

2·98

JULY 1998

Interactive Discussion Medium



FORUM

**TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATORS'
FORUM**

In this Issue:

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Translation Issues cont.

Readability / Usability /
Quality cont.

Tools cont.

FORUM 2000 new

Education & Training cont.

Professional Events

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The International Council for
Technical Communication

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IMPRESSUM:

**Technical Communicators’
TC-Forum** is a non-profit initiative
supported by INTECOM, the
International Council for Technical
Communication.

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Next issues:

- October 1998 (deadline for input
1 September 1998)

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* Each Topic has a two-letter abbreviation,
for example

- CL for Controlled Languages
- TR for Translation Issues
- RU for Readability/Usability
- TO for Tools
- ET for Education & Training

The contributions (articles or comments)
are numbered consecutively through the
different issues of TC-Forum.

When commenting to any of the contri-
butions, please refer to these “codes”
for ease of understanding.

Risks and Side Effects (CL 14)

By Wladyslaw Janowski

Controlled Language (CL) is a controversial issue for linguists, editors, readers, but also for firms. Costs, marketing and sales figures are at stake. Why did I select "risks and side effects", from the numerous problems involved, for my contribution? I am convinced that CL will be successful because positive / financial arguments prevail. Consequently, we will have to avail ourselves of CL, and identify and realize the risks involved and potential vicious side effects.

Compromise Between Efficiency and General Use of Language

Even in the technical field, written language cannot and should not be totally deprived of emotional and aesthetic qualities. We should compromise wisely between our objectives and the need for

- intelligibility,
- repeatability,
- low cost, balanced against potential risks
- high error rate, and
- probable rejection by target groups like private or professional product users.

There is no time to reflect.

Markets are hectic!

- We also need to be aware of the danger inherent in
- excessive simplification, and
 - the deprivation of everyday colloquial.

There is no time to reflect. Markets are hectic!

A society using CL in everyday communication would -horror of horrors- be setting a standard. The danger is imminent because people tend to imitate stereotypes. Therefore CL must be applied sensibly and pragmatically.

Some Languages Are Not Fit for CL?

Some languages like English and the Roman languages are more suitable for building CL structures than others. Less suitable are the Slavic languages where complicated structures and subjectivity prevail.

Let me give an example:

There have been Windows applications in the Polish language for years. Version 3.1 asks: "Exit Windows?" before closing a session. As "Exit" means end of function or process, translators chose the Polish concept "Koniec" ("end"), instead of the word by word translation of "exit" which would be "leave". Applying CL rules, one should stick to "End Windows" or "Close Windows" instead of "Exit Windows".

The adaptability of CL is different in different languages. It might be extremely difficult to find acceptable CL expressions in some languages. A probable solution might be worldwide application of International English, even though that might prove dangerous to culture and language. On the other hand, there are certain advantages; which means that, willingly or unwillingly, International English is being introduced, step by step, not only in Technical Communication but also in the fields of the media and colloquial language.

Fairly old concepts like GerEnglish, Franglais or Germish hint at definitely related phenomena which are not directly at work though, when people use International English in other languages, they are endangering the English language itself. As more and more people use International English worldwide, it's even more necessary that the English and Americans learn to understand and use a version of their own language that is not only simplified but also non-standard from their point of view.

CL and Translation Tools

Inventors keep creating tools for technical translators, such as Trados Fine Translation Tools and other translation memory systems. These tools don't make much sense without CL; what is more, they create CL themselves. This may not be too bad if only the first (original) text is linguistically correct, if not excellent. After that, each mistake or blunder, or each context risk not intended by the original author, means that in a different context the original wording may acquire a different

meaning or even degenerate into complete nonsense. Each time you apply the data base the risk grows worse and ultimately it produces rubbish, the results of which keep me and my customers from the automobile sector increasingly busy.

Let me quote an example from this field: After analysis of syntax the translator is offered the separate syntactical unit "assemble", but there is no context. No wonder this expression will later turn up in different forms, such as

- title of paragraph
- part of title, e.g. "assemble automatic gear"
- assignment, like "assemble module x and check seal"

At this stage, without context, I don't know how this expression will be used later, during the translation process.

So I translate into Polish the equivalent of "montage" which proves correct and is fed into the data base.

Then this syntactic unit is used for a preliminary translation of a new text, and the program qualifies its output as either

- Correct, or
- Problematic (to be checked), or
- Untranslated.

In this special case the expression "clutch-gear-assembly", preliminarily translated into Polish as: "assembly of clutch and gear-unit", is qualified as "correct". This labeling, however, is incorrect and should therefore be qualified as "problematic" because the actual context means "assembly of clutch and gear" (it is not one unit).

Even if I look through the data base, I cannot change this process because the machine-translation is correct on a given syntactic level – but not in this special context. It's only when proof-reading that I may realize that, by taking into account the context, something is wrong. By then it would be too much trouble to correct the data base. Or delete and start again? Would that be sensible?

Where does this risk derive from? In translation memory systems you must use the shortest possible syntactic units (sentences as a rule, but also individual words). The first and most important selection of segmentation criteria takes place in the original language. During translation you may interfere (i.e. take steps) to correct wrong or dangerous segmentation. But that means additional work; work you wanted to avoid. Thus the need to interfere may render the use of translation-memory-systems senseless.

Finally, syntactic rules in different languages are different. What might function well with English – German – English translations might prove difficult with other languages, or result in comical or dangerous mistakes, all of which increase costs immensely.

Conclusions

Should we use CL? In principle yes, but...

Should we use CAT-systems? In principle yes, but...

Should we use International English in the CL - version as an alternative for translation in the technical field? Why not, but...

Are there "risks and side effects"? Yes, but... whom should we ask?



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Babelfish: Real-Time Machine Translation on the Internet

by Kurt Ament

Voila!
You're
multi-
lingual

In his ironic science fiction thriller „The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy“, Douglas Adams describes a creature called a Babelfish that enables humans to understand and speak any language on earth. You simply stick the device in your ear and – voila! – you're multilingual. No more need for flash cards, language labs, or grammar books. Just plug in and play the fish.

Ready or not, Adams' fictional earpiece just made its virtual debut on the Internet. It's time to stop surfing and start fishing.

Real-Time “Debabelizer”

On December 9, 1997, Digital Equipment Corporation and SYSTRAN A.G. launched AltaVista Translation Service, the first European language translation service for Web content. For the first time, non-English speaking users can translate information on the predominantly English speaking Web in real time. The new free service, which is hosted by Digital's AltaVista Search site (<http://www.altavista.digital.com>), also enables English-only users to understand information in five European languages: French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. Not surprisingly, the server itself is called „Babelfish“.

Translating Web Pages On the Fly

To translate raw text is simple:

1. Go to the AltaVista Translation Service site: <http://babelfish.altavista.digital.com>
2. Paste the source text into the text box
3. Select a target language and click Translate.

If you wish, you can copy and paste the translated text into any type of document. Or you can reverse the process and translate English text into a foreign language.

To translate Web pages or search results is just as easy (for more details see Digital's AltaVista Search site).

Mind Over Machine

Idiomatic texts, such as the one you are reading, do not lend themselves well to machine translation. As Digital and SYSTRAN put it: “The technology works best when the text is grammatically correct and does not use too many idioms; however, users can usually understand the meaning of even a poorly written document.” This you can judge for yourself.

I find that reading text generated by the Alta Vista Translation Service is not unlike listening to “Voice of America” broadcasts through heavy state-sponsored static. The reception could be better, but you get a basic idea of what's going on outside your borders. No doubt, and with good reason, professional translators will build bonfires for AltaVista. But others – particularly monolingual Americans – will erect shrines to this fast, free, and easy translation service, no matter how obvious and odious its flaws.

Déjà-vu All Over Again

If all of this sounds vaguely familiar, it is. Machine translation, like the Internet itself, is a remnant of the Cold War.

After World War II, the idea of decoding natural languages through mathematical techniques became a reality. Twenty years of military-industrial research culminated in SYSTRAN, which was developed in 1968 by Peter Toma in La Jolla, California. By the late 1980s, this system enabled loyal behemoth customers – such as the Commission of European Communities, the U.S. Air Force, and Xerox Corporation – to translate mountains of documents, modify their own dictionaries, and preserve original document formats during the translation process.

(TR 6)

In the early 1990s, SYSTRAN retrofitted its main-frame-based technology to personal computers. Now, together with Digital, they are back on the world stage, this time offering free Web page translation to, of all things, individuals.

History of the Future

The history of translation in general says a lot about the future of real-time machine translation in particular.

Essentially, there are three ways to translate documents:

- **Human translation**, done by humans who are fluent in the source language and native to the target language, is used for sensitive documents that do not contain much redundant material and are not likely to be revised frequently.
- **Computer-assisted translation**. Interactive machine translation includes modifiable bilingual glossaries and “fuzzy memory” that compares current texts with previous translations, allowing humans to accept, reject, or edit those translations. It requires almost no post-translation editing by humans, and is used for polished retail publications that go through repeated revisions.
- **Machine translation** is automatic translation, and as such requires the use of controlled language in original texts and extensive post-translation editing by humans. It is used by military and industrial organizations that are large and disciplined enough to leverage economies of scale.

Unlike the AltaVista Translation Service, all three approaches involve human translators to a greater or lesser degree. In fact, AltaVista is a translator’s nightmare: unchangeable databases mechanically processing uncontrolled language worldwide in real time and in a public space.

Despite its obvious flaws, however, this spectacular experiment is something to keep your eye on, especially if you are directly involved in international technical communication.

Remember 1993? In the beginning, the experts thought the Web was science fiction. Then came the browser wars. In 1996 they thought it couldn’t turn a buck. Then came electronic commerce. Now they say it has no content. Enter real-time machine translation. Each of these breakthroughs was market-driven, and each violated the conventional wisdom of its time.

Resources

For more information about real-time machine translation, consult the following sources:

- **AltaVista Search**
<http://www.altavista.digital.com>
- **AltaVista Translation Service**
<http://babelfish.altavista.digital.com>
- **Babelfish**
<http://www.infotektur.com/demos/babelfish>
- **Digital Equipment Corporation**
<http://www.digital.com>
- **The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy**
<http://www.amazon.com>
- **SYSTRAN A.G.**
<http://www.systransoft.com>

Note: This article appeared originally as “Real-Time Machine Translation on the Internet” in the May 1998 issue of Intercom, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication. It is copyright 1998 Kurt Ament and STC. For further copyright information, contact the editor of Intercom, Maurice Martin <maurice@stc-va.org>.



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Machine Translation – a New Dimension and What You Can

by Fred Klein

A New Dimension

Built-in obsolence? Part of my paper about MT (TC-Forum 4-97, TR5) must be updated. On December 9, 1997, DEC and Systran A.G. launched AltaVista Translation Service, a free real-time system that can "translate" information from the predominantly English-speaking Web. You could - and should- test yourself, though today I faced a disaster.

Instead of "translation", AltaVista offered me unbelievable junk, evidently an unedited MT version of American promotional material. The text was unreal, the result of a myth: You click a button and the translation is staring at you. You are in the middle of a jungle.

Before you start the test, you should understand the problems, because MT is NOT context-sensitive. For instance:

- The term "fair train stop" was translated as "gerechter Zughalt".
- The noun "fair" (Messe) was rendered as a wrong adjective.
- The term "nipple, stainless steel" was translated as "Brustwarze, rostfreier Stahl" (breast nipple was the only equivalent found).
- The term "miss distance" (the distance by which a missile misses a target) was rendered as "senorita distancia".
- "Tape drive" became "Leukoplasttreibwerk" (Leukoplast is a German trademark for an adhesive plaster).
- And the American term "billion" became "Billione" in German instead of "Milliarde".

Fun? Impossible? You should withhold judgment, and be patient.

The original "classical" MT involves pre- and post-editing (Controlled English) and is INTERACTIVE. Human users must input and code words not found. They may have to create customized specialized bilingual dictionaries and, most important, they must select the proper term from large groups of terms with more than one meaning. Quality is enhanced, but the cost is prohibitive, and post-editing can become a time-consuming nightmare. The investment is very high.

Real-time MT of the AltaVista/Systran type is free or very cheap (1 cent per word). It is unbelievably fast, available 24 hours a day anywhere with a minimum requirement of a 486 PC clone and Internet access. There is no pre- or post-editing, the text is called a "suggestion", and AltaVista offers a needed disclaimer.

The language is uncontrolled and there is no access to databases or online dictionaries. The system offers you a translation for EVERY word – often the wrong one. Words with typos are not translated. You can take the result and edit it conventionally, but that defeats the purpose?

Is AltaVista's real-time MT a ridiculous, flawed experiment? I do not think so. It brings a new dimension to international information transfer, NOT to translation. It is a new niche, something impossible until now. It is application-driven and limited to specific purposes.



Fun?
Impossible?
You should
withhold
judgment,
and be
patient.

Expect (TR 7)

If you are a professional translator – like me – or a technical communicator, you must radically change your thinking to accept a different approach. No professional translator needs to feel threatened by this type of "translation".

We think in terms of good English, style, and high quality, publication-type translations. Each time I find a mistranslation or typo I jump; it has become a reflex. But we deal with a different product to be judged by other standards. The first time I saw the strange result, I jumped and rejected it. You may do the same, but I suggest that you test and test again at random. Think of it as cheap, instant international (mis)information.

What Can You Expect from Real-time, Online Translation?

The results are completely unpredictable. I suggest you test 10 different topics. I am not listing Instant Translations here, on purpose. In one case, a medical "translation" was easy to understand; in another test, I, as a professional translator, was unable to make any sense out of the "translation". In a third case I could understand only some of the content, based mainly on a few nouns and some verbs: the total text was jibberish.

Some multilingual Europeans, and most professional translators, will gleefully reject the whole system. Some monolingual Americans will proudly praise the results uncritically, as a breakthrough in MT. Both are wrong.

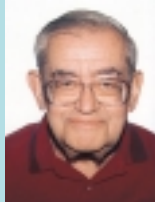
AltaVista's "Translation Assistant" provides a free service to the Internet community. The company claims that a document is translated into something comprehensible, but not perfect. According to the promotional copy, Systran, a partner of AltaVista, "produces the best and fastest translation software in the world". Fast, yes. But not the best!!!

The sales point of AltaVista and Systran is the word "translation". If we could define it as

"international information transfer", I would be more satisfied. Moreover, a disclaimer should be added automatically to each "translation", that "a computer translates everything without any human intervention."

Systran also suggests you may have lots of fun with the mistranslation. Maybe - but you should still be able to use it.

Which type of text is suitable for real-time MT? Web pages, abstracts, headings. Systran suggests newspapers or magazines. My previous experience in "classical" MT tells me that "running text" is not suitable, but then I was thinking of "translation" instead of "information transfer". We are presented with "suggestions"; take it or leave it. If you cannot take the "junk" , real-time MT is not for you.



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Technical Communication and Encryption - Adding Value to



by Marie-Louise Flacke

Working on a global scale might give you the opportunity to add value to your technical communicator's job. In particular, when dealing with encryption on the Internet, you should be aware of restrictions which might have an impact on your documentation.

Defining Encryption

Encryption grants privacy to electronic data by modifying your mail so that nobody but the intended person can read it. When encrypted, the message looks like a meaningless jumble of random characters.

Encryption Issues

With electronic commerce emerging in Europe, encryption is becoming a real issue as it is the best way to secure transactions on the Internet.

Several companies are involved in e-commerce, either designing or providing encryption software, merchandising secured routers, adding encryption features to browsers or using encryption to secure data exchange with customers.

Encryption Issues for the Global Technical Communicator

When dealing with the French market, the technical communicator should keep in mind the specific issues of encryption. This might be an opportunity to add a real value to the communicator's documentation activity.

Forms of Encryption

On the Internet, encryption can have two aspects: digital signature or data encryption:

- Digital signature is used to prove (assert) the origin of the data. It authenticates the message (authentication) and checks that data has not been altered (integrity). Digital signature is used to verify that a message really comes from the claimed sender.
- Encryption aims at maintaining data confidentiality and is based on sophisticated mathematical research. This computation technique provides either private or public encryption keys.

The most well-known encryption method is RSA (Rivest, Shamir, Adleman) which provides the basis for the easily available PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) encryption software. To be reliable, an encryption system must be made of very long keys. The bigger the key, the more difficult it is to break the code.

French Barriers to Encryption

France is the only Western European country which does not allow a free use of encryption on its territory. In spite of the recent decrees (dated March 15 and March 25, 1998), obstacles still remain to achieving full implementation and free usage of encryption in France.

The March 25, 1998 decree gives the limits to encryption based on the maximum key length of 40 bits. Encryption algorithms based on higher bitlength (such as 56 bits) are subject to a contract (declaration) with a Trusted Third Party (TTP). A Trusted Third Party is a security authority, or its agent, trusted by other entities with respect to security-related activities. In fact, a TTP may act as a Key Escrow Agency (KEA) whose key-escrow scheme has been approved. Users who escrow, i.e. deposit their keys with the KEA are able to freely use the cryptography scheme with these keys. On the other hand, the French KEA is required to hand over keys to law enforcement under certain conditions, such as suspicion of lawbreaking.

the Technical Communicator's Job (RU 10)

Documentation and Encryption

1. Encrypting Email Messages

French users are allowed to secure their email messages using encryption software, provided the key to this encryption tool does not exceed 40 bits. Unfortunately, research has proven that 40-bit encryption can be (more or less) easily decrypted. Consequently, if you want to exchange encrypted data with your French counterpart, please bear in mind your colleague might be reluctant to do so. He or she might want to get more information about the encryption software you are using and may ask: Is it a low encryption software? In case of strong encryption algorithm, has the key been escrowed with a TTP?

These precautions will apply both when using digital signatures and encrypting whole files. In addition, the recent liberalization of the French law (March 1998) means French users have not yet had time to get familiar with encryption tools. Be patient with them!

2. Documenting Encryption Hardware and Software

This should be the big issue for technical communicators and/or localizers. Usually, documenting encryption products implies writing for a global audience, without considering the very specific country regulations.

Technical communicators writing for a French audience will add value to their job by inserting a note drawing the user's attention to the restrictions :

- **Example #1** : "En application de la législation en vigueur en France, l'utilisation de cette fonction est soumise à certaines restrictions". (*)
- **Example #2** : "Ce produit étant soumis à la réglementation française, il ne sera commercialisé qu'après accord des autorités compétentes" (**)

Further, the technical communicator should be aware that the documentation is written in

French, but the restrictions apply exclusively to the French territory, not to French-speaking countries. This means the restrictions do not apply to French software/hardware released in other French speaking countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium, Luxemburg and Canada.

Conclusion

Being aware of the specific applications in various countries will help technical communicators or localizers add value to their documenting activity. It will also increase the integration of technical authors into developers' teams.

- (*) In accordance with current French law, the use of this function is subject to certain restrictions.
- (**) This product being subject to French law, it can't be released onto the market without approval from the relevant authorities



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- (2) *Digital Signatures to Power E-commerce,*
Rainer Mauth (BYTE, January 1998)
- (3) *French Law on encryption:*
<http://194.51.213.11/lij/decret98206.html>

Transferability of Long File Names (TO 6)

by Karin Gärdegård

Please,
spread
the
word!!

If you use Win95, NT, Mac, or any other operating system that allows long file names, are you aware of the problems that can arise when files are transferred to Win 3.11 or DOS? The problems particularly affect files that have long file names in which the first eight characters are the same, e.g. "minutes of 20 Sept meeting" and "minutes of 14 Nov meeting". The problem arises as soon as a file is opened in an operating system that allows only eight characters in the file name, suffix excluded.

The problem is that in old systems, either one of the files gets written over, or the other file has to be renamed. However, it is not possible to change the names of compressed files, such as zipped or self-expanding files.

So, out of a tidy suite of file names (possibly compressed into one file), often only one file can be opened! Then an enormous amount of time is wasted renaming all the files bearing the same suffix, such as .pdf (portable document file), .mif, .eps, etc. If the files have different suffixes, naturally there will not be a problem. Let me give you an example:

Imagine a sequence of pictures for a document that lies in a folder (catalog). The files are called instrument picture-1.eps, instrument picture-2.eps, instrument picture-3.eps, etc. For example, for an application running in Win 3.11:

- If the pictures are linked, it takes forever to rename and create new links.
- If the folder is compressed, only one file is opened when the folder is unpacked automatically in Win 3.11 or DOS, and it will be called "instrume.eps"!

It is not particularly difficult to solve the name problem if you are aware of it. In the aforementioned example, you can transpose the names so that they will become: p1_instrument picture, p2_instrument picture, p3_instrument picture, etc. (because there are programs which require the first character to be a letter a-z). Thus, to avoid more work than necessary, in the planning stages of a document, decide to use a name structure for files and pictures so they will transfer easily to systems that limit file names to only eight characters. Remember, there are professionals around the world who still work in Win 3.11!

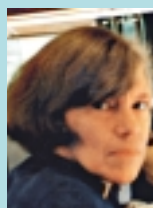
I am sure that you, dear readers and colleagues, are aware of this and work from this knowledge, but please, SPREAD THE WORD!!

Addendum:

Hardened veterans already know which characters are forbidden in file names in the different platforms. Here is a quick guide for beginners or those who seldom use computers and thus might forget these facts.

Karin's Quick Guide for facilitating file transfers between platforms:

- The part of the file name unique to that file should lie in the first eight characters.
- Use only the English alphabet A-Z and numerals in the file name. The only other allowable characters are - (dash or hyphen) and _ (underline).
- Forbidden characters are a space, / \ ; . , , and diacritical characters such as ä, ö, etc.



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There Goes the Productivity.... (TO 7)

by Ulrich Thiele

Writing this article reduces my productivity factor for today by a certain amount. There are many other things I have to take care of today, and I'm not able to charge any of our customers for the time.

The productivity factor is defined as the relation between the daily amount of working time spent on paid projects and the total amount of working hours. The difference is the nonproductivity in a technical writer's life.

A "couple of years" ago, my nonproductive time was limited to some customer meetings and some reading of technical books. The rest of my working time I was able to spend with job-related information research and pure technical writing. In those days the technical expressions for software update, work-around and hardware drivers had not been invented.

Today, every other week the postman delivers another software update package, with another thousand pages of documentation and more bug fixes to be worked through. And on top of that, the software update won't cooperate with other software on my particular PC, and anyway it's unable

to read the data files generated by its predecessor. You know the game. Our statistics for the past couple of months show 13.6 hours per week for PC-related problems with two workstations. There goes the productivity.

Another thing that worries me is the agenda of most of our customer meetings: 10 minutes of discussion on the contents of a new user manual, then another 45 minutes to find out about the appropriate file formats and data exchange procedures. "There is no such thing as an application user today," our PC consultant told me only recently. "If you want to be a technical writer you have to be an expert in the depth of operating systems and hardware details." And he added: "Now show me what you have learned on network configuration in our last lesson."

Actually I should stop blaming the software manufacturers for all this inefficiency and our weekly expenses of 13.6 hours for it, since I bet they will all be gone – together with their data formats – long before my customer's machines, for which I am writing documentation, reach the end of their life span.

I guess they will have gone back to pencil and rubber eraser by then.



There Goes the Productivity.... (cont.)

We spent nearly 800 hours last year on nonproductive and unpaid work.

(I'm wondering which tools will be used ten years from now to service the documentation for that customer's machines, when today's word processing and dtp software are history and nobody remembers Windows. And the CD ROM with the documentation on it fits in no disk slot available. I guess they will have gone back to pencil and rubber eraser by then.)

There is even more nonproductivity connected with our work, like keeping track of all the norms, guidelines and technical standards we have to consider when writing our documentation. (And there are far more to come from Brussels and other important committees.) Or think of all the wasted hours that you stare at the screen, hoping you will finally find that most important piece of information instead of wasting all that unstructured Internet data.

Well, we did some more statistics and came to the conclusion that we spent nearly 800 hours last year on nonproductive and unpaid work. In addition, every working place invested more than 10 000 DM in (mostly) hardware and software, just to keep the system going. Everyone who runs a documentation department is aware they have to find ways to improve the efficiency of the productive work to compensate for the nonproductive hours. Many freelancers and independent documentation offices have already extended their weekly working hours to allow for this.

On the other hand, writing this article actually increases my productivity factor, because at the same time I'm supervising another PC, which now for the third time without success is trying to print out just one A3 page full of graphics. Simultaneously, I am also supervising another PC, which

is trying to backup some files on a streamer, which fails to recognize the tape. However, this does not mean that bundling of nonproductive tasks always increases the productivity factor!

Write me a note and say whether you agree or disagree. But be careful: It will reduce your productivity factor for that day! Can you afford it?



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The Blind Leading the Enlightened... (TO 8)

by Brian Gillett, Christine Munro, Alison Middleton

Having read, with interest, the recent articles about the virtues (or otherwise) of Microsoft Word as a tool for producing technical documents we feel the real issue is not how to create technical documents using Microsoft Word, but rather what tool best suits the task. We suggest that the selection of the most appropriate tool be instigated by those enlightened people – the Technical Publications people – and not the business managers with little knowledge of the specialist needs of Technical Publications.

AST is a Technical Publications agency producing documentation which integrates into our clients' existing standards and software. Thus the need to integrate increasingly means we have to produce documentation in Microsoft Word, which often is our clients' preferred in-house software package. The key word above is preferred. On talking to our customers it is not their preferred software package, but rather the software selected by the unenlightened within their companies who have deemed that Microsoft Word best integrates into their existing company business software, namely Microsoft Office.

In the early days of Microsoft Windows, this seemed like a sensible move. Source information in the form of text, generated within the company, could easily be incorporated or restyled into a Microsoft Word technical publication. This argument, however, shows little regard for either the



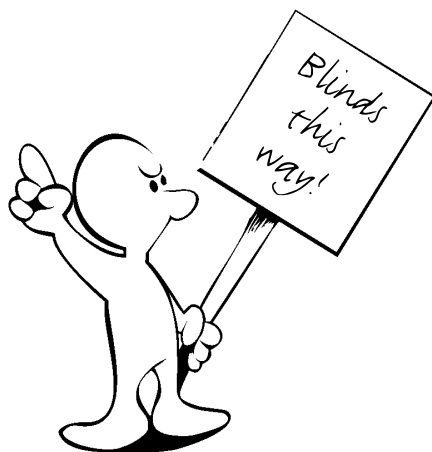
need to integrate graphics from a variety of software packages or the size of the resultant technical publication.

The selection of Microsoft Word as opposed to a Desktop Publishing Package designed specifically for the task of integrating graphics into complex publications with distinct sections, automatically generating indexes, contents and cross-references, has been left to those without the necessary insight into the specific needs of a Technical Publications department. The argument for ease of integration is no longer valid with the advent of Windows based versions of all the proprietary DTP packages.

Technical publications are unlike any other business publications in that they stretch non-DTP software packages often to breaking point – as suggested by Thomas O'Connors's article (TC Forum 1-98).

We suggest that Technical Publications departments stand up for themselves and insist that the selection of tools for their tasks be left to themselves. Their specialist knowledge of producing (and amending) technical publications from source information supplied from a range of software packages, and the complexity of the resultant technical publication puts them in the best position to select a tool that is best suited to the task.

Should not the enlightened lead the blind ?



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Forum 2000 – The International

by *Brigitte Beuttenmüller*
and
Michael Fritz

The Idea of Forum Conferences

Forum conferences started when Ulf L. Andersson, a technical communicator from Sweden and founding member of both the Swedish Society for Technical Communication and INTECOM, realized that usually he returned from a conference with the same feeling: “The paper presentations were mostly tedious and unrewarding, but I met very many interesting people during the breaks. It’s a pity the breaks were so short.”

The moment was born for him to think of a way to arrange a conference consisting of one entire, long break! And this how he became the inventor of the Forum conferences.

A second thought pursued him. “Why travel to conferences in far-away places just to listen to people reading their papers – which you could do just as well at home?”

That was the starting point. His main idea was, right from the beginning, to make it as easy as possible for the conference participants to find people with common interests and arrange situations where they could exchange ideas and experience. The participants should leave a Forum conference not only with ideas that others have planned to “hand out”, but also with ideas generated at the conference, thanks to people with different backgrounds and creative conference methods.

His idea was to ban all lectures (i.e. formal presentation of papers) but still to offer a program interesting enough to attract many participants.

The Forum 2000 organization committee met in Luebeck on May 13, 1998. The agreement was signed and the first important facts were decided.

Place and Date

June 13 – 14, 2000
Commonwealth Centre
London, Great Britain

The Theme

Technical Communicators Leading the Way

As we enter the new millennium, technical communicators will make their mark in history. Documenting technology is our responsibility and, with the advancement of tools and equipment in all aspects of life, technical communicators will have to seize the opportunity to lead users into the future.



Signing the agreement on Forum 2000, from left: Ron Blicq (IEEE/PCS), Thomas Warren (STC), Gerry Gentle (ISTC), Claus Noack (tekomp)

Conference for Technical Communication

Ulf Andersson's Solution? – The Idea Market.

Ulf presented his new concept to an INTECOM board meeting in Stockholm in 1974. The INTECOM board accepted his concept and offered support to arrange the first international conference for technical communication. This new conference was held in Sweden in September 1975. Gradually, with further Forum conferences (one every five years), new elements for professional discussions followed.

The Forum Conference Concept

Today, Forum conferences offer a wide variety of informative and stimulating elements:

- Idea Markets
- Sort-and-build groups
- Brainstorming sessions
- Networking lunches, etc.
- Video sessions

Idea Markets

Idea Markets are intellectual market places where 10 – 15 activators simultaneously present their ideas and questions (note: there are no “speakers” at Forum conferences; they are called „activators” instead).

A conference handbook (called the “Preseedings”) is distributed to participants prior to the conference so they can choose which topics they are interested in.

Participants move freely among the stands discussing the material presented by the activator and described in the Preseedings. The discussion moves freely, both between the activators and the participants, and between the fellow participants themselves.

Whereas monologues are typical of lectures at normal conferences, and dialogues may be typical of good poster sessions, polylogues – in which several people talk with each other on a topic of common interest – characterize the Idea Market.

TC-Forum will keep you up-to-date on any developments in the organization of Forum 2000. For further information, please contact:

Forum 2000 Conference Organization

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The Postharvest is published after the conference and contains both the activators’ comments concerning the polylogue and a summary of any material produced during the conference (or received too late to be published in the Preseedings). It is mailed to all participants.

Sort and Build Groups

Some discussions at the Idea Market may be so stimulating that it would be a pity to terminate them abruptly because the time given for the Idea Market sessions is over. Extra time and extra rooms are set aside for such groups to continue their discussions or resume them later.

Brainstorming Sessions

At a Forum conference participants can also sit in on “superbrain” sessions, which consist of fairly large groups of conference participants. People with different background, different experience, and different ways of thinking share their knowledge with one another.

Networking Lunches

Another way of helping people with common interests to meet: The tables at lunch have little flags with different discussion subjects so participants know that all people at one table share the same interest.

“Why travel to conferences in far-away places just to listen to people reading their papers– which you could do just as well at home?”

Forum 2000 (cont.)



The Forum 2000-committee at work.

1990 Stockholm, Sweden

This was an exceptional program that, in addition to an Idea Market, Sort-and-Build groups, and Brainstorming Sessions, introduced a New Media room and a Communicators' Show Room. There was a daily televised "talk show" and intellectual smorgasbord.

1995 Dortmund, Germany

This first Forum conference outside Scandinavia was organized by four member societies of INTECOM and has been the most successful so far. It contained all the traditional Forum methods and introduced, as new elements, a keynote speaker, two live video conferences with colleagues in Moscow and Beijing, and a system exhibition.

Video Conferences

This conference element was first introduced at Forum 95 in Dortmund/Germany. In two video conferences, Forum participants were connected with colleagues and experts in Moscow and Beijing to discuss their professional situations.

A Short History of Forum Conferences

Forum conferences are organized every five years and are under the auspices of INTECOM. Five Forum conferences have been organized so far:

1975 Malmö, Sweden

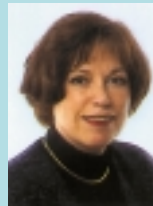
This was the first Forum conference and it featured an Idea Market, Brainstorming Sessions, a canned information festival, and a daily conference newspaper.

1980 Lillehammer, Norway

This was known as the conference with "more dinner speeches than lectures". It began consolidating the Forum conference methods.

1985 Helsingør, Denmark

The "Preseedings" and "Postharvest" books were introduced in 1985, plus a daily video journal covering each day's events. An intellectual smorgasbord, a communication cartoon party, multi-brainstorming sessions, and an information test lab all ran during the conference.



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Education for Technical Communicators in Germany (ET 3)

by *Brigitte Beuttenmüller*

Today more than 15 universities offer programs in the field of technical communication.

When tekomp (the German society for technical communication) was established in 1978, education for technical communicators did not exist in Germany. Therefore one of tekomp's main objectives since its foundation was to set up and promote education in the field of technical communication. After all, the improvement of product quality depends largely on the quality of the education of those responsible for the products.

By now, a number of universities offer programs in these fields. The first was established in 1991 at the Fachhochschule Hannover, and today more than 15 universities have followed. However, the subject of technical communication and documentation is wide and difficult to define. Many questions arise:

- Which universities offer programs in technical communication?
- What are the prerequisites?
- What the possible subjects?
- How long does the program take?
- What kind of final exams can be taken?
- What is the title?

Identifying Different Programs

In 1996, tekomp organized an Academia conference inviting universities to meet and introduce their programs or to gather information from others. The intent was to be better prepared when implementing future programs.



On the whole, the situation turned out to be much more diversified than originally expected. Although most of the universities with existing programs had taken the tekomp guidelines as a basis, they also tried to realize their own ideas. It became clear

from this conference, that education in technical communication in Germany is offered mainly in four different categories:

1. Technical Communication is the main subject – Technical knowledge is secondar.

Fachhochschule Hannover

The program takes 8 semesters (4 years). It comprises courses in language, communication sciences, methodology, psychology, graphics, and technology. The students are required to take two practical courses, one of which can be abroad.

Fachhochschule Merseburg

This program also takes 8 semesters. Two-thirds of the program is concerned with technical communication; the remaining one-third is a specific technical subject.

2. A combination between technical communication and engineering

Fachhochschule Gelsenkirchen

The program is based on technical communication in mechanical engineering. Students require a 13-week practical course before studying and have to do a practical semester during the program. The main emphasis is on mechanical engineering; technical communication comprises 1/3 of the program.

Education for Technical Communicators in Germany (cont.)

Fachhochschule der Deutschen Telekom in Leipzig

Technical communication is one subject within the overall program. The program also extends over 8 semesters and also requires considerable time for practical courses. The program consists of one-third non-technical subjects such as technical communication.

Fachhochschule Karlsruhe

Students of engineering can study technical communication in three additional semesters, one of which must be a practical semester.

3. Technical communication as a specialized subject within the Engineering program.

Two universities offer this third alternative: students enroll for the complete program in engineering and can book additional courses in technical communication.

4. Translators and interpreters with special knowledge in technical communication

Universities of Magdeburg and Hildesheim

The emphasis lies on a praxis-oriented ability to communicate in a foreign language. The texts to be translated are mainly technical or deal with economics.

Summary of Overview

We can say that technical documentation has attracted the interest of quite a number of universities, and many more will soon follow. Many alternatives for studying the profession are available for students. They can choose between a complete engineering program with a few additional hours per week in technical communication, a program with restricted technical knowledge but broader education in technical communication, technical communication as the main subject with some generalized technical knowledge, or programs in which language is the absolute main subject.

The list (which is not complete) makes clear that education for technical communicators in Germany is based on quite different interpretations of the profession. Is a minimum of technical knowledge enough to document a nuclear plant? Will an efficient electrical engineer be able to learn how to write good technical documentation in 20 hours per semester? Should the education of a technical communicator be mainly concentrated on technology?

Is a minimum of technical knowledge enough to document a nuclear plant?

Many Open Questions

One result of the Academia conference was the publication of a "Studienführer Technische Kommunikation und Dokumentation", an overview of all the existing university programs for technical communicators in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

The subject will be further discussed – not only among universities, students and tekomp – but hopefully also here in TC-Forum.



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More on Education for Technical Communicators (ET 4)

by Ron Blicq

For most readers of TC-Forum, technical communication is an activity undertaken by dedicated technical communicators, for whom writing, editing, illustrating, or page-making is their chosen vocation. Yet there is also a much larger community for whom technical communication is only a secondary activity, although it remains an essential part of their work.

Often technical communication is a secondary activity.

Brigitte Beuttenmüller touches briefly on this in her article on page 19, when she examines responses to a questionnaire assessing the teaching of technical communication at universities and technical colleges in Germany. She writes: "The list makes clear that education for technical communication in Germany is based on quite different interpretations of the profession." This is particularly recognized by teachers of technical communication.

Where a university offers a degree program in technical communication, the emphasis is almost entirely on preparing undergraduates to become career technical communicators, with the focus primarily on how to prepare technical documentation. Such programs are offered, for example, by Fachhochschule Hannover in Germany, the University at Twente in The Netherlands, and Clarkson University in the United States.

Where a university or technical college offers technical communication as a support subject to a mainstream technical program, the emphasis is on preparing undergraduates to become career engineers, technologists or technicians who have the capability to communicate effectively about their work. Consequently, only minor emphasis is placed on technical communication.

The focus of such programs differs from that presented to career technical communicators. At Canadian universities and community colleges, for example, where technical communication is only part of a technical program, the focus is on how to write effective letters, memos, email, reports, and proposals, and how to present information orally at meetings and conferences. Only a fraction of the time, if any, is spent on teaching technical documentation of the type we know. (I would be interested to hear from readers of TC-Forum if the same is true where technical communication is taught at engineering schools and technical colleges in other countries.)

The focus is on how to write effective letters, memos, email, reports, and proposals.

This distinction is not clearly understood outside the technical communication community. Consequently, we need to make these differences clear when we talk or write to lay persons about the programs in technical communication taught at our universities and technical colleges.



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Letters to the Editor:

Dear Readers,

I am responding to Ami Wright's letter in TC-Forum 98-1, and particularly the second paragraph. Like Ami, I have found referrals from existing clients have been the best marketing resource. However, referrals are the resource over which you have the least control. If your product is good, then referrals come easily.

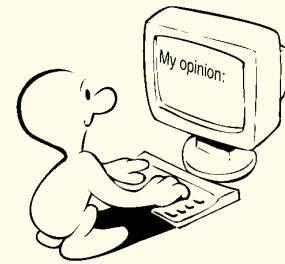
I have tried all but one of the methods Ami mentions: direct mail I found to be labor-intensive and costly, and had only a minimal return; newspaper and journal advertising resulted in virtually no response; cold calls—well, like most technical communicators, I am neither comfortable nor effective when approaching a prospective client "cold"; and a Web site I have yet to develop.

Two techniques we have tried recently have been more successful. The first is to invite clients to an open house at a local hotel: we provided a continental breakfast, set up a display, and gave an illustrated presentation demonstrating what we do and what we can do for our clients. The second has been to make a promotional videotape and send it to prospective clients with a letter identifying what we can do for them. It's short (only six minutes), identifies problems the client may be experiencing, and illustrates what we can do to resolve them. Clients like to receive information in this format because it's using a technology they are accustomed to.

But with video you have to be careful. It has to be a quality production, partly because it reflects the quality of your product, and partly because it's in a medium that your clients see regularly in a very polished form. This means it's rarely possible to have a "hobby" video enthusiast make the production for you. In our case, even though we are experienced in scripting and producing educational videos, we handed the project over to a small professional company that produces marketing videos for a wide range of clients.

Have these two methods created work? The invitation to an open house brought in 22 potential clients, two of whom are now using our services and a third is discussing what we can do for them. The video is less tangible: I can't measure whether it created a particular job, but it has helped as a follow-up to cold calls. It seems to open doors more readily. The investment was fairly high, but long-range I expect it will warrant the investment.

Regards
 Ron Blicq
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Technical Writers' contribution to software development

I strongly disagree with the statement (published in the mailing-list t-itwg@twh.nbg.de):

"Of course, no company will allow a TW to contribute to this part (the User Interface) of the developing process."

Here in the FormFlow R&D group, the doc team have always had a voice in the UI design. It's not unusual for developers and QA analysts to come to TW's, to ask our help.

Perhaps the difference is that, here in Canada, many of us were born and educated in other countries, many with a first language other than English. We all respect the need for linguistic and cultural accuracy and acceptability, and do all we can to achieve them. I think we are very lucky!

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Please feel free to contact either the Editor or your NCP for any questions concerning TC-Forum.

TC-Forum provides information about upcoming events for technical communicators. These include conferences, seminars, calls for papers and other information of professional interest. TC-Forum accepts information about non-profit events only. Send information to the Editor (address see Impressum page 3).

20 – 24 July, 1998, Geneva,
Switzerland
INET '98: The Internet Summit
8th annual Internet Society Conference

Member discounts available to members of INTECOM organizations

At INET '98, some events of particular interest to technical communicators include:

Research:

Indexing and Searching the Web

Translation:

Overcoming Language Barriers on the Global Internet

User Interface Design:

Accessible Web-Sites. Design and Construction

INET is not a trade show, but a professional conference which brings together a group of up to 2000 people concerned with the Internet and its uses, including Internet pioneers and leaders, businesses, academics, governments, information professionals, educators, and many others. People from over one hundred nations are expected to attend this year. It is sponsored by the Internet Society, whose founding shortly followed the first INET.

INET'98 will include presentations of more than a hundred peer-reviewed papers and case

histories, plenary sessions, panels and a wide range of seminars on key Internet issues. Contacts: INET¹⁾

For more information or to register, visit the ISOC Web site, www.isoc.org, and click INET'98¹⁾. If you're a member of an INTECOM organization and plan to attend, please make sure to register by July 10 so that we have time to process your member discount.

11 – 13 September 1998
Cambridge, Great Britain

ISTC Conference '98 - Golden Opportunities

"Conference '98 celebrates the 50th anniversary of the ISTC. It is also 50 years since the transistor transformed electronics and gave us our first computers. Costs for the full weekend are: Society Member £300.00p Non-member £350.00p Partners £175.00p Members of INTECOM Society Members enjoy Society Member Rates. The programme is coming together. Those wishing to present a paper or workshop should contact the ISTC conference office²⁾.

23 – 25 September 1998

Quebec, Canada
IEEE/PCS IPCC 98

Technical Communication Conference

The Professional Communication Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Inc (IEEE) is holding its 1998 conference in Quebec City, Canada. The theme:

"A Contemporary Renaissance: Changing the Way We Communicate."

Professional Events

Sessions will be in both normal conference format and in the Forum „Idea Market“ style pioneered by INTECOM. For information contact Ron Blicq or Lisa Moretto³⁾ or www.engine.ieee.org/society/pcs/confnrc.html

Call for Papers:
29 – 31 October 1998
Ljubljana, Slovenia

"Where East meets West: Technical Communications and Usability"

The conference is being hosted by Hermes SoftLab, a software development company and one of the most successful businesses in Slovenia. Slovenia is known as that small country "on the sunny side of the Alps," surrounded by Austria, Italy, Hungary and Croatia.

The conference consists of 1 day of preconference workshops and 2 days of elective sessions and progressive (roundtable) discussions. The sessions will be divided into two tracks - one for technical communications and one for usability.

The keynote speaker at the conference will be Saul Carliner. The conference will feature workshops and panel discussions with Paula Berger, a well-known technical communicator and Ginny Redish and Evelyn Williams, two well-known usability experts.

You are invited to present a paper at one of the elective sessions or lead a discussion. Please send a one-page description of the paper or discussion you would like to hold. The topic can be either in the technical communication or usability track.

Please send proposals for your

papers and discussions by 30 July 1998 – and do not hesitate to put questions regarding any details of the conference to Carol Chubiz⁴⁾.

11–13 November, Munich, Germany tekomp Conference

During the Autumn Conference of tekomp, the German Society of Technical Communication, there will be tutorials, workshops, speeches and panel discussions. Languages will be German and English, but there will be no interpretation. The main theme will be "Document Management Systems", but contributions on all other subjects of Technical Communication are also welcome.

Interested in contributing? Please send your proposals by mid-July to: Ulrike Bornemann⁵⁾, Further details on the conference are available in the Internet (www.tekomp.de) and from the tekomp-office⁶⁾

12 November 1998
Oslo, Norway

NFTI Conference

The Norwegian Society for Technical Communication is holding an international conference for technical communicators.

The subjects of the conference will be:

- Challenges and possibilities for the technical communicator in the IT world of tomorrow.
- Writing documents for translations – the pitfalls are many. How to avoid them?

Call for papers.

If you would like to contribute to the conference by giving a paper, please contact the NFTI office⁷⁾.

June 2000 in the UK:

Forum 2000

Technical Communication
Leading the way.

See page 16 – 18

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