

# IF NOT ME, WHO?\*

## Encouraging critical and ethical praxis in technical communication

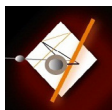
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Two decades beyond the digital revolution, the age of the technical communicator has arrived, and yet his status and agency remain tied to an era past. One needs only to look at the terms with which we still describe the technical communicator—scribe, wordsmith, translator—to see the limits of his agency. Such labels imply the technical communicator or professional writer simply writes what he is told to write, reinforcing industrial power dynamics. Indeed, scholars Slack, Miller, & Doak (1993) argue that it is precisely this identification with corporatism that limits the technical communicator's role.

But far from limited, the 21st century technical communicator's responsibilities continue to expand. In the course of a single project, the technical communicator will play the roles of information devel-



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oper, communicator, interpreter, and usability expert. At each stage, the technical communicator dialogues with an audience, developing an Aristotelian *ethos* to build credibility, maintain loyalty, and uphold the public good.

However, communiqués regarding ethical concerns are often perceived as *secondary* to the product under development, despite numerous examples of the catastrophic consequences of minimizing ethical criticality (Walker, 2004). Such disasters are compelling arguments for a renegotiated role of technical communicator as someone who is *in* the institution but not *of* it.

The ever-increasing complexity and pace of production only adds weight to the argument that the technical communicator of today must be technically competent, ethically bound, critically conscious and situated with enough institutional power to halt the wheels of production when necessary, putting the common good over institutional gain. The 21st century technical communicator must be elevated from mere scribe to negotiator.

Sullivan and Porter suggest this is not outside our reach. Certainly, we can teach students and empower professionals to see the multiple aspects of technical communication as an act of “mutual negotiation” (Sullivan & Porter, 1993). As an arbiter between the organization and the public, the redefined technical communicator as negotiator has as her aim “mutual understanding and more ethical choices” (Sullivan & Porter, 1993). Under this new model, the technical communicator would employ a critical-ethical lens to investigate and speak to the multiple discourse communities surrounding the work.

The technical communicator cannot remain the translator of the past, but should evolve into part producer, part advocate, representing the interests of *both* the company and the public it serves. Technical communicators must not abuse their persuasive talents. She must not forget that *people* are affected by what our documents pre- and proscribe. The shutter disaster, Three-Mile Island, the recent BP Gulf Horizon oil spill all remind the technical communicator that it is not uncommon for life to depend on what looks like mere letters on a page (Wilson, 2001). That is why it is important to use language with precision, to prefer simple direct expression of ideas, to satisfy the audience's need for complete and honestly represented information, and to promote a professional climate where ethical judgments can be exercised without reprisal. Understanding the ethics of his position and having the authority to act on ethical dilemmas is critical to the 21st century technical communicator's credibility and the profession's identity and legitimacy. ■

## Notes

- \* As quoted by Andrei Sakharov, Soviet nuclear physicist, dissident, and human rights activist, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975.

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