WHAT IF READERS
Can't Read?

BY TONY SELF

This article discusses the different reading styles of the emerging generation of workers and the changing reading patterns of existing generations.

The Reader Is King

As technical communicators, we claim to be user advocates. We claim to keep the reader uppermost in our minds when we are writing: the reader is king. We might even use the mnemonic PAD to remind ourselves that thinking of purpose, audience, and delivery is the key to good communication practice.

If we really do believe in the importance of the audience, the reader, the user, then how have we changed our practice to reflect the changing characteristics, competencies, and even literacies of our readers? Have our readers changed over the past few years? The evidence points to the answer being a resounding "Yes"!

Reading Has Changed

What evidence do we have? To start with, all major newspapers with a web edition now have more online readers than traditional (paper) readers. *The Age*, a Melbourne newspaper, has close to 1 million readers of its paper edition, but 1.5 million web readers (*http://about.theage.com.au/view_article.asp?intid=63*).

A study by Springer (*www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_download document/eBooks+-+the+End+User+ Experience?SGWID=0-0-45-608298-0*) found that eBooks have begun to make strong inroads into the areas of research and academic work. When individuals use eBooks, they are usually engaged in "horizontal information seeking" and "power browsing"—in other words, they skim quickly through the reading material and bounce from source to source.

By research, Springer was referring primarily to use within universities by students and academics (*www.masternewmedia.org/ebooks_usage_trends_ and_statistics*). As an example, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 78 percent of users said they use eBooks for research, while 56 percent reported using eBooks for study. (Only 10 percent mentioned using eBooks for teaching or leisure.)

Of course universities don't accurately reflect the broader workplace. But university graduates make up the bulk of new information workers. We often write for the LCD (the lowest common denominator): the inexperienced and least knowledgeable of our readers.

The New Readers

If university students today are the workers of tomorrow, then they will soon be the readers of our manuals, user guides, procedures, and user assistance. What sort of readers are these new readers?

A self-survey of digital ethnography students at Kansas State University found that the average student, in one year:

- Bought textbooks worth $100, but never opened them
- Read 8 paper books
- Read 2,300 web pages
- Viewed 1,281 Facebook profiles
- Wrote 42 pages of assignments
- Wrote 500 pages of emails

The fundamental shift away from traditional forms of written communication (books and documents) to new media (email, social networking, collaboration spaces) is something to which we as technical communicators should be attuned. The shift is not just from paper to online media; the shift is also away from top-down, autocratic communication structures to democratic, peer-to-peer structures.

Literacy Is Changing

The modes of human communication are changing. Language rules are changing. Literacy is changing. Some people think that the "problem" with young readers is rooted in a decline in emphasis on spelling and grammar. But the problem is not poor spelling and grammar; the problem may be an undue emphasis on its importance.

In 2004, Jo Carr, a sociolinguistics lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, wrote: "rules used to be an indication of social class and literacy in the past, but [members of] to-
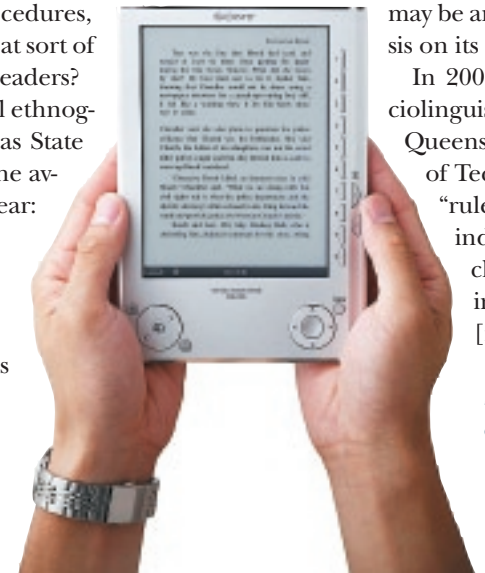
Figure 1. Sony eBook Reader

day's society are doing things differently because language today serves the purpose of speed and social interaction." Sue Butler, of the respected Macquarie Dictionary team, suggested that we dump the apostrophe altogether.

Since 2006, New Zealand high school students have been permitted to use "text speak" in national exams (*www.dotcult .com/Txt_Spk_OK_in_NZ*). Their answers must clearly demonstrate the required level of understanding, but they can use a language that some older folks might find difficult to recognize as English! For the uninitiated, text speak is an abbreviated form of spelling that aims to use the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message. Hence, punctuation, grammar, and capitalization rules are largely discarded.

Georgina Dimopolous, a 19-year-old Melbourne University student writing in *The Age*, pointed out that "provided young people effectively communicate information, an SMS message or an MSN conversation may be *just as legitimate as an email or an essay*." Since when has email been as "legitimate" as an essay?

It's no use arguing about it. That debate is done and dusted. Nineteen-year-olds about to enter the workforce see email as legitimate (i.e., formal and authoritative). Authority of information is more likely to be conveyed by currency (its up-to-dateness) than by providence (who wrote it) or packaging (what form it is presented in).

An Australian National Report on Schooling found that 11 percent of year seven students lacked basic reading skills, and 20 percent do not meet numeracy benchmarks. While only a few students will be unable to read by the time they reach the end of their secondary education, a significant proportion will have quite different reading abilities than a generation earlier. How do we write for our readers if our readers can't read traditional documents?

Playing to the Reader's Strengths

One solution may be to allow young people the opportunity to play to their technological strengths.

My neighbors have two daughters; Megan is 22, and Leonie is 15 (I have

"We've read the manuals" branding on a Gizmo company car.

changed their names). When Megan was 15, just seven years ago, her parents had a second telephone line installed. Megan seemed to be always talking on the phone; she was a stereotypical teenage girl. But that stereotype is no longer valid. Leonie never uses the phone line. She does have a mobile phone, but she tends to use it primarily for texting. Rather than chat to her friends on the phone after school, Leonie will chat using MSN. Talking on a telephone is no longer typical of a modern teenage girl.

My neighbors are not unusual. In Britain, the average person sends 28 text messages per week, but only makes 20 telephone calls. That's the average across all age groups in the entire population. In the Philippines, an average of 15 text messages are sent per person per day. In New Zealand, one mobile phone plan provides a cap of 2,000 messages per month, which some young people need in order to limit their texting. Two thousand messages per month is 67 per day, almost 3 per hour, or 1 every 20 minutes, 24 hours per day.

Literacy Is Different

My teenage daughter stayed with her grandparents for a few weeks. I told her

to make sure she let her grandfather know when she was on the train every day; she naturally chose to communicate by text message. However, not only did her grandfather not know how to receive text messages on his phone, but he also did not know how to read them. My daughter was shocked to realize that her grandfather was functionally illiterate.

The web-literate entrants to the workforce are not stupid, and they're certainly not illiterate. They have a different literacy. According to a 1998 study by Cetron, children encounter as much information in a single year as their grandparents did in an entire lifetime. Of particular relevance to technical communicators is the finding that these new readers are accustomed to information becoming obsolete and having to constantly update their knowledge. They are also practiced at sharing their knowledge instantly and virtually.

In summary, new readers (some of whom apparently can't read or count!) are our LCD audience. They are using language differently, and they don't use the same communication rules and protocols as earlier generations. They also afford electronic communication an elevated status.

Over-hyped?

If you've reached this point and you feel that this change in reading skills is either over-exaggerated or not significant, consider poor Clifford Stoll. In the February 1995 issue of *Newsweek*, Stoll wrote an article titled "Hype Alert: Why Cyberspace Isn't, and Will Never Be, Nirvana." In the article, he mocked "visionaries [who] see a future of telecommuting workers, interactive libraries and multimedia classrooms. They speak of electronic town meetings and virtual communities. Commerce and business will shift from offices and malls to networks and modems. . . . Baloney. Do our computer pundits lack all common sense? Computers and networks isolate us from one another. A network chat line is a limp substitute for meeting friends over coffee."

Today's reality seemed quite fanciful for such non-visionaries in 1995. The "limp substitute for meeting friends" is an enormously powerful and extravagantly popular tool for connecting people. There are over 100 million users of MySpace, with the average page visited 30 times per day. We've even had to come up with a term to describe that connectedness: social networking.

I earlier quoted from a self-survey of digital ethnography students. Their teacher, Michael Wesch, is a media ecologist. These phrases didn't exist when those students were born, and this phenomenon is bound to continue. Many schoolchildren will go on to work in jobs that haven't been invented yet. (Former US Secretary of Education Richard Riley predicts that the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 would not have existed in 2004.) To "google" is now a verb. Things change quickly, and we can't afford to make the same mistakes as Clifford Stoll.

Some More Shocking Facts

Let's now digest a few more shocking facts about the future readers of our documentation (from Karl Fisch, *http://thefischbowl.blog spot.com*):

- China will soon become the number one English-speaking country in the world.
- The US Department of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 10 to 14 jobs by the age of 38.
- One in four US workers has been with their current employer for less than one year.
- The USA is 20th in the world rankings of Internet broadband penetration.
- One in eight couples married in the USA last year met on the Internet.
- There are five times more words in the English language now than there were in the days of Shakespeare.
- The amount of unique new information generated this year will be more than the previous 5,000 years.
- The amount of new technical information is doubling every two years.
- In 10 years, ePaper will be cheaper than paper.
- The One Laptop per Child project will result in 50 million computers per year being shipped to underdeveloped countries, where children will learn to read without ever using paper.
- The percentage of university graduates from India with English language skills is 100 percent.

Old Readers Are Changing, Too

It's not just the young folks whose reading skills are changing. The speed at which information can be retrieved through tools such as Google is causing readers to become impatient. An Akami study in 2006 found that 75 percent of people would not go back to a website that took more than four seconds to load. (A few years earlier it was eight

seconds.) Four seconds equates to 15 words. This might explain why no one reads your documentation.

Was that a bit harsh? I accused you of writing documentation that no one reads. One company betting on that supposition is Gizmo, a computer support company whose slogan is "We've read the manuals."

Are we losing the ability to read? Scott Karp, CEO of Publish2, Inc., thinks so: "I was a lit major in college, and used to be a voracious book reader. What happened? What if I do now all my reading on the web not because the way I read has changed (i.e., I'm seeking convenience) but because the way I think has changed?"

Karp is not alone. Dr. Bruce Freidman, Professor of Pathology at the University of Michigan, found that he has almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print. "I can't read *War and Peace* anymore. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it."

The phrase "Google is making us stupid" rings true for many people.

Studies back up these anecdotes. A University College London study reported: "It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that new forms of 'reading' are emerging as users 'power browse' horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense." So it appears that our reading is moving toward skimming information horizontally, or reading snippets of text from different sources, rather than in-depth, vertical reading. Our readers are becoming impatient, and technical communicators need to act!

Reform in Other Communication Fields

Related professions such as journalism have already made some big changes. Many newspapers now feature one-paragraph summaries of

the ten or so top stories, catering to those impatient readers. *The Age* calls its feature Express News; the *New York Times* calls its Shortcuts. The *New York Times* design director, Tom Bodkin, said Shortcuts would give harried readers a quick taste of the day's news, sparing them the "less efficient" method of actually having to turn the pages and read the articles. To survive in the newspaper business, the needs of new readers have to be met. The impatient reader is also causing change in politics (the 15-second grab), in television (shorter news items and shorter current affairs programs), and in many other communication fields where being attuned to the needs of customers is critical to business success.

In Australia, the radio station with one of the oldest demographics is ABC Radio National (RN). This audience is dramatically changing its listening habits. ABC, attuned to the changing preferences of its audience, started offering podcasts for RN programs. By September 2008, a total of 15 million RN podcasts had been downloaded. (Australia has a population of around 20 million.) This number is significant not because of its size (in podcasting terms, that's not a big number) but because of its unexpectedness. If we think the readers of our documents are old readers, not new readers, that doesn't mean we're exempt from changing communication patterns.

Technical Communicators Must Adapt

If technical communicators are still producing hardcopy manuals and stand-alone help systems using current methods in 10 years time, the profession is doomed. To adapt, technical communication must:
- move to topic-based authoring
- embrace minimalism
- use Web 2.0 technologies (XML, mashups, wikis, RSS, web services, etc.)
- embrace new media
- adopt heavy-duty single sourcing to improve productivity
- reduce production time (to match the shortening product life cycles and agile software development)

- keep abreast of the change in our readers

More radical changes might be needed, including:
- abandoning the Table of Contents in electronic documents
- no longer including task information for software in user assistance
- using new ways of communicating concepts, such as:
  - graphical devices
  - movies
  - audio
  - animation

Let's look at one of those radical changes: omitting task information. Dr. Mike Hughes, an academic and technical communication visionary, believes that task information belongs in the user interface, not in the user assistance. If a how-to instruction has to be written, the software is flawed. Only conceptual information belongs in the user assistance, according to Hughes.

A successful new communication micro-business is Commoncraft (*www.commoncraft.com*). On a very low budget but with a high level of skill, the husband-and-wife team have put together clever video explanations of complex technologies. In one short video (under four minutes), Commoncraft explains wikis. This is the type of conceptual information that Hughes suggests is the primary domain of technical communication. It would be easy to argue that the written product of technical communicators is not nearly as effective as Commoncraft-style videos.

Collaboration is an area that we need to focus on as well, particularly for new readers. People prefer to learn from peers rather than from manuals; new readers have lost trust in manuals but not in their peers. Collaboration offers technical communicators a way to facilitate information rather than to create it. This collaboration could be through wikis, mailing lists, and social networking services. We may think the lack of authority of such community-based information is a problem, but new readers see collaborative tools as legitimate.

Writing So That Readers Don't Have to Read

The pressure to change our ways is not only coming from our readers, it's also coming from the top. The expectations of management are changing, and as more metrics and data about information retention become available, the pressure will increase. The self-survey of Kansas State University students mentioned earlier was not communicated through the written word but through a YouTube video. I am confident that I would never have read that important information had it been provided as a PDF. But in video form, the information has been downloaded 2.6 million times! Nobody reads our manuals, but maybe they would view our videos? Could our future Help systems be podcasts? Are we doing the best we can, or are we sticking with the status quo and pretending nothing has changed? As teacher Steven Maher noted in the PBS documentary *Growing Up Online* (*www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kidsonline/view/main.html*), we have the choice of fighting against change or accepting it as a reality. As user advocates, fighting against the changing nature of our readers doesn't make sense.

The creator of the Information Mapping methodology, Robert Horn, said in 2001: "we have to write so that people don't have to read what we write."

The irony of this article is that only old readers have the ability to read beyond the first paragraph or two. If I were to aim this article at new readers, I'd need an entirely different communication approach. I guess I need to get started on an animated video! ❶

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