

design matters

October '00

Usability Experts are from Mars, Graphic Designers are from Venus

by Curt Cloninger

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There is an unarticulated war currently raging among those who make web sites. Like the war between dark-skinned blacks and light-skinned blacks in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, this war is one that only its participants recognize. The war is not between commercial sites and experimental sites. It's not between "Bloggers" and "Flashers." This war is between usability experts and graphic designers.

In the usability corner, wearing the blue and purple underlined trunks, weighing in at just under 20K per gig... J-a-a-a-cob Ne-e-e-e-ilsen, usability guru extraordinaire, with over 16 usability patents and several "lists of 10" — do's, don't's, thou shalt's, and thou shalt not's.

And in the graphic design corner, wearing the greyscale trunks, weighing in at 500K per site (that's dollars, not bytes)... Kioken(oken-oken-oken), firing clients left and right, and wielding Flash as if the plug-in itself were built into Joe Newbie's genetic makeup.

Neilsen thinks today's web is an advanced but ill-used database. Kioken thinks today's web is a fledgling but ill-used multimedia platform. And each side **knows** that their view of the web will prevail. Observe the (over) confidence:

Neilsen: "Boo.com has closed. Good riddance. Boo was one of the very few high-profile sites to launch in recent months that dared violate my design principles and aim for glitz rather than usability... It proves that overly fancy design doesn't work."

Gene Na (co-founder of Kioken): "We had to fire Sony the other week. They weren't listening to us, so we let them go. We actually had to get rid of Bad Boy [Entertainment] in the beginning, but they straightened up and came back. So did Sony. What the client sometimes doesn't understand is the less they talk to us, the better it is. We know what's best."

Let the celebrity death match begin. Gentlemen, I expect a good clean fight. Come out with your hands up, and may the best web paradigm win.

What's So Funny About Peace, Love, and Understanding? — I wager that after 15 rounds, after broadband, after standards compliance, after the increasingly mythical release of Netscape 6, both the usability experts and the graphic designers will still be standing. The web is just too big for one paradigm to prevail. Some sites will need intensive whiz-bang branding that Neilsen's "principles" won't allow. Other sites will need moronically basic navigation and speedy download times that Kioken doesn't care to provide. Most sites will need some combination thereof. So why the war? Why can't the usability experts and the graphic designers just love each other?

For better or worse, the divide between these two camps existed long before "new media," and will continue to exist long after the web has become as commonplace as indoor plumbing. "New media" merely brings this dichotomy into renewed focus because, well, it's new. We're still developing the web's vocabulary. Consequently, we're still trying to get a handle on this "usability/design" conundrum, largely unaware of its primordial origins. With that in mind, allow me to glibly and over-simplistically delineate the situation:

Usability/ Information Architecture == the masculine == the left side of the brain == doing == math/science == the rational == logical action == the articulatable == Mars.

Graphic Design == the feminine == the right side of the brain == being == art == the emotional == intuitive action == the inarticulatable == Venus.

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Fitting In?

by *Beth Mazur*

Where do information designers fit in? That's the theme for this issue of *Design Matters*. Consider that in the May 2000 issue of *Technical Communication*, Conrad Taylor writes: "[M]ischievously, I must comment on Ginny [Redish's] phrase 'Information design, like many other aspects of technical communication...'. I'm tempted to talk of 'technical communication, which is an aspect of information design!'"

The relationship of technical communication and information design has been a long-time concern of this SIG. When we were founded in 1997, we were wisely counseled to avoid any definition of information design that was redundant with a definition for technical communication. Thus our focus on the organization and presentation of complex data (see the back page of this newsletter).

For the last four years, we've had a happy relationship with STC, and we look forward to many more of the same. But from time to time, the question of how we fit in with our parent organization surfaces. Can one be an information designer but not a technical communicator? The article on page 4 asks this question; you'll hear my two cents plus those of many SIG members who responded to my request for comments. As you'll be able to tell from reading my initial article plus the additional comments I've included, I've got some strong sentiments on the subject!

What do you think? After you've had time to read the article, visit the experimental ID SIG forum at www.geocities.com/stc_infodesign and share your thoughts.

On a whimsical note, perhaps information designers are well-suited to act as 'marriage counselors' to their usability and graphic design specialist brethren! The cover story this month made the rounds recently on a variety of email discussion groups. Information designers tend to care about the issues of layout and design important to graphic designers, yet we're also very cognizent of the concerns of usability: efficiency, effectiveness, and appeal.

Thank you Cheri! With this issue, Cheri Taylor turns over the reins of the ID SIG to our new manager, Phylise Banner. We'll hear more from Phylise in the next issue, but for now, I'd like to publicly thank Cheri for over three years of outstanding leadership for the ID SIG. She has been a true joy to work with—and I'll miss her enthusiasm, creative ideas, and fun attitude. While she promises to stay involved, much of her energies will now be turned to a local effort, the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG of the Carolina chapter. We wish her all the best!

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Design Matters

Volume 5, No. 1 ♦ October 2000
Design Matters is the newsletter of STC's Information Design Special Interest Group (SIG).

■ <http://stc.org/pics/idsig>

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Transitions...

by *Cheri Taylor, Immediate Past Manager*

The Information Design SIG is transitioning into the new century with a new manager. I would like to introduce you to Phylise Banner, an Information Architect who teaches at Skidmore College in New York and who is known for her practical and entertaining seminars on many aspects of visual communication. You may have attended one of her presentations or workshops at a recent STC conference.

Phylise brings us a wealth of energy, new ideas, enthusiasm, and an uncanny ability to charm volunteers into saying "Yes"! In subsequent issues of the newsletter, you'll learn more about Phylise and her ideas and plans for our SIG. Please support her with your own energy, ideas, and enthusiasm!

As of the end of September, our SIG has **3100 members!**

And don't think you've heard the last from me yet! Old SIG managers don't retire in STC, they just become immediate past managers. I'll be helping out here and there where I can.

I would like to thank the many of you who have volunteered your time and efforts and knowledge over the first few years of our SIG's existence. The ID SIG would not be where it is today without you. Even if you have not (yet!) actually helped your SIG, thank you very much for joining our group! I am very pleased and proud that our SIG has well over 3000 members for Phylise to call on.

Best wishes to all of you, in your information design pursuits and in everything!

Cheri Taylor is the owner of TechWords and the founding manager of the STC Information Design SIG. She can be reached at taylorcw@compuserve.com.

Call for Progressions—Chicago!

Join fellow ID SIG members in the annual ID SIG progression at the STC Annual Conference. The 2001 conference will be held May 13-16 in Chicago.

At a progression, participants choose from 5-10 topics organized together under a general theme. Each progression speaker spends 15-20 minutes talking with 8-12 people on the topic of their choice. There's also a short period for questions, and after that, all participants switch tables and choose another topic. Speakers then present to a new group of people on their same topic. This process is repeated one more time so that a total of three rounds are completed during the 90-minute conference session.

To be a speaker, you can choose any ID-related topic for the ID SIG progression. Some of last year's topics were "Minimalism: A Practical Example" by Susan Lester, "Information Design for Decision Making on the Web" by Mike Albers, "Designing Usable Forms" by Caroline Jarrett, and "Wayfinding in Small Places: How to Create Job Aids" by Beth Lisberg.

If you've never presented before or the idea of standing up in front of a big room of people is intimidating, then a progression is definitely for you! The informal style of the progression is much less stressful, and former speakers have noted that they get back almost as much as they give from the dialogue with the participants.

Progression speakers are eligible for the speaker's discount (which also means you get the speaker's gift). Progression speakers are able to submit individual papers for the conference proceedings, so if being published is important, you'll be able to satisfy that requirement (but there is an early deadline).

One caveat is that progressions are a bit on the minimalist side themselves! A flipchart is provided to each speaker; computer displays and Internet connections are not available.

New This Year!

Besides our traditional progression, we'd also like to include an information design showcase progression this year. If you have an information design product that you are pleased with, bring it to the showcase to share with others! Particularly of interest for this progression are before and afters.

This progression will be a "lightning" progression. Instead of spending 30 minutes with each group of participants, you'll spend about 15 minutes. The idea is to share the challenges you faced during design and development, what you're pleased with, and what you'd do differently!

How to Participate

Interested? **If you'd like to participate in one or both progressions, please send an email to Beth Mazur at mazur@pobox.com.** Please include a topic title, short description of your topic, which progression it fits in, whether or not you plan on submitting a paper, and a brief bio.

Please respond **NO LATER THAN Friday, December 1** so that the appropriate session descriptions can be forwarded to the office for the preliminary program. If you have any questions, feel free to ask either Beth or Phylise Banner, the ID stem manager for the Chicago conference. Phylise can be reached at pbanner@skidmore.edu.

On the Fringe

by Beth Mazur, Design Matters Editor

I've been to a number of conferences and seminars over the past few months. All but one of them have been STC events. But curiously, I've had a similar discussion at most of them. They go something like: "I feel like I'm on the fringe of STC—I'm not a traditional member, yet there isn't an organization that speaks to my interests more specifically." "You feel that way too? I know just what you mean!"

Often this sentiment comes out of those in the software user-interface/web community. But for me, it's a bit more complicated. I trace my own "fringe" feeling to two phenomena. One of these is the narrow way that STC, or its affiliates, sometimes defines technical communication. The other is what I like to think of as the myth of the technical communicator.

Defining technical communication

The Washington, D.C. chapter has information on its website to help clarify what is eligible for STC's various competitions. According to these guidelines:

- A piece can be technical because it is about a technical product, service, or subject matter.
- A piece can be technical because it comes from a technical organization.

When I joined STC six years ago, the above described me and my job. I did software documentation for a high-tech company. I worked on software manuals, online help, the whole nine yards. But now, as a communications specialist who works for a non-profit, non-technical, membership organization, I wouldn't be able to find any product that I work on that fits under either of the above criteria. Yet STC's publications and conferences continue to be very relevant to the work that I do.

More recently, George Hayhoe wrote a *Technical Communication* editorial discussing the "essential knowledge that all technical communicators must possess." He rightly argues that it isn't about tools, but then asserts that it does include expertise in "one or more subject domains in the sciences, medicine, engineering, or another technical field." As a technical writer with a computer science background, I was able to take on the full responsibility for an assembly language manual. Besides designing the manual, I also wrote and tested all of the sample code we used in the volume (in other words, I was also the SME). But today, my subject domain is the needs and interests of people over 50—this isn't a 'technical' subject, yet I still think I do 'technical' communication!

Fortunately, I've felt very comfortable in the document/information design communities. Karen Schriver writes that "document design is the field concerned with creating artifacts that integrate words

and pictures in ways that help people achieve their specific goals for using information at home, school, or work." Is STC well-served by—perhaps unintentionally—giving the impression that some of these artifacts aren't in the realm of technical communication?

The myth of the technical communicator?

The other issue that leaves me feeling on the fringe is the concept of a "homogenous" technical communicator—the idea that there is a knowledge base and/or skill set that is common to all in the field. George Hayhoe says in the same editorial that the "most significant component of the technical communicator's background is a mastery of communication concepts and techniques. Among others, these skills include writing, editing, visual communication, multimedia, document design, audience and task analysis, usability testing of products and documents, and interpersonal communication."

Shouldn't this say "these skills include one or more of...?" I'm not sure that I have met the person who has a mastery of all of these subjects! Familiarity, yes. A reasonable level of facility, possibly. But mastery? This seems to be the equivalent of saying that members of the Association of Computing Machinery are expected to have mastery of programming, information retrieval, documentation, computer graphics, multimedia, and operating systems (these are just six of 36 special interest areas that ACM supports). I'd argue that technical communication is a field just as computing is; there isn't one single profession, there are many.

That's not to say that I think everyone needs to be an expert in only one or two particular areas. I've lately been intrigued by the idea that technical communication is becoming more and more like filmmaking, which generally requires a collaborative effort by a team, with individual team members (writers, editors, directors, sound technicians, etc.) bringing their expertise in a specific subject to the project. The idea of the one-stop-shop filmmaker conjures up notions of the grad out of film school, maxing out his or her credit cards with visions of making it at Sundance.

I do suspect that, as in film, there is a place for the generalist (and not just at the one-stop-shops). At the annual conference in Cincinnati in 1999, I led a progression session entitled "The Information Designer as Director." In film, the director is the one who has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the various specialists work together to bring the vision of the film to a reality. I think the role of the generalist, whether he or she is an information designer or not, is to know enough about the various techniques in communication to know when to bring in an expert and more importantly, how to communicate to this expert what is needed on the project.

The truth that many STC members are still like the one-stop-shop filmmaker doesn't necessarily mean that this is the future of technical communication. Frankly, I'm not sure it really reflects the current STC either. And I think this is the reason that the certification debate keeps ending up as it does. There might conceivably be a "body of knowledge" (or certification) for writers. There might be one for editors. For indexers. For illustrators. But I'm just not so sure that all technical communicators share a body of knowledge per se.

The future of technical communication

I don't mean to pick on George. But while I'm sure that many of our members resonate to his approach, I suspect that there are others, like me, who don't. Given my relationship with the ID SIG, I thought it made sense to make this inquiry of other SIG members. Am I making a mountain out of a molehill? Or is there something here? So I sent a PDF version of this article to the ID SIG discussion list inviting comments.

Please visit the ID SIG discussion forum
at www.geocities.com/stc_infodesign
to share your opinion!

George Hayhoe:

I agree with Beth that some in our Society may feel that they are on the fringes of technical communication, but I differ with her on some of the specifics. Beth notes that in my May 2000 editorial, I asserted that the essential knowledge for technical communicators includes expertise in "one or more subject domains in the sciences, medicine, engineering, or another technical field." She goes on to note that, "... today, my subject domain is the needs and interests of people over 50—this isn't a 'technical' subject, yet I still think I do technical communication!" I disagree with Beth when she says that the subject domain she works in is not a technical subject. I believe that her work for AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) requires a degree of mastery of several technical subjects, among them medicine, psychology, sociology and social work, economics, physical education, and law.

We shouldn't forget that *technical* is not the adjectival form of *technology*. Rather, *technical* means "Having special skill or practical knowledge [especially] in a mechanical or scientific field" or "Used in or peculiar to a given field or profession; specialized" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd edition). Technical fields include not only science, medicine, and engineering, but a wide range of others as well. Technical communicators transfer specialized information from subject matter experts to those who need to use it. Whether the specialized information in question

consists of articles about how to deal with death and dying (as in the current issue of the AARP magazine, *Modern Maturity*), or procedures for making clothing, for programming a videocassette recorder, or for using software is irrelevant. We make our livings communicating specialized information of all kinds. Beth goes on to comment:

George Hayhoe says in the same editorial that the "most significant component of the technical communicator's background is a mastery of communication concepts and techniques. Among others, these skills include writing, editing, visual communication, multimedia, document design, audience and task analysis, usability testing of products and documents, and interpersonal communication." Shouldn't this say "these skills include *one or more of . . . ?*" I'm not sure that I have met the person who has a mastery of all of these subjects! Familiarity yes. A reasonable level of facility possibly. But **mastery**?

She makes a good point here, and I agree that my statement needs some qualification. Let me explain what I meant. Too often, too many of us define technical communication too narrowly, as writing and (perhaps) editing. We forget about the wide range of knowledge and skills that must be marshaled to communicate specialized knowledge effectively. It's ironic that we take such a narrow view since so many of us are responsible not only for writing and editing, but also for illustrating, designing, laying out pages, producing multimedia, and so forth. If tasks and audiences are analyzed, we do it ourselves. If the usability of our information products is tested, again, we are responsible for doing so.

I agree with Beth that it would be difficult to find many technical communicators who are truly masters in more than one or two of these areas. Still, I think that we need more than casual knowledge of all of them if we are to be competent in our work.

For example, if I were designing an undergraduate curriculum in technical communication, I would include courses in all of these areas to make certain that the graduates of my program had attained a level of proficiency in all of them by the time they entered the job market. Later on, I would hope that they would specialize in one or two of these areas, expanding their mastery of them.

There are degrees of mastery of all areas of knowledge and skill. True masters not only know what they know they also know how much they still have to learn.

Beth comments:

I don't disagree with the technical versus technology argument (made above and in subsequent responses). But the truth is that I have no more mastery of "medicine, psychology, sociology and social work, economics, physical education, and law" than does the average lay person. What I do is more document design, more of the "integrating words and pictures in ways that help people achieve their specific goals for using information at home, school, or

work." I've done web pages for our state offices, various directories, both print products and online documents for our intranet, and until recently was the editor of a weekly briefing to state staff and volunteer leadership. Many people would call this business communication. So...can one be a document designer (or information designer) but not be a technical communicator?

Tom Weimer:

I find it very interesting that the guidelines you cited about what makes a piece technical do not say anything about whether the piece explains how to do something.

When I first began investigating the field of technical communication, I noticed that there was a lot of disagreement about what makes a piece of writing technical and "what is technical writing?" We all seemed to agree that a software user's guide or computer manual was technical writing. The owner's manual for your car? Yes. But what about a cookbook? Some thought it was and some thought it wasn't.

Trying to understand this disagreement and my own point of view, I took the elementary step of looking up "technical" in my Webster's Collegiate dictionary, which explained a great deal. To oversimplify just a bit, "technical" can be defined two distinct ways: 1) of or relating to technology, or 2) of or relating to technique.

I think that the origins of our profession (and the term "technical writing") are more closely related to the second definition, having to do with "technique." A technique is a method, so technical writing describes how to do something. However, I think that in practice, we associate technical writing with the "technology" definition. Cars and computers are technology, but we don't think of cooking as technology.

Technology is the application of specialized knowledge, and the result can be a device, concept, or technique. Rarely is technical writing only intended to describe a technology. It describes what to do with a technology, so it is describing technique. Perhaps the reason we associate technical writing with "technology" is that new technologies demand more explanation of how to use them.

To muddy the waters further, in our society, the word "technology" is commonly used as shorthand for "advanced or new technology in physical or biological sciences." This lessens the association of the word "technology" with fields like organizational management or home economics, but a new way of applying knowledge (in other words, new technology) in these fields would call for a new policies and procedures manual or cookbook.

My personal definition of technical communication is anything that explains how to use a product or ap-

ply a concept. This makes technical communicators out of math teachers, cookbook authors, corporate intranet webmasters, as well as online help and computer manual authors.

Joanna Chadwick:

I am Product Design Manager for Milvus Software Limited (producer of wealth management software) in the Channel Islands. My previous job was in DTP and graphic design for the Marketing Dept of an AAA bank.

I was initially employed by my present employer as Technical Author, and given the responsibility for the development of online user documentation. A new position was created for me last year, when the Company changed its name and image and started developing a brand new product.

Now my main project is creating and developing context-sensitive and standalone Help for this new product, which is also used for marketing, testing and training. To maximize efficiency, I have created a single source, which I am preparing for CD, Internet, and hardcopy distribution. I'm also responsible for consistency in corporate branding, marketing and signage (I get to storyboard and direct the odd TV ad too), and seem to be the "MS PowerPoint and Word nerd".

My question is this: If your employer doesn't worry about the "mastery" of every area of your work, but is happy that you do it to the very best of your ability and creativity (and pays the mortgage), then why should you?

Beth comments:

I go back to the film analogy. It is certainly the case that a film writer can learn to do film editing, directing, lighting, set design, and so forth. And many films are handled just that way. But as the complexity of the project grows, real mastery is (seemingly) required. The question I'm asking is: would you expect to see the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ("a professional honorary organization of over 6,000 motion picture professionals") state that its members' backgrounds each include a mastery of writing, editing, lighting, design, costuming, etc.? If not mastery, then do we expect that a screenwriter have a basic proficiency in costuming? If not, why would we expect it of STC?

Why do I care? I have six years invested in STC and I think this is worth discussing. I'm not the only one. In an STC-published volume (published in 1996!) titled "Defining Technical Communication," Richard VanDeWegh contributed "one of many articles in [the] collection expressing concern for our understanding of the kind of communication we do or teach. He suggests that we tend to view our kind of communication in 'narrow terms,' and, consequently, we have an 'image problem.' He argues, in

part, 'Little agreement on how we define technical communication points to a huge problem in [the] industry.'"

Peg Rickard:

I haven't been to an STC conference for two years. I do agree with you that STC should embrace communicators/writers that deal with technical products or materials as well as non-technical, such as for the aging population. Perhaps there is too much emphasis on the technical and not enough on just the communicator.

Over the years, I've evolved from technical writer to manager to user interface usability specialist. I can always find articles in STC publications that are relevant because good design and communication skills are the same regardless of the area of specialty.

Should be interesting to see how STC responds to the needs of its members.

Beth comments:

This is the crux of the problem. It is certainly within STC's charter to remain focused on "traditional" technical communication. But as you say, the publications' articles (as well as STC's conferences) are relevant to a much wider audience, including interface designers, usability specialists, and so on. This is why these people keep turning up at STC conferences! I wonder if I'm the only person who thinks STC is poised to be the IEEE or ACM for technical and professional communications?

Charles Cantrell:

This is a very interesting topic and particularly germane to my current situation. While I have not had similar conversations, and I have not had these feelings, because I have a bed-rock professional identification with Technical Communication, my company recently moved me and a couple of other technical writers out of the Technical Communication Department and into the IT Department.

Let me explain. I, along with a member of our product development group, were recently instrumental in convincing my company to purchase and implement a full-blown single source system, using a proprietary object-oriented single source repository, full-service SGML/XML editorial environment, and all of the DTD, document analysis processes that go with it. (This was the single largest purchase of outside software for a software company that has always, in the past, had a "we will build it ourselves" attitude.)

We will be moving from a typical Frame, Word, etc. development environment. As part of that system, I will be responsible for managing the repository, helping customize the editorial environment, and I have been very central in the DTD design and implementation.

There is another component to our system that is quite unique that has to do with embedding the completed XML components from the repository into our application, so they can be delivered as dynamically assembled on-line help.

With all of that, my company, without even consulting me, said, "Oh, you aren't really a technical writer anymore, you are an IT person." And so, off we go to IT. Granted, they decided that we would be a special portion—titled "Information Services"—and this would fold in responsibility for the organization of the entire Intranet website, with a direction toward a proposed Knowledge Management system. (This was previously already in the IT department, over my protests.) But, still, we are no longer "technical communicators," we are IT people.

So, while I was not aware of your point in the general case, I sure do see it in the particular.

In some way I may have contributed to this, because I had been lobbying for a change in my title to that of "Information Engineer." In fact, I have been using that title "unofficially" for about a year, because I have been writing more code than content.

(For example, I wrote code that extracted data from our database application to construct a WinHelp file with several hundred topics that documents the SQL functions of one of our products. Push a button, and boom, you have a newly refreshed, accurate definition of all the SQL tables in the application in a fully linked, cross-referenced WinHelp app.)

But, I have still thought of myself as a "technical communicator." I was just using a different toolset to implement all the same instructional design and information design principles.

In any case, I agree with all the points in your article, with the exception that rather than feeling on the fringe of Technical Communication, I feel more than ever at the center of where I think it needs to go, and where I think it will go.

Dan Dornbrook:

Your article raises some important points about the changing nature of our field, especially the diversity of skill sets needed; I think it would be helpful if you could address the differences that remain between technical communication and certain other communication fields, especially marketing-related fields like advertising and public relations. The skill sets overlap, but I think the focus is still different ... or is that part of the definition question?

Beth comments:

Good question. Perhaps we should ask the members of the Marketing Communication Special Interest Group? While we're at it, can we ask why there are documentation SIGs in both ACM and IEEE?

Caroline Jarrett:

I read your article with interest and a great deal of sympathy. My field (usable forms) isn't exactly "pure" technical communication either. I describe myself as a usability consultant rather than a technical communicator, but that's because my work is mainly in understanding how forms are used and creating requirements for them, and then evaluating forms. If I were spending a greater proportion of my time designing forms, then I probably would consider myself to be a technical communicator, but I'm not at all sure I'd be included in the classic definitions.

At one time, here was the product and here was the manual—one on the computer screen, and another on paper. That isn't true any more. Often, they're both on the web, and the user may not even know if she's "in the product" or "in the help." The product boundaries have become blurry, and so will the roles of the tech author and the product designer.

I'd like the "traditional" tech. writers to feel comfortable with us "fringe" members, because we have skills and ideas to offer each other. Perhaps if we widened the definition from "technical" communication to "purposeful" communication, that would help?

Mark Levinson:

On the question of what characteristics of our work make it technical communication, I have to agree with what you saw on the Washington DC website. To be a skilled, trained technical communicator and to apply your skills and training to your job do not necessarily mean that your job is technical communication. As a parallel example, consider a builder who goes to work as a safety inspector. Relevant skills, different job. If you're writing about the needs and interests of people over 50 and that isn't a technical subject, we as your fellow technical writers still love you. We are not going to come tear off your epaulets and rip up your STC card. You are still one of us but if you tell us that you are not writing about a technical subject, and not writing for a technical organization, then you're telling us that you aren't currently producing technical writing. Nothing to be ashamed of. Writing can be good even if it isn't technical. I don't know who reads it, but the bookstores seem to be full of the stuff.

Beth comments:

It's nice to still be loved :). And I agree, I'm not currently producing technical writing. But is STC missing the opportunity to grow its membership? AARP stopped being the American Association of Retired Persons for two reasons. One, many of the benefits of membership were applicable to working persons over 50. In fact, 1/3 of our membership are working. Two, calling ourselves an association of

retired folks was clearly not going to be a help when it comes to recruiting Boomers.

I don't expect that us fringe folks make up 1/3 of STC's membership. But given that the benefits of STC membership (the publications, conferences, and SIGs) are well-received by a wider group, I'd suggest that it is worth considering whether to market it that way!

Saul Carliner:

I think the myth of the homogenous technical communicator is just that.

But that said, the fact that so many people call themselves technical communicators suggests that there must be something common among their jobs.

And if we want to effectively prepare people for work in our field and to market our services to people who don't understand what we do, then it's our responsibility to find out what that common knowledge is across our very different jobs that serve very different industries. We do not have to be homogenous to have lots of things in common.

Furthermore, if we don't care to do this, then who will? And if we don't define what it is that we do so that the people who hire us know what to expect, no one else is likely to. And if we don't define what we do, then what right do we have to whine about the fact that we're not effectively used in our organizations? We have nothing that tells us what we could be doing, so how could anyone guess it? It's our own fault.

So how do we find out what's that common definition? For starters, it's not by taking a bunch of STC members into a room and asking them what they do. That's too easy, and easy answers usually aren't.

Instead, two promising sets of techniques are DACUM and meta-analysis. DACUM comes from the training world and is an acronym for Developing a Curriculum. People use the DACUM technique to find out what's involved in a job. It's performed by a certified facilitator, and with people who actually perform the job. No supervisors. No customers.

We could do the same thing for technical communicators. But knowing that technical communicators serve in a variety of roles based on a combination of title and experience, we need to conduct several DACUMs, one for each key constituency in the field: entry-level technical communicators, intermediate level ones, and senior ones; technical editors (perhaps at a couple of levels of experience and perhaps one group for editors in companies that also employ writers and another group of authors' editors who work in scientific institutions); information designers/planners; project managers; and graphic designers. Participants should be carefully selected to make sure that a cross-section of the industries in which we work are represented (for example, tech

writers for research labs and for internal software applications, as well as authors of documentation for software publishers). Then we'll know what goes on in each of these very different jobs.

Knowing what makes us different, we can then perform a meta-analysis of this data—that is, look across all of these different jobs—and identify the common themes among them. Those common themes are the core skills and knowledge of our discipline.

Two more thoughts: first, this exercise is not a static one. With knowledge advancing at dizzying proportions and jobs changing as a result, a study like this needs to be conducted again (probably in 5 to 10 years).

Last, the fact that we work in such different situations is often used as an excuse for not conducting this study, or as a reason why it can't be successful.

That's a bunch of bunk. It's just an excuse for avoiding very difficult work.

As I have written in a commentary in the August issue of ISPI's magazine, all of the communication disciplines are merging. But there's a value in maintaining our separate identities (though I didn't mention that). To do so, however, means we have a responsibility to define and communicate our identities.

Marilyn O'Leary:

I am also a communications specialist but many of my products are about technical subjects. Most are scientific, using biological or engineering resources, sometimes targeting a scientist-audience, but more often targeting industrial or non-technical audiences. For my graduate thesis in technical communication, I surveyed over 100 technical writers who had composed manuals and discovered that the subjects of their manuals range from technical instructions for telephone line workers and airplane engine mechanics' guides to guidelines for tourism developers. Most of the manuals had some relationship to science, but the target audiences covered a broad range from novices in a particular field like banking, to skilled professionals, to segments of the general public.

Karen Schriver's definition has a broad meaning when you think about today's world and speculate on tomorrow's. Society around the world is increasingly "technical" because of the diverse applications for electronic products. Cell phones and hand-held computers are the cornerstone of business in the developed world and a new doorway of communication in the developing world. Tools, even those for cooking or gardening, are now electronic. The need is increasing for instruction and explanation in multiple languages and at many levels of advancement. Technical communicators are being called upon to produce documents—on line and in print—fast.

Regarding the myth of the technical communicator, I don't have a twin technical communicator. At the Louisiana STC Satellite's annual workshop last spring, we held a roundtable discussion about our positions as technical communicators. Surprise—no two people at the table do the same thing. Even those serving the computer industry have different goals, responsibilities and experiences. Yet, without guidance from the facilitator, the discussion rapidly went into short cuts and unique uses for various programs or equipment, even though our audiences and subject matter differed. Afterwards, many used the break to continue sharing ideas and tools, and to express the same frustration you're expressing.

Tom Zeal:

I read your article and I am somewhat confused about what would make anyone feel like they don't belong to STC. Has STC refused your membership fees and told you that you don't belong? Have they asked for references or asked you to meet some specific criteria for membership? That has not been my experience.

My experience with STC is that it is a very open association with people from many different backgrounds and interests joining and contributing. I have never been refused membership and I haven't ever worried about what the other members thought. It sounds like you have met many other people that feel the way you do. I believe that your feelings have more to do with the human trait of wanting to feel connected to something and fearing that we are doomed to peer in rather than make ourselves at home. Please make yourself at home. If you need someone else to tell you that you are a member then I will congratulate you and tell you that you belong here. If you attend STC functions, seminars and conventions and the information is relevant to your personal interests or job then by all means keep attending and support the diversity that makes up STC.

Amy Perry:

I agree that the STC is not well-served by limiting its domain to fields considered technical. I think the key is the phrase "specific goals" in Karen Schriver's definition of document design. The college-level course in defining technical communication which I took last spring led me to the conclusion that creating document spaces to fit a specific situation is a sine qua non for technical communicators. This is opposed to creative writers, who are more free to create whatever they feel like, so to say. I hasten to add that I am definitely not saying that TCs are not creative—for often they are very creative and ingenious. Rather, I am pointing out that we as TCs begin with a context and a creative artist is free to begin without a context. In fact, this comparison is often how I

describe what a technical communicator does to someone who asks.

I also agree that there is not a set of core skills shared by all technical communicators. There is a set of skills, one or more of which every TC has, and most of which some TCs have. But it is entirely possible that Communicator Pat has the exact set of skills that Communicator Lee lacks, and both Pat and Lee can rightly be considered TCs. I have seen TCs who need editors to edit their writing, but they are very creative and very good at analyzing audiences and tasks, planning, and designing. I would, however, posit that there is a single core skill, and that this core skill is the ability to create (or tailor) a document space to a specific situation. Not too surprisingly, this statement harks back to your first point. A given TC may not be the one who defines the specific situation—this would be done by the person analyzing the tasks and the user. But the TC would be able to understand the context and then would either use tools or design document spaces, or edit, or do something else related to tailoring the content to the specific situation.

By the way, if the definition of a technical writer is one who creates document spaces to fit a particular situation, one might well ask, don't people in other occupations do that, too, who aren't considered technical communicators? For example, I can think of instructional designers and public relations specialists. One might also add attorneys who write briefs. And, yes, I think people in these occupations are highly specialized technical writers. I also think there is opportunity for more cross-fertilization of ideas between these professional organizations and STC members. But these people are so highly specialized that they have narrowed themselves down and out of the field. Therefore I would need to amend my definition to include the versatility of the TC.

Cheri Taylor:

While George Hayhoe may have listed several "high-tech" fields as examples of subject domains, I don't think that STC intentionally means to restrict the definition of "technical" in that way. My Oxford American Dictionary includes the following definitions for the word "technical": (1) of a particular subject or craft etc. or its techniques, and (2) requiring specialized knowledge. Any subject domain by definition qualifies as technical because any domain will necessarily have its own jargon, styles, precedents, and methods of addressing its audience. While the needs and interests of people over 50 may or may not be "high-tech," the subject domain is still "technical." STC would do well not to give the impression that only those communicating about high-tech need apply.

Concerning the myth of **the** technical communicator, I find it interesting that the field of technical

communication has become as diverse as my original field of study, engineering. Certainly, no one engineer is ever expected to master all the types of engineering. Indeed, in most U.S. states, an engineer becomes a Professional Engineer in only one type of engineering (civil, electrical, etc.). But the first step to earning that P.E. license is to pass a single exam that **all** engineers take. This first exam guarantees that the engineer has mastered the "basics" common to all types of engineering. Only later, after several years of work, does the engineer sit for the exam for his or her chosen specialty. To me, technical communication has become like the current situation in engineering. Yes, there is a core body of knowledge that all communicators should possess, but there is also plenty of specialized knowledge as well, specialized knowledge that not everyone needs, wants, or can learn in one lifetime. Any attempts at certification or defining a body of knowledge must address both the basics and the specialty areas, much as the engineering profession has done.

A good "one-stop-shop" technical communicator will have a mastery of the basics and as much experience with as many specialized areas as possible. And certainly there are many who are happy to specialize in only one area (indexers, usability specialists, editors, etc.). STC offers a home to both the generalist and the specialist. (Note the immense growth of the special interest groups in the last few years.) If STC leans toward encouraging its members to be as diverse as possible, well, that certainly helps the organization sell conferences, books, and memberships, but it also helps its members stay current, employed, and challenged.

Beth comments:

I wonder how many members of the IEEE Professional Communications Society have taken the required engineering exam? I've often thought about comparing the field of communication to the field of medicine, but I think the analogy fails there for the same reason it fails for engineering. I just don't believe that there is a testable skill set that is common to say, a writer and a graphic designer—even if they both specialize in the same 'technical' field.

That's why I think the comparison to film is better. There might well be a skill set common to editors, one common to writers, one that's common to graphic designers. But one common to all of these? By the way, membership in IEEE does not require that the person be an engineer having passed the basic engineering exam. Instead, they have different classes of membership depending on the education of the applicant and number of years of relevant experience. ACM makes it even easier. Do you have a bachelor's degree in any field? Equivalent? Two-years full-time employment in IT? Then you're eligible for full professional membership.

Jeff Murphy:

I must agree with your observations, but they're nothing new (but that doesn't mean they're not worth saying again). Most of the scholars who teach and write about our profession encourage membership in several other professional communications organizations, like IEEE, depending on the writer's goals and areas of expertise. My old professor recommended Toastmasters for those writing speeches or presentations.

I'm currently working for a rather large company where I'm saddened that most of our "clients" think of technical communicators not as talented writers and editors who provide a breadth of communications offerings and skills but as geeks who are good with specific pieces of software, especially now with the WWW onslaught. This is nothing new either: ads for technical communicators still include the long list of required software knowledge, tools they want you to already know how to use.

Our internal customers tell us not only how to do our jobs but which sets of software tools they'd like us to use for their projects, even though they know very little about them. Engineers and professionals in other departments call me rather than our own computing "helpdesk" since they know I'm knowledgeable about a particular piece of software. Even our own management now seems to value those with specific "IT" skills over those with broader communications knowledge (they need/reward "database" designers more than writers/editors). This trend, of course, comes on the heels of a company-wide effort to basically reduce the number of IT workers.

To all of these folks, the "technical" in technical communications means that we're not skilled professionals but merely technically-proficient typists, often perceived more as computer jocks and not skilled human factors experts or interface designers. I often wonder what they thought of us before digitalization and long to return to "Paper 1.0" rather than dealing with ever-changing Web standards and software tools.

An ID SIG member:

Technical communication, at its core, focuses on clear, concise information simply conveyed to others. But, technical communication, as a profession whose

practitioners deliver clear information, is about much more than writing.

The big shift in technical communication, for me, has been the movement away from giving the reader/user all the information that is known about a product in one place to giving them just the information they need when they need it. Human performance technology issues now drive the design and delivery of information. Document design and similar information design tools move into practical applications in the real world. All of this is tempered, of course, by time and budget constraints of your organization.

The myth of the technical communicator who has a homogenous knowledge base is rare. A technical communicator is more a learner who can readily assemble new ideas into their existing skill set. I am learning and growing new skills because I interact with a wider variety of people on the job—programmers, support reps, trainers, etc. Mastery of all these skills? No. But, technical communications have an understanding of the process required to research, design, develop, and deliver information to a targeted audience.

Beth comments:

But the ability of focusing on "clear, concise information simply conveyed to others" has applications in other domains. A recent *Hyperviews* (the STC Online SIG's newsletter) has an article on "Convincing small business owners to use technical communicators on small business Web sites." If a business application is 'technical' because it is "peculiar to a given field or profession; specialized" (earlier dictionary definition), then I say get rid of the T-word. Or at least qualify it. Because its popular use is muddying up the waters. And that's not good communication!



Tell us what you think!
Join the discussion at
www.geocities.com/stc_infodesign.

The next issue of *Design Matters* is being guest edited by Sonya White. Her theme will be "Design Challenges," and will look at some of the issues and challenges that we wrestle with in order to do what we do. For example, there is often a balancing act that we have to perform to ensure usability while still considering the limitations of technology, client budget, etc. If you are interested in contributing, email Sonya at sonyawhite@zdnetwork.com.

Starting a Chapter SIG

by Cheri Taylor, Carolina Chapter

The following was excerpted from an article written for the October 2000 *Tieline*, the monthly newsletter for STC leaders. Those interested in starting a chapter-level SIG may want to check out the full version at <http://www.stc-va.org/20tielines.html>.

Special Interest Groups (SIGs) within STC provide a way for STC members with interest in a particular subject to share their interest with each other. Society SIGs at the international level have hundreds (even thousands) of members and often publish a newsletter, host an electronic newsgroup, and sponsor events and sessions at annual conferences. Chapter SIGs at the local level usually have far fewer members but, because their members live near the same chapter, can meet regularly and address their members' local needs.

This article provides some guidance you can use to start a SIG within your own chapter. As with applying any general guideline to a specific situation, be aware that some of the activities described in these steps may overlap or not apply in your situation. Modify the steps as necessary to meet your needs. You can be as formal or informal as your situation warrants. Get going, and have fun!

Step One: Does your chapter need a SIG for your focus topic? If your chapter has members who are interested in your focus topic, and no other organization within or outside your chapter addresses their unique needs, then the answer is yes!

Tasks: Make sure a similar group doesn't already exist. See if your chapter has other members who would be interested in joining a chapter SIG dedicated to your focus topic. Broaden your search to nearby cities if necessary.

Step Two: Characterize your intended membership. Think about the type of person who would be interested in your focus topic, the type of work they might do, and the companies they might work for. Your thoughts will help you determine which places and events to search for potential members.

Note that membership in Society SIGs is open to all STC members with an interest in the SIG's subject matter. In general, chapter SIGs follow this same guideline. However, since chapter SIGs may allow members who are **not** STC members, chapter SIGs may also restrict membership in ways that safeguard the value of belonging to STC, a value that STC members purchase with their dues.

Tasks: Characterize your intended membership. Your chapter SIG will have unique membership rules fitted to your area's needs. Don't worry about

fine-tuning your characterization yet. It will evolve as you develop your chapter SIG, learn your members' needs, and discover what works best.

Step Three: Collect a list of interested people. If you have determined that your area needs a chapter SIG for your focus topic and you are willing to continue the startup process, begin to formalize your polling. What you are after in this step is a list of seriously interested potential members.

Tasks: Set up an electronic newsgroup for interested people. Send email to those who have expressed interest or may be interested. Create a simple flyer or card to distribute at chapter meetings and other likely venues. Use the chapter grapevine to announce your search for those interested.

Step Four: Formalize your intent to your chapter and the Society-level SIG. Your chapter may or may not have formal guidelines established for setting up a chapter SIG. Contact your chapter's leadership to find out what you need to do to formally establish a chapter SIG within your chapter.

Tasks: Obtain a copy of your chapter's guidelines for forming a SIG. If your chapter does not have a guideline, you can use this article as your guide. Inform your chapter's leadership. Consider sending a formal letter of interest. Request help from your chapter. Find out who is responsible for the chapter website, newsletter, budget, and membership list. You may be able to use some of your chapter's funds to pay for meeting sites, mailings, brochures, a newsletter, or other activities. Some chapters may choose to provide start-up funds, then expect the SIG to be self-sustaining. Contact the leadership of the Society-level SIG for your focus topic and let them know you are forming a SIG within your chapter. They can provide you with further help (such as guidance on meeting topics and activities), and can list your chapter SIG on the Society-level SIG website. Note that the Society-level SIG can disburse funds only to help **all** their chapter SIGs in general. For example, distributing copies of this article at a conference would be an allowed expense for a Society-level SIG. An example of a disallowed expense is helping a single chapter SIG by paying for a postcard mailing to that chapter's members.

Step Five: Document your plan. Capture your thoughts and plans into a planning document. This document will hold all your notes, contacts, and ideas, keeping you organized and allowing you to share your plans with others who want to help. If the guidelines you are following require a formal application to become a chapter SIG, your document can evolve into that application.

Tasks: Create a planning document. Begin to flesh out such topics as a mission statement, goals, objectives, possible activities, potential meeting topics and speakers, and preliminary budget. If you are follow-

ing a formal chapter guideline, be sure to include any other topics the guideline requires. For an example of a planning document, see the Carolina Chapter CIC SIG's application at <http://www.egroups.com/docvault/ccicinterest/>. Explore what other chapter SIGs do. Visit the website for the Society-level SIG for your focus topic and explore the websites of the chapter SIGs listed. Use the guidelines on the STC site. See <http://www.stc-va.org>.

Step Six: Identify volunteers who can help you.

Unless you have the time and energy to do it all (and no one does), you should identify other people who are seriously committed to helping the chapter SIG get established and move forward. The more people involved, the less each person needs to do, and the more likely the SIG will succeed.

Tasks: Identify at least two other committed volunteers. Poll your newsgroup. Suggest roles such as Website Coordinator, Meeting Coordinator, Public Relations, and Meeting Site Host. If you are not willing to be the Manager yourself, make finding this volunteer your most important priority. Think long-term. To leave the legacy of a successful and thriving SIG, one of your goals should be to develop a core group of involved people so that the SIG will survive your eventual absence.

Step Seven: Start meeting informally. Even before you hold your first formal organizational meeting, and especially if you cannot put together a formal meeting for several months, you can start meeting informally.

Tasks: Begin holding informal meetings. Use the meetings partly to further the SIG's progress.

Step Eight: Create your initial public relations materials. Create some marketing materials to publi-

cize the SIG. These pieces do not have to be polished efforts at this point. As the SIG grows and volunteers come forward to enhance them, the pieces will become more professional and polished.

Tasks: Create an initial website. Create an initial brochure. Follow the STC guidelines for using the World Wide Web, the Society symbol, and the Society logotype (<http://www.stc-va.org>).

Step Nine: Plan and hold the organizational meeting. A formal organizational meeting announces to the chapter that the SIG is serious about establishing an existence. Use the meeting to describe the chapter SIG's plans, generate enthusiasm, and plan for future meetings.

Tasks: Find a location, decide on a time, and advertise the meeting. Plan the agenda. Don't forget to include something fun!

Step Ten: Act like a SIG! You are officially on your way! You're a SIG!

Tasks: Finalize the SIG application. Start regular meetings. Enhance the public relations materials. Establish SIG guidelines. Change as needed to meet your membership's needs.

The first local-level Information Design SIG began meeting in February this year in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area with Don Gay as its organizer. If you have any interest in starting a local ID SIG in your chapter; send an email to mazur@pobox.com.

Cheri Taylor is owner of TechWords, the immediate past manager of the Information Design SIG, and the manager of the new Carolina Chapter Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG. She can be reached at taylorcw@compuserve.com.

Too many new designers only understand IA as a function of "interactive" media—or worse, of Web design. They haven't been confronted with media that don't allow you to be so flexible or redundant. They aren't aware of the important solutions that came before the Web, which in many cases were far more interesting and more lasting than what's being done today.

— Nathan Shedroff

As quoted in http://argus-acia.com/people/current_profile.html

Mars/Venus

...continued from page 1

It's no surprise then, that Master Neilsen makes most of his dough writing and talking (the articulatable), whereas Kioken makes most of their dough designing (the inarticulatable). Indeed, to re-quote Na, "the less the client **talks** to us, the better it is."

You can see why each group would quickly get on the other's nerves. The usability experts find the graphic designers too touchy-feely. "What do they mean they need to mess around with the look and feel to see what develops? Why can't they just give me a wireframe now?" The graphic designers find the usability experts too blunt and by-the-book. "What do they mean graphics are just the icing on the cake? Without graphic design, all you've got is a plan!"

Meta-Voodoo Usability — In the press and on the bulletin boards, the graphic designers tend to take a beating. And not surprisingly. They are the inarticulate ones, remember? Thus you get articles that malign innovative designers without rightly discerning the purpose of their sites; or worse, you get outright dreck written by blind guides who wouldn't know aesthetic appeal if it stripped bare and gave them a table dance.

But wait, the usability experts have their statistics! It has been documented! The users are on their side! But what questions are these usability studies asking? "Could you find it?" "Were you able to accomplish it?" "Articulate to us IN WORDS what you were able to DO." Such questions presuppose a "Martian" criterion for user experience. If the site is a "Martian" site (logical, rational, left-brained), then it will score well on Neilsen's usability test. If the site is a "Venusian" site (intuitive, emotional, right-brained), then it will score poorly on Neilsen's usability test. Were Neilsen to ask questions like, "What adjective best expresses how this site made you feel?" he would get dramatically different statistical results. But of course, questions like that would be touchy-feely and unscientific. To use his own jargon then, Neilsen-esque usability testing is, in the overall scheme of things, yet another form of "voodoo" usability. It finds what it is looking for and ignores what it is unable to measure.

But what if Levi's doesn't have a huge database of

products that it's selling online? What if Levi's just wants people to feel that its vintage clothing is rugged and somewhat extreme? What if a successful site to Levi's is a site that conveys an emotion, an attitude, a world-view? In other words, what if Levi's is branding? Most usability tests are impotent to evaluate the success of a site in terms of conveyed emotion, because emotion is something that most users (and most humans) have difficulty articulating, particularly in response to multiple choice questions. But just because a positive interactive experience can't be charted doesn't mean it hasn't occurred.

I Am the Lorax, I Speak for the Trees — The graphic designers sense that something is amiss, yet they are largely tongue-tied in their efforts to refute "the violence inherent in the system." Being young, punkish, rebellious youths (all tattooed, shorn, and pierced to the hilt as well), they lash out blindly, saying ill-conceived, inarticulate, un-endearing things. Thus Sr. Neilsen scores even more opportunities to indoctrinate the corporate movers and shakers, while an entire subculture of frustrated designers churns away in obscurity, thrashing their anti-capitalistic design statements into the cyber-void.

Until now. The graphic design community is finally getting some poster boys: Kioken's Joshua Davis, VolumeOne's Matt Owens, Juxt Interactive's Todd Purgason, and a host of other thoughtful professionals who are crafting graphic-intensive commercial sites that big clients are finding increasingly hard to resist.

The theorists and writers advocating graphic web design have been a little slower to emerge (for reasons already belabored above). Graphic design doesn't exactly lend itself to a specific list of do's and don't's. User interface jedi Nathan Shedroff has a wonderfully conceived piece on interface seduction, but it's still mighty abstract. I've come up with my own list, which I hope is a step toward developing a more articulate web design vocabulary. And there is always the odd enlightened piece on graphic design from a classic "list of 10" perspective.

But writers about graphic design will never have as many easily articulatable "principles" as Jacob Neilsen (if they do, beware). Such inarticulatability is inherent to a vocabulary of the aesthetic. Graphic

Confusion and clutter are failures of design, not attributes of information. And so the point is to find design strategies that reveal detail and complexity—rather than to fault the data for an excess of complication. Or, worse, to fault viewers for a lack of understanding.

— Edward R. Tufte

As quoted in <http://eleganthack.com/blog/index.html>

design on the web is no exception. Still, just because a truth can't be reduced to a sound bite, it nevertheless remains a truth.

I've Looked at Clouds from Both Sides Now — Although the web began as a medium to exchange physics research papers, it seems naive to expect it to remain predominately text-based. Usability experts bemoan the evolution of the web into something beyond a card catalog. Their "speedy download" mantras belie their reluctance to jettison a word-based web. But just because the web was born in text doesn't mean it need remain in text.

CD-ROMs were born in gaming, and now the CD-ROM medium includes encyclopedias, experimental ambient environments, and virtual cookbooks. You don't hear old-school game designers saying, "The William Sonoma Guide to Fine Cooking CD-ROM is a total crock! There's not even a hint of competition! We all know that CD-ROMs are by their very nature competitive!" How ludicrous. Yet there are still old-school usability experts saying, "Don't they know the web is about accessing information? Who cares what it looks like? Where's the content?"

I don't think the web is going to turn into interactive TV, but neither will it remain a forum for exchanging physics outlines. And who wants it to, anyway? For all their statistics, arguments, and lists, the usability experts are overlooking the fact that we, as humans, are not all Martians. Indeed, there is a

little Venus in us all, and some of us are nothing but Venusian.

Yes, I admonish all graphic designers to heed the few user interface experts who bother to critique your Flash layouts without blindly dismissing your entire site.

But usability gurus, heed ye the words of hippy sage Joni Mitchell as she describes the mechanics of human interaction:

"Rolls and flows of angel hair, Ice cream castles in the air, Feather canyons everywhere, I've looked at clouds that way. But now they only block the sun. They rain, they snow on everyone. So many things I would've done But clouds got in my way.

I've looked at clouds from both sides now, From up and down and still somehow It's clouds' illusions I recall. I really don't know clouds at all."

Substitute "graphic design" for "clouds" and you get the idea. Unless usability experts are willing to admit that a 250K streaming Flash file may indeed be the best solution for a branding site's core page, those same experts may find themselves expounding in exile on Mars while the rest of us humans intuit the neo-web experience.

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You be the editor!

Have you always wanted to talk about information design from your point of view? Interested in editing a newsletter but not quite prepared for a major, long-term commitment? Then you may want to consider guest editing an issue of *Design Matters*.

Guest editors write, solicit, or otherwise acquire 2000-5000 words for a single issue. These articles can be of general interest to information designers or they can be themed on a particular topic.

You can visit the *Design Matters* archive at stc.org/pics/idsig/newsletter.html to see terrific guest-edited issues by Michael V. Sharp, Mary Ann Eiler, and Bonnie J. Davis.

Design Matters layout and production is handled by Beth Mazur. For more details, please send email to Beth at mazur@pobox.com.

Information Design

The field of information design applies traditional and evolving design principles to the process of translating complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into valuable, meaningful information.

The practice of information design requires an interdisciplinary approach which combines skills in graphic design, writing and editing, instructional design, human performance technology, and human factors.

Although its reach extends far beyond traditional boundaries of technical communication, the essentials of information design profoundly affect our work. The products of information design occur in any domain in which clear communication is essential, from those familiar to technical communicators, such as reference manuals and online help systems, to those outside the traditional realm of our work, such as public signage in public buildings, insurance and tax forms, and user interface design.

Our Mission

The mission of our SIG is to meet the professional development needs of our members and to act as a vital conduit between STC and information designers at large. Our objectives include:

- advancing awareness of information design among STC members;
- assisting members interested in acquiring information design skills;
- encouraging information design research and making available information design resources;
- examining the roles and practices of the information designer;
- and providing a forum for the discussion of relevant topics.

Please visit the ID SIG website at <http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>



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