INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this memo is to preface my master’s portfolio in technical and professional communication (TPC). The memo and the documents accompanying it will showcase my work in Auburn University’s Master of Technical and Professional Communication program and present an argument surrounding the professional identity of technical communication. My aim is to trace the contours of our field’s trajectory, examine the technical and professional sides of our field, and offer a direction toward further professionalizing the work that we create, curate, and implement for public audiences.

I am earning a Master of Technical and Professional Communication degree, but I have always wondered where the “professional” communication comes in. Why is our professional organization not the Society for Technical [and Professional] Communication (STC)? Perhaps the emphasis on “technical” is a professionalization effort to create a distinction between our work and the work of marketers, public relations specialists, and advertisers. My fear, though, is that we create an unnecessary boundary on our range of skills, our field’s recognition, and our field’s social action when we exclude professional communication from our discourse.

Technical communication has evolved from pre- and post-WWII technical writing into a diverse field of writers, editors, designers, usability experts, and scholars. Savage (1999) argues, however, that we are still an immature profession because we lack market value. In particular, he asserts that job advertisements neglect technical communicators’ rhetorical skills and that workers from competing fields (e.g., journalism, mass communication, and English) often secure jobs in technical communication because they cannot find work in their own profession(s). While Savage’s work was perhaps appropriate for the context in which he was writing, our practitioners who write, design, or develop public or popular knowledge (as opposed to techno-scientific knowledge) still struggle with a professional identity. Recently, Savage and other scholars in TPC have contributed more to the conversation surrounding technical communication’s professional consciousness and still come to the bleak conclusion that students transitioning into the workplace are at a disadvantage compared to more “established” professions like engineering, accounting, law, marketing, and public relations (Savage & Seible, 2010; Bloch, 2011). The tensions surrounding professionalizing TPC present a sort of stalemate for students, educators, and practitioners in making decisions between what Carliner (2012) calls formal professionalism, quasiprofessionalism, and contraprofessionalism. Respectively, those with stake in the matter must choose whether they prefer exclusive rights to performing their line of work (a la Savage), the ability to “participate” in work tasks without exclusive rights, or a free professional market.
LOCATING THE FIELD
Our Roots in Science and Engineering

As a profession, technical writing emerged in part from anxieties over the fact that engineers were not capable of articulating their work. In other words, the field sprung from concerns that engineers could not write at sentence level (rather than concerns for invention or rhetorical skill). Consequently, technical writers we were often thought of as transmitters, or conduits, deemed invisible when their message was successful and ineffective when their message was not successful (Slack et al., 1993; Miller, 1989). In other words, the technical writer’s work was only valuated when s/he made mistakes—their only perceived workplace influence was negative. In this way, it is easy to see that our practitioners often occupied positions near the bottom of a workplace hierarchy.

Longo (2000) offers technical communicators some reassurance for their professional role in Spurious Coin. In her deep cultural history of technical communication, she deploys an “exchange” metaphor: i.e., technical communicators “mint the coin” of science and technology. According to her, pure scientific knowledge is the material aspect of the coin—the hard, cold metal jingling in your pocket—while technical communication gives value to the coin—the reason the clerk at a store accepts it in exchange for goods. This metaphor is significant in that it makes our rhetorical craft and its value in techno-scientific discourse obvious. Rather than thinking of the technical communicator’s work as the simple transference of information, Longo makes it clear that work at the hands of the technical communicator is inherently valuable—the technical communicator is no longer the conduit, but rather the codifier who crafts knowledge or information that is usable, shareable, and valuable. However, despite providing extensive evidence for technical communicators’ knowledge work, Longo still expresses concern that such work is sometimes still lost in STEM disciplines, where the engineer, chemist, doctor, etc., still “create” scientific knowledge through research, experimentation, and documentation and thus wield the most influence in scientific knowledge-making.

Adding to our rhetorical foundations, Miller (1989) serves as a cornerstone in technical communication’s transformation within the context of a knowledge economy—located in scientific reasoning, but founded in rhetorical knowledge (see Rutter, 1991). She offers technical communication intrinsic value by suggesting that practitioners exercise a balance between technê and praxis (Miller, 1989). The former refers to the “low” sense of practicality, i.e., hard work, the “rough and tumble” instrumental production without concern for theory (p. 14). The latter refers to the “high” sense of practicality, i.e., work that contributes to the well being of a community. For technical writers, this dichotomous relationship presents a rift between the workplace and the academy in the sense that practitioners must base their work in best rhetorical and ethical practices and scholars must recognize the value of technical skill as a vehicle for rhetorical knowledge. However, Miller argues that by teaching students to truly understand the work they are expected to perform in industry, by introducing them to theory and by developing “a locus for questioning, for criticism, for distinguishing good practices from bad” (p. 23), we encourage students to combine technê and praxis for the betterment of our audience. This is significant because those in the academy considered post-WWII technical writing, and perhaps still modern technical communication, low culture. This perspective is problematic because we are no longer mere manual writers; we are now the web developer, the techno-scientific illustrator, the content manager, the UI/UX designer, among other specialist positions. And even if we are the manual writer, we still contribute power and influence to documentation in the manner in which we compose, construct, and produce them.
Johnson-Eilola (1996) ushered in this new generation of technical communicators in a post-industrial world by invoking the symbolic-analytic worker, one who “possess[es] the abilities to identify, rearrange, circulate, abstract, and broker information,” (p. 183). He notes that technical communicators work collaboratively to solve complex problems and develop effective communication. In this way, Johnson-Eilola is pointing to our potential to work across a range of disciplines, able to create effective communication without losing sight of the user in the process. This is certainly valuable in any techno-scientific discipline, but it might also be an important shift into professional communication. Collaboration is key in marketing, advertising, and public relations—some of the fields that our practitioners compete with—and we possess the same ability (and tendency) to work collaboratively to produce, tailor, and curate knowledge for specific audiences. The knowledge work that Johnson-Eilola points to, and its distributed or collaborative nature, could be the key to an argument for technical communication’s quasiprofessionalism. In other words, the ability to participate in knowledge work, without holding exclusive rights to performing such work, might ease some tension in the field while also allowing young practitioners the freedom to perform work appropriate for their interests and skill sets.

New Avenues in Professional Communication

Ronning-Hall (2015) outlines our overlap into marketing in the January 2015 issue of Intercom. She points out the relationship between technical content and marketing potential: “At every touchpoint [of the customer journey]—not just after a sale—what buyers want is what technical writers have specialized in all along: useful, authentic, relevant, accurate information that solves problems. Not fluff. Not spin” (p. 13). It is important to note that she makes a clear distinction concerning the popular perception that marketers are spin-doctors, producing fluffy content to woo consumers into a purchase. Ronning-Hall is making a case for our potential in marketing writing. We are capable of creating documentation, producing deliverables, and curating information so that it benefits the user and the executives simultaneously. This is a significant, but somewhat nuanced, perspective on our professional potential. Our field uses social media within itself (STC blogs and webinars among other outlets), but does not widely promote marketing as a viable career path for technical communicators. It would be irresponsible to assume that technical communicators should suddenly dominate the marketing profession, but moving toward quasiprofessional status, STC, students, educators, and practitioners might begin recognizing this professional side of technical communication more readily, so that perhaps stakeholders in other professions will as well.

POPULAR MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR PROFESSIONALIZATION

Some technical communication practitioners are beginning to embrace popular media; namely, scholars are recognizing social media’s role in the invention and distribution of symbolic-analytic work. Ferro & Zachry (2014) position social media as a way for technical communicators to take part in rhetorical work that challenges them to analyze their audience(s) more deeply to adapt to the “many-to-many” nature of online communication. Additionally, they assert that social media users are motivated by a sense of proximity and community, and that technical communicators might benefit from commenting features on social platforms. Specifically, commenting features on social media would give users a way to communicate their needs and preferences without being asked—giving technical communicators valuable insights while meeting the users’ desire to provide information at will rather than being prompted. This direct conversation with users is useful for communicators, but social media content usually falls under a marketing or public relations job description, bringing us back to our professionalization issue of market competition. We’re able to conduct the same work as
practitioners in other professions, but we might not get the chance to if our potential is not recognized. If social media are online communication, they are technical. And if social media aim for social action, they are media that technical communicators might have some stake in. While some might argue that this makes our professional consciousness too broad, the aim of a quasiprofessional technical communication discipline is just that— the opportunity to perform different types of work, without holding exclusive rights to such work. In other words, our educational background and technical skillset would allow us to work with practitioners in other disciplines to create valuable work for public audiences. The problem remains, though, that our young practitioners are sometimes not given that opportunity (Savage & Seible, 2010; Bloch, 2011).

Another emerging issue surrounding social media in technical communication is invention. Stacey Pigg (2014) introduces social media platforms like blogs and Twitter as means for creating workplace and client relationships, keeping up with events and trends in the workplace or market, and other ways of “overcoming fragmentation” (p. 71). These practices are significant when it comes to collaborative invention, communicating with users, and establishing market value. This sense of proximity to our coworkers, clients, or professionals in other markets could be key in maintaining interaction with them and working with them (or encouraging them toward social action) in the future. However, I think that our popularization might span beyond social media. We might use social media as a tool for popularizing our profession—making technical communication a more recognized discipline. With more recognition, we could continue to evolve the field as it has been evolving over the past four or five decades. More important, though, might be the popularization of our work—what we produce, tailor, and curate for specific audiences. Technical communication, through STC, uses social media like blogs, podcasts, webinars, etc. to connect with members within our discipline, but our degrees are not recognized in job descriptions for professional communication roles like web content and social media management. The problem, then, is that we are qualified to work with members of other disciplines, but that practitioners in our own field, let alone those in the markets that some of our practitioners are attempting to enter, do not yet recognize the full potential of our knowledge work.

Ethical Responsibility

If we acknowledge that technical and professional communication, as means for social action, are powerful modes of communication, we must work to check such power with ethical best practices. In all spectrums and ranges of TPC, we must recognize the responsibility that comes with rhetorical influence—especially when we are influencing users to do something. If we do not consider ourselves conduits or information transmitters, but instead see our work as value added, we should balance this shift in rhetorical power with a shift in ethical awareness.

An infamous communication problem that serves as an example of our ethical responsibilities is the Challenger disaster. We must use best practices in ethics when our documentation stands to influence decisions that could change lives, alter reality/create false narratives, or affect user safety. Paul Dombrowski (2000) highlights a shift in ethical responsibility by explaining that the outdated “mechanistic” view of technical writing brought with it less responsibility, because merely passing information along from a sender to a user places responsibility either on the technology itself or on the user. However, as technical communicators who shape techno-scientific knowledge, we must work to understand the implications of our “expanded role” (pp. 2-3). Moreover, if we continue to venture into professional communication roles and further popularize technical knowledge work, we should work even harder to ensure that such widely spread, influential content meets ethical standards.
Form vs. Social Action

STC asserts that all technical communicators employ a “user-centered approach to providing the right information, in the right way, at the right time to make someone’s life easier and more productive.” Therefore, our user advocacy is at the center of our ethical awareness. However, an interesting thing to note here is the implicit significance of genre. It is important to draw out what it means to provide the right information in the right way.

Miller (1984) asserts that communicative value is inherent in social action rather than substance or form. Applying Miller’s genre theory to social media makes a case for added value in social genres. Mediums like Twitter and blogs are often thought of as frivolous—not contributing any true value to discourse. However, that notion might change with social action. Despite the fact that a blog post or tweet can be used as frivolous means to a tedious end, they are also examples of social action and community engagement. Therefore, the communicative value in social media lies not in a tweet or blog post itself—some may be valuable and others may be frivolous—but rather, in the social action such media implement. Consider this: a team of technical communicators creates a YouTube video rather than a quick reference page in a product manual for changing a headlight on a 2011 GMC Sierra. The YouTube video gets 10,000+ views and a majority of comments are positive, indicating that the video was helpful. Now our field would be tasked to determine whether the video is frivolous media—the “easy” alternative to reading a manual—or effective social action and user engagement. We have the power to craft interesting, influential rhetoric and check it with ethical best practices. If we added cultural significance to such compelling information our field, and our users, might stand to gain. Rather than hide the technical communicator’s rhetorical value in a quick reference guide we can provide users wide access and active engagement online.

My argument is this: we might stand to gain from popularizing our field and using our knowledge work to reposition genres of technical documentation, like a YouTube video to show users how to change a headlight, or reposition our work in professional communication by gaining market value. Our work is often invisible—we rarely get bylines or our names mentioned in credits. Our work is sometimes not valuable—people will skip over our documentation because it does not offer them the engagement that they have become accustomed to. So, I am not arguing for an entire reconfiguration of our work, but I am posing the question that if we can ethically and persuasively present techno-scientific information in an engaging, interactive, social, dare I say popular way, what is the harm in it? We would stand to gain market value in professional communication (to work with practitioners in comparable fields like marketing, journalism, and public relations) and make our technical documentation more accessible and engaging.

PORTFOLIO DOCUMENTS

My portfolio represents my practical knowledge, technical skills, and ethical decision making as they pertain to creating documents for class projects, client work, or publication. The following five document descriptions highlight my application of document design theory, audience analysis, distributed & symbolic-analytic work, popular culture theory, and ethical theory.

College of Liberal Arts Career Video

Working collaboratively with three other graduate students, I aimed to synthesize and represent months of career outlook and financial research to undergraduate students and their parents in an exciting and engaging way. “CLA Careers” is a five-minute-long video presentation on career outlook for liberal arts majors. The extensive research coupled with a strict deadline required close attention to detail and keen project management skills, while working with a
somewhat unfamiliar medium required specific attention to/knowledge of document design principles and audience analysis. Additionally, the genre of the document is significant as we used social media to present interesting, yet persuasive, information in a manner that also engaged with our users.

**English Composition II Syllabus**
This spring I decided to use my syllabus as more than a quasi-contract between me and my students. Instead, I wanted our course syllabus to reflect the theme of our course (culture), and, moreover, some of the approaches to culture that we would be taking. The syllabus is laid out like a magazine, which alludes to the course theme, but also makes course information easier to navigate. It also includes a reference to our use of social media in the classroom as a tool for invention. Like the careers video, it is also an example of how reconfiguring our work can be effective. Rather than use a conventional syllabus, I aimed to use the magazine genre as means to an end—to give my students a feel for the course’s theme and engage with them in a way that they are accustomed to through popular media.

**Activism Poster: End Artless Advertising**
This document is the end result of a class project for ENGL 6010: Document Design. The poster alludes to Andy Warhol's pop art style, tying it directly to consumerism and mass media. It demonstrates my knowledge of best practices in document design, but also invokes my research into popular culture theory. It could also demonstrate the power of popular texts to urge social action.

**Discursive Writing: Ethics of Visual Rhetoric and Photo Manipulation**
My case study on BP’s public relations response following the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster raises questions about ethical responsibility in the Photoshop age. When technical communicators (or workers performing creating documents of technical nature) do engage in popular media, what are their responsibilities to the public? This case study offers some insight on what popular work might look like for us, and cautions us to consider the implications of persuasive imagery.

**Technical Editing: Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve Plant Species Guide**
Working collaboratively with four other students, I worked to conduct a comprehensive edit of a ~50-page species guide for a client affiliated with Auburn University. Our main goals were to make the scientific content more accessible for a lay audience and to make the guide more visually appealing. We performed several levels of editing, which proved the distributed nature of large technical communication projects. We worked with existing content, divided up tasks, worked collaboratively to review the document several times, and finally performed a substantive edit of the final document.

**REFERENCES**


