

Reply to Commentaries on “Egoless Writing: Improving Quality by Replacing Artistic Impulse with Engineering Discipline”

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Abstract

The author discusses two contextual problems associated with responses to his article. After discussing how documentation relates to business models, he concludes that communicators, to ensure their longevity, should pursue knowledge management opportunities.

I.7.1 Document Preparation—document management

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The wide range of responses to my essay on “Egoless Writing” has alerted me to two contextual problems.

First, whenever one writes a history of ideas, even if it covers only 25 years or so, it is important to point out that the latest ideas are not necessarily widespread and that the oldest ideas are far from gone. For example, at this very moment, some programmer in America is fixing an ancient COBOL program with a statement that begins with a GOTO; elsewhere, some novice technical writer is typing “Depress Enter.” As recently as two years ago, I consulted with one of America’s largest brokerages, in which software job aids and training materials were being written by temporary office help! If I created the impression that I think any industry is monolithic (Waite), I apologize.

Second, my perspective is grounded in business thinking. Not every practitioner and scholar in this field agrees with me that the central question in assessing a company’s documentation policies and practices is: How’s business and what can the documentation group do to improve it? This prejudice has made me vulnerable to the end-of-history myopia that Sauer charges me with. My central argument, that most of the problems of user documentation and support have been solved, is influenced by what Sauer calls the twenty-year “stability” of the technology. That is, from a business perspective, it seems to me that the best documentors have already figured out what users need and that the minor changes in the products available do not warrant high-level planning and analysis (like that espoused by me in my two books on documentation and by Haramundanis in the current essay). If, as Sauer muses,

there were a sudden non-incremental change in the technology, we'd be back to 1985 again and I'd have to rethink things.

In this context, the objective of my little essay was to describe an arc in the history of the documentation profession. This arc (which Waite sees most clearly) first describes the upward transformation of the profession from a high-level craft requiring the skills of the artisan, to a form of engineering requiring the skills of an industrial engineer (project manager) and human factors specialist. Note that this process has been impelled by commerce, the wildfire growth of the microcomputer/PC industry. Note also that I have never anywhere characterized the artisan writer as either neurotic (Sauer), nor even as "bad" (Haramundanis). Rather, I criticized the artisan writer for habits and attitudes inconsistent with the large-scale commercialization of computers—for the same reasons one might criticize the earliest cohort of programmers.

My arc then projects a downward path, after most of the thorny theoretical problems of documentation have been solved, so that the remaining work is less intellectually stimulating and satisfying—especially if performed by the earlier cadre of writers. Sauer and Haramundanis, however, offer contrary views based on their first hand experience. If these talented critics and keen observers think that my assessment is premature, that there are still many surprises and problems in designing the documentation suite for a new product, then there are at least two possible explanations:

- Either I am anticipating, responding prematurely to a change a few years before it happens. (That's possible; I take some pride in having predicted many of the important changes in our profession well before they occurred.)
- Or my critics are ignoring the best practices currently available and reinventing (over-engineering) their documentation projects, thereby pursuing technical refinement at the cost of business value.

What may be less apparent to most readers (except for Waite, who humbles me with his close reading of nearly all my articles and books) is that my essay has a somewhat confessional aspect as well. Modesty prevents me from taking as much of the credit for the first part of the arc as Waite assigns me. (Ms. Haramundanis also did more than her share with several major firms and in her influential publications.) But I do feel somewhat responsible for the second part: the routinizing and templatizing of the documentation process and the reduction of technical communicators to word-miners,

a process I observed as a consultant to DEC as early as the late 80s.

By helping my clients to achieve business quality in their documentation (that is, a quantity and type of documentation consistent with their business objectives and their competitive pressures)—rather than the esthetically elusive, Pirsig-type quality—I am afraid I supported a belief in good enough documentation, instead of excellent documentation. I don't regret this posture (especially since hardly anyone actually reads documentation anyway), but I do feel somewhat Philistine about it all. My position has always been that all documentation choices must be business-justified, and, therefore, given the world of available models to choose from, and given the "stability" of the industries in which most documentors work, I conclude that nearly all the problems of user documentation have been adequately (if not wonderfully) solved.

It follows, therefore, that the task of this generation's technical communicators should be, largely, the finding and implementing of best practices. (This is also an axiom of Knowledge Management.) In other words, there is less need for the rhetorical/ergonomic analysis that made documentation so challenging 15 years ago. (It also means that it's time to stop resuscitating legacy documents that do not correspond to the best practice models.)

Obviously, no particular communicator needs to feel pressured or "disrespected" by this observation. In a rich and diverse economy, just because a task is obsolete in theory does not mean that no one can earn a living performing it. Remember that most organizations producing documentation have not reached 1980, let alone the current phase. (I taught a seminar in Israel last summer to a group of "documentation specialists"; after asking them their favorite books on technical writing in general and user documentation in particular, I learned that no one in the twenty-person assemblage had ever ready any book on the subject!)

Finally, I did not mean to create the impression that the responses to this situation are all "lose-lose" (Waite). On the contrary, I think there is much interesting, stimulating, and even high-paying work still to be done. Like my friend Saul Carliner, I believe that technical communicators should lead the Knowledge Management initiative in most companies. This project—the logical successor to user support—in itself will provide the profession with another decade of real opportunities for communication research, innovative solutions, and intellectual advancement.