miss the opportunity to see a condensed version of it tailored specifically to practicing consultants. It covers all the promotional and marketing techniques that you need to establish a consultancy and keep it established.

Betsy Frick of St. Louis, Missouri, will speak on *Skills Employers Want for the*

*Jobs of the Future*. You cannot sell businessmen (or women) a service they do not need or want. Betsy has just completed a survey of businesses for the U.S. Department of Labor. The purpose of this investigation was to find out what skills companies are searching for in their permanent and temporary personnel. In her talk, she is going to focus on what contracted services businesses are willing to pay for.

Steve Napp of Atlanta, Georgia, attempted to start a cooperative network of technical-communication professionals who provide temporary services in mid-Georgia. The concept did not work well largely because of market forces beyond anyone's control. Undaunted, Steve went on to establish and nurture one of the largest local PIC of technical-communication consultants in STC. More than 60 independents now belong to the STC Atlanta Chapter's consulting PIC. Steve will share the types of information that pass through this network, how the network works, and why it works. He will also pass on advice on how (or whether) you should set up such a network in your professional environment.

Charlie McWha is the manager of the C&IC PIC, and has just given up her consultancy in software documentation to accept full-time employment (and a steady paycheck) as a communication professional in Charleston, West Virginia. Fred O'Hara is one of the first technical-writing consultants, whose practice in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, has endured from 1972 to the present day. These two will give very different perspectives on consulting during a recession. Is it the pits, with your clients going down the tube faster than you are? Is it great, with clients seeking cost-effective ways to meet their goals while downsizing their permanent workforce? Or can it be both???

Barbara Kane Russell from Nashville, Tennessee, is a consultant to international

corporations in the northeast and southeast United States. She will be presenting a talk entitled *Global Technical Communication: Putting Translation in Context*. In it, she will point out competitive issues among the United States, Japan, and Europe and the roles technical communicators can play in this arena. She will also comment on her consultancy and how she prepares material for an international market.

Other presentations tentatively on the program include talks on:

**Insurance:** What do you need? How much do you need? How do you get it at the best price? And how do you know if you really need it?

**Running a home-based business:** What are the benefits? What are the drawbacks?

Independents who practice technical communication have the option of attending PCOC, the PIC meeting, or both. The two meetings have separate registrations, each of which includes one or more meals. The registration fee for PCOC is \$100 for STC members, and that for the PIC meeting is \$40. Several hotels and motels are located within walking distance of the conference site and reflect a variety of prices. Although rates can vary, the most expensive to the least expensive is probably

- Hampton Inn (under construction) (800) HAMPTON
- The Garden Plaza Hotel, (615) 481-2468
- Comfort Inn (800) 221-2222
- Holiday Inn, (800) HOLIDAY
- Days Inn (800) 325-2525
- Ridge Inn Plaza (615) 482-9968

See PCOC, page 6

## Notes on HR 5011

by Jim Stirewalt  
Senior Member, Washington Chapter

H.R. 5011, "Employment Tax Improvement Act of 1992." Introduced 29 April 1992 by Rep. Doug Barnard (GA), Chairman, House Committee on Government Operations.

Referred to House Committee on Ways and Means (Chairman: Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, IL), Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures (Subcommittee Chairman: Rep. Charles Rangel, NY).

Rangel's subcommittee held hearings on this bill on July 23. Representatives from 25 government and private organizations testified (such as the GAO, Treasury, American Bar Association, and the Newspaper Association of America). The bill is now waiting for a subcommittee ruling. There is not yet an equivalent bill in the Senate.

### Information

H.R. 5011 is not a totally benign force, but it is currently the best thing going and it would repeal Sec. 1706. Grumblings may arise over the following:

- The bill would drop the trigger for filing forms 1099-MISC from \$600 to \$100.
- The bill would require filing forms 1099-MISC for certain payments to corporations as well as to individuals.
- The tone of the bill presumes that independent contractors (ICs) are the "bad guys" for (in some cases) trying to misclassify themselves as independents and underreporting their revenue. The "bad guys" perception is a consequence of poor IC public relations and organization. Whether justified or not, it is part of the current landscape.

Despite any distaste, ICs may wish to take the bad with the good in order to get Sec. 1706 repealed.

### Recommendations

#### 1. Immediately write letters to:

Hon. Dan Rostenkowski  
Hon. Charles Rangel  
Hon. Doug Barnard  
House of Representatives,  
Washington, DC 20515

...stating your support for the bill and your hope that they'll get the House to pass it.

2. Immediately write to Hon. your own representative telling him/her about the bill and encouraging that s/he become a co-sponsor of it.

3. If you don't know what Congressional District you are in or who your one representative and two senators are, call the Board of Elections (Registrar of Voters) in your county and ask.

4. Immediately write two letters to Hon. your two senators, US Senate, Washington, DC 20510, telling them that H.R. 5011 has been introduced in the House and that you hope they will support

a similar bill if one is introduced in the Senate.

5. Establish and service your own communications net (phone trees, EBBs, mailings). There is not the money or labor available to do anything that's better structured. If needed, pass on the tip in No. 3 above. ICs are notorious for being politically naïve. There are better and worse ways to contact your legislators. (A few guys in 1987 held a "sleep-in" in a senator's office—definitely wrong.)

6. To get future information, send your name, address, and phone number to:

Jim Stirewalt  
P.O. Box 222  
Buckeystown, MD 21717  
(301) 874-5258; or

Christine Lambert, CPA  
Suite 403  
451 Hunderford Drive  
Rockville, MD 20850  
(301) 672-1290

7. This is an election year. Contact all the candidates for Representative (your district) and, if any, Senator (your state). Describe the bill; how troublesome the issue has been (IC issues have been recurring since the late 1960s); how useful it would be to get a bill passed this year (before the election). Encourage them to contact both their national parties and the current Senators and Representatives.

8. Do what you can to contact people in the Quinstate area (PA, DE, MD, WV, VA). It would be nice if as many representatives from these states as possible would co-sponsor the bill.

9. Contact your professional and trade associations at both the local level and at headquarters, and encourage them to list the bill on their legislative agendas.

## On The Move

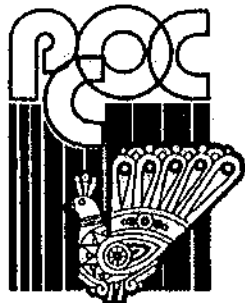
Charley McWha, Editor of the *Independent Perspective* for over 2 years, has been appointed Manager of the C&IC PIC. McWha is interested in making tighter connections between the C&IC PIC and Chapter-level Special Interest Groups. She'd also like to encourage more PIC conferences in different regions of the country, much like our session at PCOC (see page 1).

Christopher Juillet, founding manager of the C&IC PIC, has been appointed by STC president JoAnn Hackos as Assistant to the President for PICs—a position established just this year. This gives PICs more direct access to the leadership of the organization. Juillet will work with PIC managers to help them develop and expand their activities, and will promote the work of the PICs to STC at large.

PCOC, from page 4

Special rates for PCOC attendees may apply. Check the PCOC registration materials. If you have not received the PCOC information packet from the East Tennessee Chapter, write or call Jonathan Frey, CTI PET Systems, Inc., P.O. Box 22999, Knoxville, Tenn., 37933, (615) 966-0072 (Ext 557), FAX (615) 966-8955.

Make your plans now to attend the C&IC PIC meeting. Fill in and return the PIC registration form at right.



**Registration for the C&IC PIC Meeting**

**Sat. Nov. 7, 1992, Garden Plaza Hotel, Oak Ridge, Tenn.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City, state, ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number \_\_\_\_\_

Enclose a check for \$40.00 made out to STC/ETC, and mail to STC/ETC, Meeting Registration, P.O. Box 5556, Oak Ridge, Tenn., 37831.