

Discussions About the Technical Communication Profession: Perspectives from the Blogosphere

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine how blogs reflect practitioner views of professionalization topics (such as education, professional societies, and value and status).

Methods: Content analysis of 10 practitioner blogs, focusing on professional topics of status, education, professional societies, and the effects of technology.

Results: Although the bloggers under study appear to function as an effective community of practice, they are not currently directing their actions or attention toward the traditional goals of professionalization, such as licensing and accreditation.

Conclusions: The latent themes that emerge show that many of the goals of professionalizing (such as standardizing routes into the field and increasing respect for the work) are also concerns of practitioners.

Keywords: professionalization, blogs, content analysis, education, status, professional societies, technology

Practitioner's Takeaway

- Professions, as distinct from regular occupations, exhibit several distinct characteristics, including market closure, a fixed educational path, and high status for practitioners.
- Academics in technical communication have, for some time, sought to examine routes towards professionalization for the field. However, it is not clear that professionalization has been a goal for practitioners.
- The paper examines whether, and in which respects, practitioner blogs discuss topics relevant to professionalization.
- The paper outlines a study that analyzed 708 blog posts from 10 practitioner blogs over a 1-year period.
- The study finds that these bloggers have several concerns that dovetail with goals of professionalization, including seeking higher status for the field, discussing education and career paths, and considering the role and importance of professional societies.
- The study also finds that these bloggers currently function as an effective community of practice, by sharing resources, contributing to the field, and reading and commenting on one another's blogs.

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Introduction

The literature on the sociology of professions shows that the main concerns of occupational groups seeking professional status are market control, high status, access to a career path, and a sense of professional identity (e.g., Johnson, 1972; Collins, 1990; MacDonald, 1995; Freidson, 1999; Krejsler, 2005). Professionalization has been a theme of academic studies in technical communication for several years (e.g., Kynell, 1999; Savage, 1999; Staples, 1999; Davis, 2001; Grice, 2002). Kynell-Hunt and Savage's two-volume edited collection *Power and Legitimacy in Technical Communication* (2003, 2005) tackles the historical and contemporary struggle for professionalization, and examines strategies for attaining professional status. Concerns include career progression, women's roles, conceptualizations of the field, and status and legitimacy of technical communication as a profession. Although few studies capture practitioners' attitudes in this regard, professional topics, including certification and educational qualifications, often result in heated debates on discussion forums such as techwr-l. Those who work in the field are dealing with changing technologies, processes, and economic flux, yet, as Gurak and Duin (2004) observe, academics have been "moving at a slower pace, at times seeming unsure about how to proceed" (p. 187). Rude (2009) considers the relationship between academics and practitioners to be "uneasy" but critically important (p. 188). Because practitioners have a closer perspective on our changing field, their understanding of those changes must be articulated.

This study explores how blogs maintained by technical communication practitioners contribute to the conversation on professionalization: It does so by examining how practitioners' views, expressed on blogs, dovetail with concepts of professionalization. The paper begins with an overview of professionalization theory, and compares the technical communication context with three professional concerns: training and education, status and value, and professional organizations. It also examines the effects that information technologies have on occupational groups. It then discusses the methods used to select and mine the 10 blogs under study. The Results section analyzes how the bloggers conceive and represent technical communication, which professional

issues emerge, and whether blog conversations suggest an occupational group operating as a profession.

Literature Review

The term *profession* is often used loosely to describe any paid employment. Fournier (1999) refers to the "casual generalization of the notion of professionalism" whereby "secretaries, security personnel, furniture retailers (among others) are all allegedly offering 'professional services'" (p. 281). Professional is also used in opposition to amateur to describe a person whose work "is devoted to an activity, as against one who is only transiently or provisionally so engaged" (Flexner, 2001, p. 152).

In sociological contexts, however, profession has a more precise meaning, to describe a "field of work whose practitioners [have] gained control of their own training, admission to practice and evaluation of standards of performance" (Collins, 1990, p. 13). In this usage, the term refers to an exclusive, elite group of occupations, and to a status that is difficult to attain: "While there may be a general tendency for occupations to seek professional status, remarkably few of the thousands of occupations in modern society attain it" (Wilensky, 1964, p. 141).

In the literature, professions are regularly characterized according to traits of the ideal-typical. This approach is premised on the understanding that "occupations vary in the degree to which they are professionalized" (Hall, 1968, p. 93). Much of the literature "conceives [them] in the image of the service ideal" (Krejsler, 2005, p. 341), where emerging professions aspire to match that ideal. Glazer (1974) makes a distinction between minor and major professions, and others (such as Etzioni, 1969; Krejsler, 2005) differentiate between professions and semiprofessions, categorizing social work, teaching, and nursing in the latter group. Johnson (1972) argues that semiprofessions are not well advanced in the process of professionalization, while occupations such as law, medicine, and architecture are. "Occupations which stand at extreme poles of the process are, therefore, bound to exhibit real differences" (Johnson, 1972, p. 18).

Professions and professionals are not always viewed positively, even though they are often

characterized in mostly uncritical terms. Negative traits—of monopolization, hegemony, elitism, and bureaucratization (Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977; Elzinga, 1990)—often lead to difficulties in how the public sees the profession as a whole (for example, the myriad lawyer jokes, based on the perception that legal professionals exploit their clients and the legal system for financial gain). Professions are often class-driven and difficult to join for those outside the middle or intellectual classes. Larson (1977, p. xiv) rejects the notion that “both sociological ideal-types and the self-presentation of professions imply that professions are independent from or at least neutral vis-à-vis the class structure.” Freidson (1999, p. 119) agrees that the status of professions is partly caused by “the class origins or aspirations of their members.”

Although the trait approach to describing professions and distinguishing them from “mere” occupations has been criticized, it remains the most accepted and, perhaps, sensible means of delineating professions from other occupations. However, a serious drawback is its focus on a result (attributes of the ideal-typical), rather than a process (steps to take toward professionalization). Moreover, it ascribes attributes that even the most high-status professions do not always achieve. In his study of professions and semiprofessions, published in 1968, Hall concluded that “[s]ome ‘established’ professions have rather weakly developed professional attitudes, while some of the less professionalized groups have very strong attitudes in this regard” (p. 103). Moreover, describing professions generically according to a set of categories disregards the individual differences among practitioners within a profession.

The focus on common characteristics of certain elite occupations also overshadows the unique requirements and characteristics of distinct occupations and has a tendency to “oversimplify the nature of professionalism” (Broadbent, Dietrich, & Roberts, 1997, p. 2).

The following sections work through three significant ideological concepts of professionalization and discuss the technical communication context in relation to each. These concepts are training and education, status and value, and professional institutions. The final section considers the effects information technologies have on professions.

Training and Education

It is difficult, often impossible, to practice in a profession without completing training, thus providing an effective monopoly for those who have. “[O]ccupational skills are regarded as nontransferable—the property of a specific community” (Johnson, 1972, p. 57). Training and education control are also factors in legitimizing a profession because where no agreed curriculum exists, it is difficult to assert the authority of its members. Freidson (1999) refers to the “strategic importance of vocational training for professionalism” (p. 121). Although the length of time taken to train contributes to the prestige of professionals, there is no fixed length of “professional” training. Professionals are prepared to spend time training and developing their skills, often for little or no financial compensation for the training duration, because such training is a career investment (Wilensky, 1964).

Technical communication does require specialized training, but there are no formal course requirements such as those in place for medicine or law, and we have no national accreditation bodies. Davis (2001) calls for a set of standards for education and practice, and suggests that the professional societies must initiate development of these standards. In a field with work as varied and diverse as technical communication, however, standards are difficult to define. Savage (2003) comments that “[m]any people in the field believe we will not be able to achieve professional autonomy unless we are able to require certification for practitioners” (p. 2). Although the STC proposed a certification model at the 2010 STC Summit and is currently advancing this proposal (STC, 2010), the discourse surrounding professionalization of technical communication appears to be driven by the academic community. Yet both practitioners and academics in technical communication complain about a disconnect between the academy and practice.

Reasons for the tension include different work requirements and work environments. Dicks (2002), in the edited volume *Reshaping Technical Communication*, refers to fundamental areas of “cultural difference.” For example, academics are rewarded for individual efforts, while the great majority of practitioners work in teams. The work of academics is very different from what practitioners do. Academic work requires reflection, theorizing, and study, while practitioners have intense

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deadline pressure and little time for reflection. In the same volume, however, Bosley (2002) emphasizes the common ground: For example, both groups lack status within their larger organizations, work within hierarchical structures, depend on research findings to validate their work, and must keep abreast of changing trends and technologies. She acknowledges that traditional academic perspectives can cause resentment among practitioners: “Unfortunately, although academics rarely define themselves as practitioners, they often attempt to influence the practice of technical communication. Doing so can cause some resentment, especially when academics have never held jobs in non-academic contexts” (p. 33). Her solution sees academics engaging in practice to increase their credibility.

Conflicts about training requirements are also established in the research. Bernhardt (2002) cites the industry preoccupation with narrow technical skills, notably software packages such as FrameMaker and RoboHelp. Johnson-Eilola (1996) is troubled by the focus on teaching skills in technical communication programs, which, he argues, leaves technical communication in a “relatively powerless position [...] Responding to the demands of industry, almost by definition, disempowers technical communicators” (p. 247).

Status and Value

The capacity for professionals to make money in their work, commensurate with the status of the occupation, is an intrinsic, if often unarticulated, goal of professionalization. Professions with higher status tend to attract higher salaries for their practitioners. Parsons (1954) concluded that money must be a useful instrument, and perhaps a final arbiter, in measuring the status of an occupation. Financial rewards notwithstanding, professionals are valued for their contributions to organizations and to society, and financial compensation is rarely the subject of discussions about value. More important is the perceived value and status of the field and respect for practitioners.

The status of technical communicators within organizations is complicated by the obscurity of the role. Light, in a 1961 article, asks “What difference should it make to the technical writer whether he or she ‘be considered a member of a ‘trade,’ a ‘craft,’ or a ‘profession?’” He responds with this elucidation: “What

we are called makes a big difference. In the world of work and in the process of earning a living, the words ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ represent preferred social status, high income, and specialized competence” (1961, p. 4).

Many studies of the technical communication profession have dealt with the value writers add to a product or service and the importance of demonstrating that value (e.g., Hackos, 1997; Carliner, 1998), yet the technical communicator frequently feels deep-seated inferiority toward, or does not feel respected by, subject-matter experts or other coworkers. One participant on an online discussion forum reported: “a great generalization is to say that being a technical writer is like being a horse on *Animal Farm*. Everyone knows we are necessary, but we aren’t as ‘good’ as the pigs” (Wilson & Dyke-Ford, 2003, p. 148). Similarly, Lee and Mehlenbacher (2000) concluded from their study of the relationship between writers and subject-matter experts (SMEs): “Several writers expressed the sentiment that the SMEs did not respect the writer as an important element in the product development process” (p. 546).

These viewpoints underscore the sometimes problematic relationships among technical communicators and their colleagues in other fields. One solution posited by Johnson-Eilola (1996) to counter status anxiety is for technical communicators to operate as “symbolic-analytic,” rather than support, workers. Symbolic-analytic work relies on “skills in abstraction, experimentation, collaboration, and system thinking to work with information across a variety of disciplines and markets” (pp. 245–246). This description is an appropriate, relevant reconceptualization of the value technical communicators can add in an era of user-generated content, universal information overload, and content farms (companies that hire freelance writers, who may not be specialists, for low pay to write large amounts of textual content, based on popular searches).

Status may also be affected by gender balance in a field. In terms of perceived gender-specific characteristics, power and authority, values central to traditional professions, are often referred to as “male” in orientation, perhaps making professions more accessible to men. “Gentlemanly” behavior was seen as a primary indicator of integrity (MacDonald, 1995), while “female” qualities such as care and responsibility were undervalued in traditional professions. This

situation persists. In the legal profession, for example, female traits such as empathy lead women to career paths in family law rather than domains such as corporate law, requiring male traits such as “ruthlessness, assertiveness and endurance” (Bolton & Muzio, 2008, p. 286). Although technical communication in support of heavy engineering and military activities was traditionally a male-dominated field, increasingly technical communication in support of software attracts women. In the preface to *Writing a Professional Life: Stories of Technical Communicators On and Off the Job*, a collection of stories of technical communicators, Savage and Sullivan (2001) write that “[r]eflecting the state of the technical communication field at present, many of these narratives are situated in computer-related industries, and most of the authors are women” (p. xxv). Bolton and Muzio (2008) suggest that “more feminized specialisms may view professionalism as a welcome source of legitimacy and as an attractive path for upward mobility” (pp. 289–290), possibly because, as Durack (1997) argues, society has difficulty “considering as ‘work’ a productive activity that is typically assigned to women” (p. 255).

Professional Institutions

Modern professions are distinguished by the establishment of institutions, organizations, or communities that enhance and promote their visibility and reputation and provide services for members. Such organizations usually serve the public interest to some degree, in addition to serving members (Flexner, 2001). Professional organizations also play a key role in driving and changing the profession (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Codes of ethics and oaths sworn on entering a profession often explicate terms of altruism and service to the community (Freidson, 1999).

Several technical communication professional organizations exist, the best known of which are the STC (Society for Technical Communication) and the IEEE PCS (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Professional Communication Society). Although ostensibly international, both organizations serve a primarily North American audience. Several institutions also operate nationally, such as tekomp in Germany and the ISTC (Institute for Scientific and Technical Communicators) in Britain. The STC has recently launched Project Phoenix to reinvent the

organization, following a decrease in membership and some discontent about the costs and benefits for members. Project Phoenix incorporates the redesign of the Web site and the development of a community portal (STC, 2011). A further initiative is the Body of Knowledge wiki, which attempts to develop a repository of resources for technical communicators in a single portal (Coppola, 2010). Other technical communication communities include the online Content Wrangler LinkedIn group, which has more than 6,500 members.

Professions in the Information Age

Broadbent et al. (1997) note that professional projects develop in complex socioeconomic contexts. Technical communicators are experiencing, in the early years of the 21st century, an unprecedented socioeconomic context. Although people have been writing about technology for several centuries, mass production of personal computers in the 1980s led to a much greater need for texts to explain technology to nontechnical users (O’Hara, 2001). More recently, publishing phenomena such as the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, podcasts, discussion forums, videos, and blogs have utterly changed content production processes. These technological transformations have affected most occupations to some degree. Hanson (2009) examines the perceived threat e-learning poses for traditional academics; Lewis, Kaufhold, and Lasorsa (2010) comment on the threat posed to journalism by citizen journalism; and Bauer (2009) studies the need for regulation of cybermedicine.

For technical communicators, however, whose job is to explain technology and to produce content, these transformations are even more significant. Almost anyone, anywhere, can publish and access information. Yet, much content is shoddily produced, and “unprofessional,” leading to the phenomenon Keen (2007) describes as the “cult of the amateur.” A related trend, “crowd sourcing,” sees the so-called crowd (comprising any online user who wishes to contribute) creating and contributing to content and products, usually for free, resulting in user-generated content. Crowd sourcing is used extensively by corporations to support products, especially in localization and customer support. Rushkoff (2009) is critical of the phenomenon: “The ‘open-source’ ethos encouraging people to work on software projects for free has been

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reinterpreted through the lens of corporatism as ‘crowd sourcing’—meaning just another way to get people to do work for no compensation” (p. 199). Outsourcing and offshoring, by-products of work distribution, are a further threat to modern professions. Paretti, McNair, and Holloway-Attaway (2007) argue that “outsourcing, offshoring, and globalization, enabled by a dynamic network of communication technologies, have altered the physical and social landscapes of our working lives” (pp. 327–328).

Conversely, the information age has exciting opportunities for professions too. For example, telemedicine enables remote interaction via telephone, between physician and patient. Herrmann (2006) foresees telesurgery, remote surgery performed using robotics, as enabling surgical operations that are currently not possible. Myriad modes of collaboration, previously unimaginable, are now routine. For example, teams in the workplace regularly involve several worksites. Work increasingly takes places in distributed environments, facilitated by technology. Distributed work directly affects how writers produce content, and demands new types of flexibility from writers (Slattery, 2007). Many schools are now also offering a virtual team experience to their students, exploiting information and communications technologies to manage the process.

The abundance of unfiltered information anyone can access, unchecked and often unbidden, must be an opportunity for technical writers, often called information professionals, who are skilled in designing information that is easy to access and use. Hart-Davidson (2001) explains the increasing importance of technical communication. “[M]ore and more, the exchange value of an information product is associated with aspects of quality that technical communicators have the expertise to look after: customization for specialized or niche audiences, ease of use, and scalability” (p. 145). Bard and Söderqvist (2002) also argue that new technologies are leading to a paradigm shift from capitalism to “informationalism,” where a new elite, the “netocracy,” become the ruling class. “The decisive factor governing where in the hierarchy [of the netocracy] an individual ends up ... [depends on] their access to and capacity to absorb, sort, overview, generate the necessary attention for and share valuable information” (p. 117). Technical communicators, given

their role as content producers, should be key operators in this netocracy.

Methodology

Blogging (web logging) has become an important discussion medium online. Blogs are “frequently updated websites where content (text, pictures, sound files, etc.) is posted on a regular basis and displayed in reverse chronological order” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1409). Blog posts tend to be discursive, and most blogs enable readers to comment on posts, thus encouraging dialogue. Blogrolls (lists of links to other blogs) also create a sense of community among bloggers (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Schmidt (2007) calls the blogosphere a “clustered network of interconnected texts” (p. 1409). A growing number of subgenres of blogs are emerging, and discussing generic blogging media is becoming as unfocused as discussing, for example, television or newspapers (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Rather, blogs are increasingly used as channels for expert communication about a specific topic or field.

The use of professional technical communication blogs for expert communication is examined in this paper. The following sections outline the selection process, limitations of the study, and coding of posts.

Blog Selection

I reviewed more than 30 technical communication blogs, found through searches on Google, Technorati, and Alexa, and through a list of the 25 most influential technical communication bloggers identified by MindTouch (a company that developed the MindTouch Technical Communication suite). I selected 10 blogs for analysis based on four criteria:

- Each blog was written by a technical communication practitioner. Although academics in the technical communication field also blog, this study’s focus is on practitioner perspectives.
- Each blog was active during the period studied (January to December 2010).
- Each blog included posts on topics relevant to professionalization.

- Each blog selected was also part of an attempt to maintain a gender balance and geographical diversity.

I emailed each blogger to request permission to use the blog in the study, outlining how the data would be used and presented. All of the bloggers I contacted gave enthusiastic approval for their blogs to be used.

Limitations of the Study

The majority of popular technical communication blogs are written by men based in North America. Only 5 women rank among the 25 most influential technical communication bloggers identified by MindTouch, and just 7 bloggers from that list are based outside the United States. In their study of A-list bloggers, Davidson and Vaast (2009) identified only one female blogger among the most frequently appearing technical blogs.

I did not analyze microblogging sites (the best known of which is Twitter), because broadcast length is limited, and therefore the medium is more suited to soundbites than discussions. Several popular and well-subscribed blogs were not included because the content was not relevant to the focus of this paper. For example, although RJ Jacquez is first on the MindTouch list of most influential technical communication bloggers, Jacquez was an Adobe product evangelist during the period of study, and his blog was explicitly corporate and product specific. The Content Wrangler blog has a very clear focus on technology developments and therefore was not used for this study. The Cherryleaf blog, likewise, although ranked fourth in the list of most influential blogs, focuses on technical communication services, and therefore was not used for this study.

Although I strove to be objective and to use accepted techniques of qualitative research, this study represents my interpretations of blog categories, and uses a limited pool of just 10 blogs, as listed in Table 1 in the Results section of this paper. The study is necessarily exploratory and qualitative because the pool of posts on professional topics is limited (as Table 2, also in the Results section, shows, just 18% of all posts focus on issues relevant to professionalization). Although I sought permission from bloggers to examine their posts, I did not speak to the authors about their intentions or about the meaning of posts because the focus was on how the blogs themselves reflect professional topics.

Coding of Posts

Following Mayring (2000), I used both my literature review and a grounded process to define the categories for study. Mayring states that researchers should formulate a criterion of definition, derived from theoretical background and research question, which determines the aspects of the textual material taken into account. Following this criterion the material is worked through and categories are tentative and step by step deduced. Within a feedback loop those categories are revised, eventually reduced to main categories and checked in respect to their reliability.

The existing literature increased my understanding of the field and the main themes of professionalization in general, together with specific issues for technical communication, while through immersion in the blog posts, I was able to determine the most important concepts emerging from the blogs. The individual blog posts and the associated responses comprised the “units of analysis” (Neuendorf, 2002). The focus of the analyses was the content of messages, rather than characteristics of the online form they take.

I used Weft QDA, an open-source qualitative analysis tool, to code each of 708 messages, assigning each post to one of the seven main categories and 54 subcategories depending on the content of the post. To increase reliability, I used a cycle of interpreting, reflecting on, and reinterpreting the data, as recommended by Kvale (1996). The main categories identified were

- Work practices, including subcategories such as document genres, structured authoring, information design and interviewing.
- Trends, including subcategories relating to work practices, work environments, and technology.
- Management, including subcategories such as leadership, quality, and content management.
- Technology, including the subcategories of social media, software, and blogging.
- Profession, including subcategories such as job roles, professional organizations, and status.
- Networking, including subcategories such as resource sharing and details of conferences.

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Table 1: Blog Details

Blogger	Blog Title and URL	Gender	Blog Description
Sarah O'Keefe	Scriptorium Author Archive: Sarah O'Keefe http://www.scriptorium.com/author/sarah/	Female	Sarah O'Keefe writes on the corporate blog for Scriptorium, a content management company based in North Carolina, USA. She is ranked fourth on MindTouch's list. She writes primarily about trends, structured authoring, and management, but also examines the value and quality of documentation.
Ivan Walsh	I Heart Technical Writing http://lhearttechnicalwriting.com	Male	lhearttechnicalwriting.com is a blog by an Irish technical writer, Ivan Walsh, who lives in China. He is ranked 19th on MindTouch's list. In addition to writing about technology developments and offering writing tips, he posts on topics such as working from home, the value of technical writing, and gender issues.
Tom Johnson	I'd Rather Be Writing http://idratherbewriting.com	Male	The I'd rather be writing blog is run by Tom Johnson, living in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Johnson also posts podcasts and video interviews. He is ranked second on MindTouch's list. In addition to technology developments, Johnson discusses the profession and reflects on professional issues in many posts.
Anne Gentle	Just Write Click http://justwriteclick.com/	Female	Justwriteclick is maintained by Anne Gentle, a social media consultant and author based in Austin, Texas, USA. She is ranked sixth on MindTouch's list. Her blog posts focus on social media, but she also writes regularly about community and user engagement.
Sarah Maddox	Ffeathers – A Technical Writer's Blog http://ffeathers.wordpress.com/	Female	Ffeathers—a technical writer's blog , is written by Sarah Maddox, a technical writer working in Australia. She is ranked eighth on MindTouch's list. She posts regular blog entries, primarily focusing on software.
Tristan Bishop	Knowledge Bishop's Mission http://knowledgebishop.com/	Male	The Knowledge Bishop's Mission blog is maintained by Tristan Bishop, a digital strategist at Symantec, and based in Florida, USA. He is ranked 20th on MindTouch's list. His posts examine content management, customer service, and reflect on his work. Bishop's blog is active only from June 2010, but was included in the study because of the relevance of posts.
Gordon McLean	One Man Writes http://www.onemanwrites.co.uk	Male	One Man Writes is a blog by technical writer Gordon McLean, who lives in Scotland. He is tenth on MindTouch's list. McLean writes primarily about technology and writing, but sometimes uses his blog to reflect on his career and on the technical communication profession.

Blogger	Blog Title and URL	Gender	Blog Description
Bill Swallow	It's All Relevant: A Multi-topic Blog by Bill Swallow <i>http://techcommdood.com</i>	Male	The It's All Relevant blog is maintained by Bill Swallow, a technical writer based in New York, USA. He is ranked 12th on MindTouch's list. His blog posts focus on social media, technology, and technical communication professional organizations.
Larry Kunz	SDI Blog: Entries for "Larry Kunz" <i>http://www.sdicorp.com/Resources/Blog/article-Type/AuthorView/authorID/24/lkunz.aspx</i>	Male	Larry Kunz writes a blog on the SDI corporation website, and is based in North Carolina, USA. His blog posts discuss trends, career development, and technology. Although not ranked by MindTouch, Kunz is a regular blogger and contributor to other blogs.
Colum McAndrew	The Robo Colum(n) <i>http://www.cmcandrew.com/robocolumn</i>	Male	Colum McAndrew writes a blog called RoboColum(n). He is based in the United Kingdom, and is ranked 15th on MindTouch's list. Although his blog focuses on developing help content, he also regularly explores career issues.

- Miscellaneous, including posts relating to humor, advertising, or personal issues.

Table 2 provides a complete list of categories and subcategories. Naturally, there was some overlap in discussions, and in several posts more than one topic was discussed, or topics interacted with one another. For example, a post discussing agile development might also consider its effect on documentation quality. Where a blog post discussed more than one topic, I categorized the post according to its overarching theme. The categories of primary interest for this paper are profession and networking, though other categories are also relevant to the discussion.

Results

Of the 10 blogs studied, 3 are written by women and 7 by men. Six bloggers are located in the United States, one in Australia, one in Scotland, one in China, and one in England. All are English native speakers and write in English. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the blogs examined, including the name and gender of each blogger, together with blog title, URL, and a brief

description of the content along with the blogger's status on MindTouch's list of most influential bloggers.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of categories and subcategories, and the total number of posts within each category. It also shows the percentage of posts dealing with each main category. As Table 2 shows, the categories with most posts are Work Practices (25%), Technology (23%), and Networking (22%).

The number of posts categorized as Work Practices emphasizes that the day-to-day work of technical communicators (writers, graphic designers, and information designers, for example) takes precedence in these online discussions. Software tools, and increasingly, new media, also continue to be a talking point for technical communicators in such public forums. Davis (2001) labels technical communicators "tool jockeys," and contends that the preoccupation with tools is an obstacle to attempts to professionalize the field. It may be the case, however, that tools discussions are popular because they are generic and do not reveal sensitive corporate information. Moreover, tools discussions on these blogs tend to offer advice and procedural information. This desire to disseminate information signifies a commitment both to the community of readers, and to the wider profession, and coincides with Lenhart and Fox's (2006) findings; their telephone

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Table 2: Categorization of Blog Posts

Category	Subcategory	Number of Posts	Total	Percentage
Work practices	Writing, style, language	39		
	Information design	34		
	Work strategies	21		
	Teamwork and collaboration	16		
	Customer service and audience awareness	13		
	Document genres	12		
	Structured authoring	10		
	Graphic design	6		
	Interviewing	5		
	Culture and localization	4		
	Editing	4		
	Communication	4		
	Usability	3		
	Marketing	2		
	Intellectual property	1		
			174	25%
Trends	Work practice trends	11		
	Content strategy	8		
	Technology trends	8		
	User-generated content	7		
	Agile development	6		
	Automatically generated content	4		
	Offshoring and outsourcing	2		
			46	6%
Management	Project management	11		
	Leadership	4		
	Quality	3		
	Content management	3		
			21	3%
Technology	Social media and new media	87		
	Software	57		
	Blogging	19		

Category	Subcategory	Number of Posts	Total	Percentage
			163	23%
Profession	Job roles	29		
	Professional organizations	18		
	Career paths	17		
	Value and status	14		
	Skill-set	10		
	Reflective practice	9		
	Training and certification	6		
	Professional identity	4		
	Gender	4		
	Job titles	4		
	Development of profession	4		
	Academy vs. practice	2		
	Altruistic service	2		
	Salaries	2		
			125	18%
Networking	Resource sharing	62		
	Details of conferences/events attended	44		
	Information about future conferences/events	29		
	Details of own presentations/work	20		
			155	22%
Miscellaneous	Humor	14		
	Advertising	6		
	Competition	2		
	Personal	2		
			24	3%
Total		708	708	100%

survey of bloggers found that 64% of respondents blog to share practical information with readers. In addition, because bloggers tend to be enthusiastic new media users, they regularly discuss the act of blogging and also examine and exploit trends in new media. Lenhart and Fox (2006) agree that “[b]loggers are avid consumers

and creators of online content. They are also heavy users of the internet in general” (p. v).

It may seem surprising that intellectual property does not appear to be a concern of these practitioners. After all, for academics “one of the hottest issues surrounding online learning continues to be intellectual property” (Gurak & Duin, 2004, p. 191). Perhaps

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intellectual property is less a gray area for practitioners than for university employees (where the fair use doctrine applies, and content can potentially be owned by either the university or the individual). However, it is likely that intellectual property is simply a bigger issue than these blog discussions suggest.

Although discussion of professional identity is limited, these bloggers do engage in reflection on their careers. The changing nature of work is a strong theme; many posts discuss Web 2.0 technologies, the death of manuals, online delivery, content strategy, agile environments, and the impact of structured authoring. Gender is discussed in just four posts.

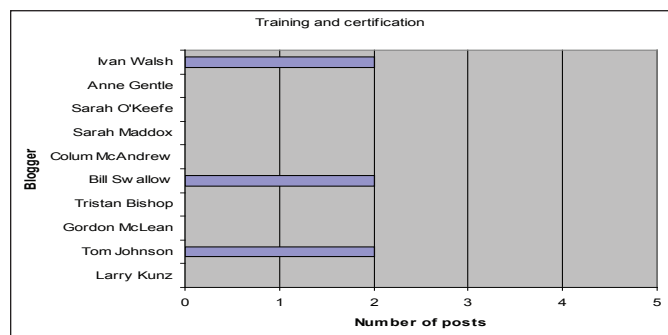
Within the Networking category, bloggers share details of events, regularly reporting back from conferences. This use of blogs is further evidence of the community-driven function of many blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

In addition to pragmatic work discussions, bloggers also consider explicitly professional topics. The following discussion examines posts about professional topics that emerge on the blogs, focusing on education and career path, status and legitimacy, the impact of technology, and professional organizations and community.

Education and Career Path

Discussions of education on these practitioner blogs are infrequent. As Figure 1 shows, only six posts are explicitly education focused.

Figure 1. Posts about Training and Certification



These posts agree that academic courses are important both for the content they provide and for the development of the field. Certification is seen as a positive development, in contrast to the thrust of

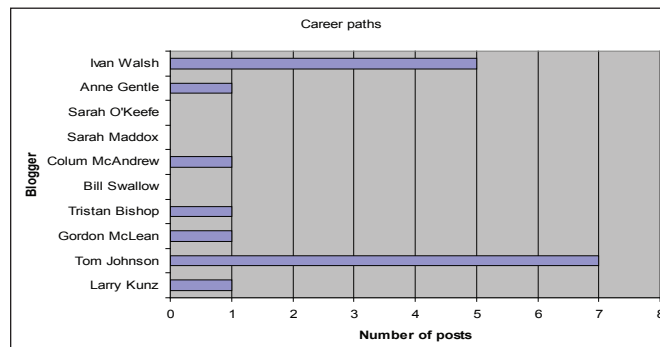
many similar discussions on techwr-l. (For example, contributors to a techwr-l thread on the subject of the STC certification model from July 2010 are divided on its value. Many contributors fear that certification will devalue their experience.) Tom Johnson suggests that “certification will push us more into a common path to the profession.” Bill Swallow agrees that “much of the certification opposition is unfounded. That is, most voicing opposition are doing so from a very subjective if not emotional standpoint.”

A comment responding to his post argues for certification as a means of moving toward professional status: “There’s a philosophical purpose behind certification that most people seem to be overlooking. Certification says that technical communication is a profession, not a task.” A further comment reflects on how certification can counterpoint the lack of visibility of the field:

Nobody leaves school saying, “I want to be a technical writer.” Ha ha, well that one is probably true. But if I’d known about the career I would have chosen it then, because I think it’s an awesome job. Certification may help make people aware of this choice sooner.

As Figure 2 shows, 17 posts discuss career paths for technical writers. Of these, six posts explicitly reflect on the influence of education and training. Tom Johnson considers the intersections of education and career path in many posts.

Figure 2. Posts about Career Paths



Technical communication is often characterized as an obscure field, and therefore not a subject that students are likely to select as a major at university. The

following extract from Tom Johnson's blog summarizes a survey on careers:

The trend in the answers is that no one sets out to be a tech writer, you just fall into it. And even if you wanted to be a tech writer, there are few degree programs in tech comm. And even if there are degrees in tech comm, you probably already have writing skills, so why do you need to get a degree in what you already know?

He suggests that this problem is in part due to the location of technical communication in English departments:

Technical communication should not be taught in the context of an English department, because tech comm is about adding business value to customers, about developing relationships with users. This is not understood or encouraged in traditional English curricula.

Johnson outlines how his links with a local university enabled him to visit the campus and talk to students about his work, therefore increasing the profile of technical writers and enhancing students' understanding of the requirements of the role. Fostering links between practitioners and academia is an explicit goal of many academic studies (e.g., Bernhardt, 2002). However, the tension between the interests and values of academics compared to practitioners is also alluded to on Johnson's blog:

Tech comm academics may be victims of academic traditions and culture themselves. To keep their jobs, academics must publish in journals using isolating academic discourse. They must target high-profile, peer reviewed journals that restrict access based on models of exclusivity and budgetary constraints. They can't connect too fully with practical matters of the workplace and still maintain their validity in a traditional university curriculum (otherwise they'll appear to be too vocational).

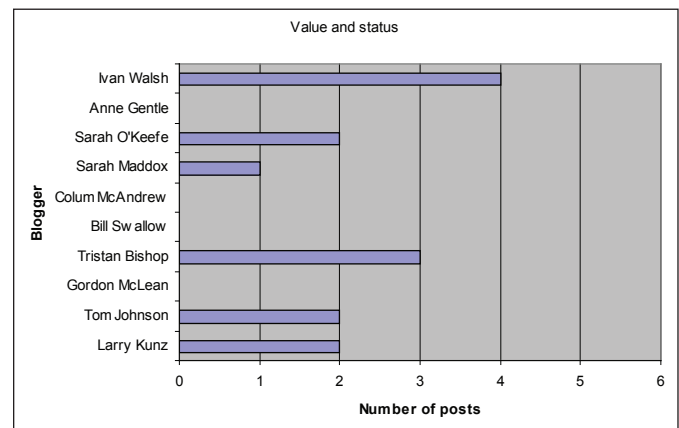
The above sentiment echoes Dicks' (2002) articulation of the "cultural difference" between academics and practitioners. The lack of conversation between academics and practitioners on the blogs examined is quite striking. Apart from a small number of comments responding to blog posts, there is no

academic presence on these blogs. No academic is listed on the MindTouch list of the 25 most influential technical communication bloggers—all are practitioners. In other fields, such as economics and law, many influential bloggers work in academia. Although the bloggers in this study regularly reference blogs, websites, and occasionally white papers, they rarely reference academic journal articles or even academic blogs.

Status and Value

The status of technical communicators in organizations, and the perceived lack of respect for their work, has been a source of frustration for technical communicators for decades. As Figure 3 shows, status and value are themes explored on many of the blogs.

Figure 3. Posts about Status and Value



The comments that follow point to the frustration that many bloggers feel at the lack of respect for their work:

Many technical writers feel unloved. They feel they don't get the respect they deserve. I hear this on LinkedIn and Facebook: 'people don't respect the work I do.'

(Ivan Walsh)

The need to be respected can be a core motivation for Technical Communicators, not to mention a source of daily frustration...

(Tristan Bishop)

[F]requently, documentation is still seen as a "tick in the box," a necessary evil or, even worse, an apathetic acceptance even though no-one else in the

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company quite knows why we exist other than the fact that we do.
(Gordon McLean)

Status and value are seen to be closely related. Emphasizing the value technical communicators bring to a project is seen as a way of increasing the status of the field. Ivan Walsh describes his experiences of helping to establish technical writing departments: “One of the problems in getting the dept setup was communicating the value that the tech docs dept could offer other business units and also how it would save them money.”

Sarah O’Keefe suggests that technical writers need strategic thinking when articulating the importance of technical writing:

Instead of arguing that others are not worthy/ can’t write/always forget to spell-check, technical communicators need to focus on bringing value to their organizations. This requires a reassessment of the technical communication responsibilities from the top down; that is, strategically.

Several bloggers compare the status of technical communicators, negatively, with the perceived status of other related professions. Tom Johnson wonders why “whereas tech comm is generally under-appreciated or ignored, usability is on a higher level of appreciation.” A post by Ivan Walsh entitled “How to get out of technical writing and into higher paid jobs” describes how technical communicators’ salaries have been frozen, and lists the following among the higher paid jobs: proposal writer, web content manager, information architect, white paper writer, and medical writer.

Uncertainty about job titles is expressed by several writers. Tom Johnson observes “growing discontent with the title ‘technical writer’” and a trend toward moving to other titles such as technical communicator, information developer, information designer, and content strategist. However, one reader of Bill Swallow’s blog argues that the “technical writer” label is gaining currency and has recognition value.

Why do we continue to try to find names for ourselves? Technical Communicator, User Experience Coordinator, Information Architect. We finally get an entry in the Bureau of Labor Statistics after how many years, and we still don’t know who we are. People are looking for technical writers, it’s

a standard, so call us technical writers! We’re still going to do a ton of different jobs, let’s use our energy on something useful.

Bloggers are not entirely negative about their status and roles. Several have positive views both on the work, and on how writers can change perceptions. For example, Tristan Bishop argues that the value conundrum can also be viewed as an opportunity: “The technical communication profession collectively peers through a window of opportunity.[...] If you are a technical communication professional, you have an incredible opportunity to infuse value into your brand.”

As a means of gaining respect for their work, Sarah Maddox advises writers to demonstrate how documentation is integral to the product: “It’s a bit of a balancing act: some developers think you’re wasting their time. That’s not unique to the agile environment though. Not everyone is in on the secret that documentation is actually at the centre of the universe 😊”

An alternative take from Tristan Bishop claims that we need to seek the respect of our audience, rather than of our colleagues (who should respect our character, but are not qualified to judge our work):

And, after two full months, I felt that my co-workers had come to respect my character. But it took two full years before I felt like they respected my work. The turning point came when a prospect mentioned high documentation quality as a driver in their decision to partner with us. At that moment, I finally understood: *It wasn’t the developer’s respect that mattered: It was that of my AUDIENCE!*

I wasn’t hired to please the developers, **I was hired to help the reader.** And, unless you are writing API Documentation, your subject matter experts are simply NOT your audience.

Although technical communication career paths are characterized by diversity, Spilka (2002) argues that this diversity need not be seen as a weakness of the field. Although these blogs reflect much confusion about the specific role of a technical communicator, both Spilka (2002) and Anscheutz and Rosenbaum (2002) argue that the variety of job roles is positive and demonstrates an expansive, rather than disparate, occupational field.

They see diverse job roles as a signifier of the expanding definition of technical communication:

The transition to expanded roles often involves new job titles that do not immediately bring to mind traditional technical communication activities. However, title changes do not mean that individuals in these new roles cannot still feel a kinship with technical communication in spirit, allegiance, and perspective. (p. 150)

Likewise, Jablonski (2005) and Johnson-Eilola (1996) have both argued that although career paths are not clearly defined in technical communication, this lack does not necessarily symbolize professional stagnation. Other factors, such as work patterns in the knowledge economy, influence career paths.

Impact of Technology on the Field

As Table 2 shows, technology is discussed in 23% of the posts. The majority of these posts offer procedural information for users of software and social media. In addition, posts discussing trends in the field also look at the impact of technology. Table 3 shows the trends most actively discussed by bloggers.

Because they are also professionally involved in their subject of discussion, the bloggers in this study understand better than academics the reality of perceived threats such as automatically generated content, user-generated content, and offshoring. Although offshoring is the explicit focus of only 2 posts, it is mentioned in 47 of the 708 posts, demonstrating how much of a concern

Table 3. Trends Affecting the Field

Trend	Number of posts
Work practice trends	11
Content strategy	8
Technology trends	8
User-generated content	7
Agile development	6
Automatically generated content	4
Offshoring and outsourcing	2
Total	46

it is for these bloggers. Bloggers are also concerned about how user-generated content will affect their jobs in the future. The related phenomenon of “content farms” is indicated as a further threat. In addition to using her blog to discuss social media and documentation, Anne Gentle has published a book on the subject, *Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation*. She explores the controversy of content farms in one blog post:

Are content farms cluttering the web and driving down writer’s pay? Or is there an entrepreneurial opportunity here that offers a low barrier to entry for content creators any where to earn pay for populating the web with content that’s already being searched for?

I think that a lot of these folks making money by paying writers almost nothing to “create content” will be gone in a year or two. There are too many “writers” and too much “content” already.

Many bloggers recognize that new media need not pose a threat, and posit positive suggestions as to how their potential can be exploited, focusing on the variety of skills that technical communicators possess and can leverage in their work. Solutions proposed by the bloggers demonstrate strategic thinking about the future of technical writing. There is growing consensus on the opportunities that exist for technical writers to “curate” content produced by users. Anne Gentle, in a post entitled “Content curation – a manifesto,” suggests professional writers and technical writers should consider a move towards [content curation]. We already search for and find the best content, sift through loads of content, discard poor content, and publish the most worthy content whenever a software release goes out.

Sarah O’Keefe agrees that “user-generated content also offers an opportunity for technical writers to participate as curators—by evaluating and organizing the information provided by end users.” However, Tom Johnson is concerned that content curation is a less rewarding endeavor than content creation. He explains how he believes technical writers should evolve to deal with technology changes.

Technical writers need to expand their skillsets to go beyond writing to add more value to their company.

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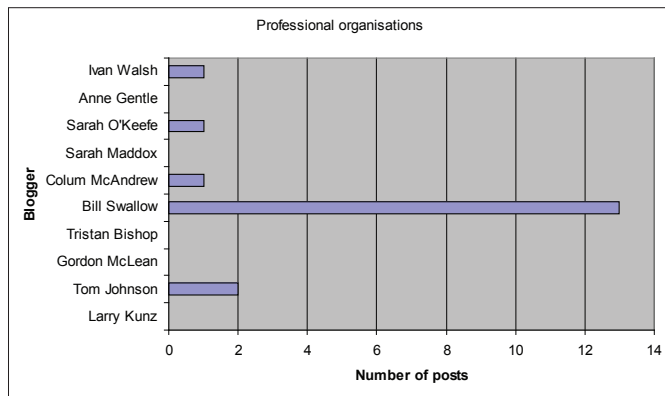
They need to be problem solvers, analytical thinkers, contributing more than just words, but also contributing to social media, user interfaces, content strategy, business analysis, elearning, information architecture, project planning, and more.

The above comments, although they do not explicitly reference it, call to mind Johnson-Eilola's (1996) articulation of symbolic-analytic workers, and show that in the face of change, many practitioners are attempting to relocate the value of their work.

Professional Organizations and Community

As Figure 4 indicates, just five bloggers are responsible for the 18 posts about professional organizations. Of these posts, most focus on STC.

Figure 4. Posts about Professional Organizations



Interactions with professional organizations are portrayed both positively and negatively. Posts on professional organizations, and especially STC, attract high numbers of comments, and respondents tend to be positive about the value of membership. A query on Bill Swallow's blog as to whether readers will be active in STC during 2010 resulted in 12 responses, with nine readers planning to renew their membership. Bloggers recognize the inherent value of professional organizations, especially for networking:

Of course the networking opportunities, member's forum and conferences have all helped me in different ways, but I wanted to let it be known to the team and the company at large that we are professionals.

(Colin McAndrew)

The best way to find fellow technical writers is to find a local chapter of our biggest professional association—STC (Society for Technical Communication).
(Tom Johnson)

Bill Swallow's blog has 13 posts about professional organizations over the time period under study. A response to one of his posts about STC explains the value of belonging to the organization:

My membership dues are an investment in the future of tech comm. STC is advancing the profession in several ways—for example developing a body of knowledge and working with the U.S. Department of Labor to reclassify technical writing so as to reflect our real value. Our profession is undergoing a lot of changes, in terms of both the businesses we're part of and the technologies we support. STC is well positioned to make a positive difference.

He explains his own reasons for renewing his STC membership, but is uncertain of the future success that changes to the organization may bring:

I see value in continuing the STC and in building a central body of knowledge, but if the majority of members do not and have left STC because of the perception that there is more value elsewhere for free.

Blogs are not exclusively positive about professional organizations. Some dissatisfaction is expressed about the services on offer to members and nonmembers of professional organizations, particularly STC. Ivan Walsh explains, "If you're in the STC, you get access to the Jobs board. The paradox is that those who most need it may not be able to afford the annual subscription."

STC is characterized as an "old" and somewhat static organization in some posts, as evinced by Sarah O'Keefe: "With established associations, it can be difficult to take a completely fresh look because of the constraints of structure, organization, and tradition." Bill Swallow adds, "One concern we've been hearing from many is that STC isn't relevant to younger technical communicators... that STC isn't progressive or innovative enough to suit their needs."

In addition to their discussions of the professional organizations, bloggers contribute to the profession in other ways. For example, Sarah O’Keefe’s Scriptorium has developed a website called techcomm alliance, with news, blogs, forums, and details of events for technical communicators, and Scott Abel of the Content Wrangler runs a LinkedIn group with active discussions and a jobs board. Many blogs discuss developments, especially technology developments, relevant to technical communicators, and also focus heavily on troubleshooting software bugs and offering advice, tips, and procedural know-how to their readers.

Further evidence of a commitment to the community is apparent from the Networking category (see Table 2), which accounts for 22% of all posts. All the blogs examined regularly report on conferences and events. In these posts, bloggers highlight their own presentations, demonstrating a desire to increase their own profile.

The use of a blog to network reveals the importance of social capital for workers operating within a particular field: Networking is cited as a motivator in keeping a blog by about half the bloggers Lenhart and Fox (2006) surveyed.

These technical communication bloggers also report from conferences they attend, providing insightful and detailed commentary on sessions for readers who cannot attend. They regularly share resources, such as links to useful websites. Some make resources they have created themselves, including podcasts and screencasts, available to the community free of charge.

Another expression of community online is calls to action. For example, Sarah Maddox invites writers to write wiki documentation, and in another post congratulates technical writers for their participation in a project called Tips via Twitter. The introduction to the post reads as follows:

It’s recently struck me again: There is so much creativity, generosity and enthusiasm in the technical writing community! A while ago, I let people know that I was kicking off a project called Tips via Twitter. Many technical writers commented and tweeted their encouragement and ideas. ... Innovation, passion and generosity are alive and well amongst technical writers. Thank you everyone!

Davidson and Vaast see bloggers as a “virtual discourse community” (2009, p. 41). Despite time, organizational, and geographical boundaries, technical communication bloggers appear to function as an effective virtual community of practice, espousing the spirit of Wenger’s (1998) articulation of that phenomenon. Their posts examine concepts of practice, identity, and learning. This spirit is summarized by a comment from Sarah Maddox on the purpose of blogging: “You’ll attract a group of followers who know that you’re interested in the same sort of thing as they are, and that they’ll learn something from you and be able to bounce ideas off you.” The community-building ethos that is an essential feature of blogging is an important professionalizing activity.

Conclusion

The main findings from this study suggest that technical communication bloggers are both prolific and strongly community driven. They use blogs to share information, network, discuss events, explain procedures, and engage in conversations with their readers. Although these bloggers do not discuss professionalization explicitly and do not appear to be pursuing traditional professionalization strategies such as licensing or accreditation, their active community engagement characterizes enthusiastic professionals.

Moreover, although professionalization is never explicitly named as a goal on these practitioner blogs, latent themes emerge, suggesting that some of the goals of professionalization are also concerns for practitioners. These goals include gaining respect for technical communication, understanding and even standardizing routes into the field, examining developments that affect job roles, and analyzing potential threats such as that from user-generated content. Bloggers are thinking strategically about the future. For example, content curation is cited as a new role for technical communicators, given the amount of (often substandard) content produced by user communities and content farms.

In the blog posts, practical concerns override to a considerable degree theoretical discussions. Almost 50% of posts discuss either work practices or technology. In posts that reflect on the role of the technical writer,

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heavy emphasis on the need to add value suggests some insecurity about the legitimacy of the field. Technical communicators compare themselves, often negatively, with other professionals such as usability specialists and instructional designers, regularly bemoaning their perceived inferiority. Although practitioners are not agreed on a job title to best articulate the work they do, role diversity may be viewed in positive terms and is a signifier and result of the exponential technological changes that have influenced, and continue to influence, the field.

The scarcity of comments by academics on these blogs suggests that academics and practitioners do not appear to communicate with each other through blogs at present. Nevertheless, the common ground between the two communities in relation to professionalization can be leveraged to move the discussion forward. Many of the bloggers studied already contribute to the field, presenting at conferences and submitting comments and posts on professional society blogs. Considering the strength of the online virtual discourse community developing around technical communication blogs, academics need to listen to the voices within, and, if possible, also participate in, that community.

This study has examined just 10 practitioner blogs. In addition to blogs, other online media are replete with conversations that reference professional topics. This corpus of online texts can yield much information about practitioners' views on the status of the field. Twitter and other social media can indicate the popularity of specific blogs, blog posts, and discussion topics among technical communicators. In practical terms, probabilistic techniques such as latent semantic analysis could automate the process of mining online texts because individual analysis of posts is very time consuming.

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