What if readers can't read?

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

By Tony Self

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? 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.

A study by Springer 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. 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 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 text books 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 e-mails.

The fundamental shift away from traditional forms of written communication (books and
documents) to new media (e-mail, social networking, collaboration spaces) is something that
we as technical communicators should be attuned to. 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:

"Grammar rules used to be an indication of social class and literacy in the past but today'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.

Since 2006, New Zealand high school students are permitted to use "text speak" in national exams. Their answers must clearly demonstrate the required level of understanding, but they can use a language that some older folk might find difficult to recognise as English! For the uninitiated, "txtspeak" is an abbreviated form of spelling which aims to use the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message. Hence, punctuation, grammar, and capitalisation 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". Let's read the last few words again: "as legitimate as an e-mail or an essay". Since when has e-mail been as "legitimate" as an essay?

It's no use arguing about it. That debate is done and dusted. 19 year olds about to enter the workforce see e-mails as legitimate: formal and authoritative. Authority of information is more likely to be conveyed by currency (its up-to-datedness) than it is by providence (who wrote it) or packaging (what form it is presented in).

An Australian National Report on Schooling found that 11% of year 7 students lacked basic reading skills, and 20% 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 neighbours have two daughters; Megan is 22, and Leonie is 15 (I have 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 will tend to use that 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 neighbours 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. 2,000 messages per month is 67 per day, or almost 3 per hour. One 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, he did not know how to read them. My daughter was shocked to realise 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 practised at sharing their knowledge instantly and virtually.

In summary, new readers (some of whom apparently can’t read or count!) are our audience "LCD" (lowest common denominator). 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 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, it seems. 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 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.

- China will soon become the number one English speaking country in the world.
- The US Department of Labour 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 US is 20th in the world rankings of Internet broadband penetration.
- One in eight couples married in the US 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 5000 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 under-developed countries, where children will learn to read without ever using paper.
- The percentage of university graduates from India with English language skills is 100%.

"Old readers" are changing too

It's not just the young folk 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% of people would not go back to a Web site that took more than four seconds to load. (A few years earlier it was 8 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".
We've read the manuals branding on a Gizmo company car

Are we losing the ability to read? Scott Karp, CEO of Publish2, Inc, thinks so. He wrote: "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 (ie, I'm seeking convenience) but because the way I think has changed?"

Karp is not alone. Dr Bruce Freidman, Professor of Pathology, 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 towards skimming information horizontally; 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 New™. 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 programmes), 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 the one of the oldest demographics is ABC Radio National™ (RN). This audience is dramatically changing its listening habits. The ABC, attuned to the changing preferences of its audience, started offering podcasts for RN programmes. 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 in its unexpectedness. 2.7 million downloads of Late Night Live? 494,000 downloads of the Philosopher's Zone? 706,000 downloads of the Book Show? 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**

Technical communication must adapt. If technical communicators are still producing hard copy manuals and stand-alone help systems using current methods in ten years time, the profession is doomed. To adapt, technical communication must:

- move to topic-based authoring
- embrace minimalism (15 words!)
- use Web 2.0 (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. 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 3 minute and 51 second video, Commoncraft explains wikis. This is the type of conceptual information that Hughes suggests is the primary
domain of technical communication. It would 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, 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 a way of technical communicators facilitating information, rather than creating 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, just as they see e-mail as being as legitimate as an essay.

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, 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'll make a start on an animated video...

Links

- Springer (http://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloaddocument/eBooks+-+the+End+User+Experience?SGWID=0-0-45-608298-0)
- Commoncraft (http://www.commoncraft.com)
Terrifying?

The *What if readers can't read* article was published in STC's *Intercom* magazine (February 2009), and later in the *Southern Communicator* (Issue 16). A reader, Deb Carlson, wrote that she found this article "at once inspiring and terrifying".

This article was a spin-off from Tony's keynote presentation at the TCANZ Forum in Auckland in late 2008. Tony will be reprising this presentation in person at the STC France Conference in Paris in March, at the WritersUA Conference in Seattle, and at the AODC Conference in Melbourne in May.

Terrify yourself by registering for one of these conferences!