

On wikis and the death of technical writing

Geoffrey Marnell

The wiki craze has given birth to the idea that the technical writing profession could be in for a bit of a shake-up and possibly a shake-out. If end-users were to write end-user documentation—with a wiki as the collaborative medium—then what role is there for the technical writer? A mere content editor, perhaps—a corrector of misplaced apostrophes and other stylistic perversions perpetrated by untutored writers, nay, ‘content providers’. I heard this view espoused, not unenthusiastically, at a technical communications conference in Wellington in November last. The suggestion is that bottom-up collaborative authoring by many heads is better than top-down authoring by one or two heads (that is, by technical writers). The many heads in this case are the users of the product, some of whom would contribute to a product wiki, thus building up a useful body of information about the product likely to exceed, in some way or other, what technical writers could produce.

This might seem an alarming prospect for our profession...but it is just not going to happen. Let me explain why.

The great interest in wikis at present has been spawned by the popularity and success of Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopaedia. But the conditions that favour the success of Wikipedia are unlikely to be found in the humdrum world of product documentation. For a start, Wikipedia has tens of thousands of contributors. Moreover, all those contributors (and every potential contributor) is free to submit a contribution on any topic that takes their fancy. What this means is that contributions to Wikipedia arise from interest and passion. It goes without saying that someone who gives up their spare time to contribute an article to Wikipedia on French history has a passion, or at least a very deep interest, in French history. So Wikipedia is succeeding because an enormous number of contributors are free to write about whatever they are passionate about.

Let’s step back from encyclopaedic endeavours and consider the world of product documentation. Imagine a small business owner—someone, say, who runs a restaurant, a nursery, a newsagency or the like—buying an off-the-shelf accounting package. London to a brick: they are not buying the software out of a passionate interest in accounting. No, they are buying the software because manual bookkeeping is a soporific drain on the human spirit and yet there is a regulatory requirement that businesses keep a record of their accounts and transactions. Moreover, depending on when they bought the package, the community of users might be as little as 10, or maybe 1,000, maybe 3,000. So, unlike Wikipedia, the community of potential contributors to a wiki that might support users of that accounting package is quite small. And, unlike Wikipedia, the passion to write about the product is just not there. What chance do you think there is that this particular product wiki will accumulate a useful mass of information any time soon?

Moreover, if the customer of this product is a typical small business owner, they will be working 50–60 hours a week. Is this customer likely, in the few free hours on a Sunday morning, to teach themselves the product (which they must do since no documentation was provided by the vendor and the product wiki is either empty or too

embryonic to be of much use)? Are they likely to test what they think they have learned, write up their learning (taking special care to write as best they can) and then post it to the product wiki? Airborne pigs come to mind.

The same considerations apply to many of the products technical writers traditionally write documentation for. Take a steam iron, for example. No one buys a steam iron because they are passionate about ironing. And if they are not passionate about ironing, what chance is there that they will be passionate about writing procedures on how to use the iron? Maybe when the children are in bed, the dishes washed, the carpets vacuumed, the cat fed, the lounge room tidied...maybe then I'll feel like figuring out how this new iron works and write up some notes for my fellow users.

The legal ramifications of end-users being given the responsibility for creating end-user documentation are enormous. It is beyond belief that a manufacturer of heavy machinery, or of medical equipment, would release a product to market without comprehensive operating instructions. The risk of litigation should someone be injured or killed as a result of using the machinery or equipment incorrectly is surely not worth the savings to be got by not using technical writers to prepare operating instructions in the first place.

Take an aircraft manufacturer for example. Would Boeing release a new aircraft without operating instructions, in the expectation that pilots would collaboratively compile a wiki on how to fly the plane safely? The company would have to hope that enough pilots lived through the trial-and-error of unassisted learning to compile that wiki. A ghoulish idea, to say the least.

Wikis *can* be useful, but only as an adjunct to traditional technical documentation. (It may well be beneficial for the community of product users if users could add undocumented tips, tricks and workarounds to a wiki created for that purpose.) But wikis will never replace traditional technical documentation; so those technical writers alarmed at the rise of the wiki need not feel threatened. The noble profession of technical writing will survive wikimania.