Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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Mobile devices and documentation

Looking back at the past ten years, Jean-Paul Bardez explains how technology has changed our professional environment and practices.

New features

Mobile phones have brought some changes that were planned, while others came completely unexpectedly. Some of our daily habits have changed profoundly. And we have adopted new technological habits without even noticing or questioning them.

Mobile phones and tablets are terminals with input and output functions. In the field of documentation, some of these functions are not yet fully exploited. So, since mobile phones are Internet terminals, some of the new Internet features clearly deserve to be more widely used.

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The past decade has brought major changes in technology, most of which have influenced people's attitudes. Basically, we know about these changes, but we don't seem to acknowledge them as factors impacting the way we work. In that short space of ten years there have also been changes in our professional environment and practices. Many of those changes involve the world of the Internet, which dictates what is feasible with a smart phone (or a tablet connected to the Internet via WiFi). To sum up, the array of input/output functions of mobile terminals could well be used to improve the user's access to information.

Mobile phones, computers and written text

Not all households in developed countries have a home computer, but they often have several mobile phones and, in France, many children receive a mobile phone when they reach the age of 10. This is a new social reality that permeates the fabric of society.

Having a mobile phone, however, is not a sign of increased verbal communication -- on the contrary, they are increasingly mainly used to read and write. Our children and many adults are constantly exchanging text messages and surfing the net. This tendency had already been seen in the success of email messages over snail mail, which started the acceleration. Indeed a lot more text information circulates nowadays by email, and we are literally flooded by written information of all kinds. This is something that can be compared with the increase in printed paper that followed the introduction of word processing software, as opposed to what we believed would happen (that this would lead to a 'zero paper world'). Mobile phones confirm the supremacy of written text over talk... particularly small talk,

which should also be taken seriously, since many important discussions take place whilst sharing a hot drink during the break (for this reason, companies have started taking social networks seriously).

New found autonomy in finding information and other new skills

We have also changed our habits, without being really conscious of these changes a few years down the line. Yet some of these changes affect the way we interact in society. It is interesting to note that despite the current economic crisis, most people seem to be willing to spend several 10s of Euros per month for their mobile phones and Internet connection.

Not only do most people have one or several email addresses and a mobile phone, but they have also adopted many new habits. To find information, children, young people, adults and older people use the Internet rather than open a book.

We have new skills like sending emails, withdrawing money from an ATM, watching a DVD, comparing prices and buying things from any place on the planet using the Internet. Many people have a social network profile, know the principle of Wikipedia, have replied to Internet opinion polls and know how to calculate a route on Googlemaps or using a GPS.

This new found autonomy and these new habits generate new expectations in terms of the quality of user instructions delivered. We no longer have the time or patience to read through pages and pages of instructions to find what we are looking for.

Completely new professional tools

Ten years ago, long-established companies managed the transition from Microsoft Word or Interleaf to FrameMaker or XML, and some companies also chose to use a CMS (Content Management System). These changes consumed a lot of time, energy and money.

At the same time, documentation became shorter, and possibly modular (single sourcing), out of a concern for re-use and economy. With a much shorter product lifespan today, product documents are not necessarily re-usable, so this policy cannot always be implemented.

Numerous methods have been developed to make writing consistent. Companies have reduced the amount of paper they produce and PDFs, various help files on CDs (that replaced floppies), and now websites, have become the norm for storage.

User forums are now widely used for finding information, and on Adobe software, they can now be accessed using the F1 key, which has been traditionally used for online help. Training has also undergone profound changes with new tools, the idea of self-training, and the use of videos, for example. The new trend towards user forums confirms users as a source of reliable information; they are now officially partners in information design.

At an industrial level, Adobe bought out most of its competitors and has become the number one in its class. But we all know that technology proficiency or standards compliance is not the essence of our trade as technical communicators. As the advocates of the user, we have a specific expert viewpoint on what we are delivering. And this is not just about technology.

Our new electronic Swiss army knife

A mobile phone offers at least 30 uses, from phoning to Internet functions, waking up in the morning, typing a text, scanning QR codes, and even more interesting: recording voice memos or sounds, taking pictures and videos. These input/output functions are now freely available 24/7 as we nearly all have a mobile phone with us all the time (unless we run short of battery...).

Text, audio, pictures and video

With a phone, you can receive and send not only text, but also audio, pictures and videos. I designed a matrix to systematically explore which of these functions are being used. To keep it short, I will name only the functions that are not widely used yet in the field of user help or documentation.

In terms of output, now that vocal messages and videos can be read from a mobile phone, manufacturers and software developers could develop the use of these media even further in their approach to documentation.

In terms of input, users can use their phone to actively participate in user forums (with text), including the sending of sounds, pictures or videos.

QR-code reading is one of the applications that makes use of the possibility of taking pictures to find information on something. A more direct way of doing this would be to send a picture of the object you are interested in to an expert to obtain information on it. This requires image comparison software, which uses the same principle as music comparison software that is used to identify tunes and find their title. Some people have already started exploring the direction of augmented reality.

In a similar way to how forums work, if the server enabled it users could send vocal memos, pictures and videos of their experience of solving one issue.

There is also a possible interaction with videoconferencing. Generally, the place of users in documentation design is on the increase, and is poised to further expand.

Where we stand

Given that documents are not made to last any more, we can allocate more time to testing with users. This means that testing can be at last granted the central place it deserves in documentation design.

With the decrease in literacy, or at least in spelling, the language proficiency of technical communicators has become one of our central skills.

And as the variety of documents increases, our role as verbal communicators with the various information stakeholders – including of course users – grows, and places us increasingly in the position of scenario designers, communication experts and project managers. **C**

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Jean-Paul Bardez is a highly experienced writer and translator of user documentation with over twenty years of solid experience. As a freelance consultant he has assisted many clients in the software and telecommunications industry. As head of the documentation team for a Gemplus telecommunications business unit, he was involved in developing an applet platform for mobile phones before becoming webmaster for the corporate website.

He is the founding President of the French society **Conseil des Rédacteurs Techniques** and with fellow members is constantly looking to raise the standards of professional technical communication, with shared values of excellent user satisfaction and testing. He is also **TCeurope's** current President.

Today Jean-Paul offers his experience to any organisation looking to develop their own technical writers. He also teaches Technical writing at Clermont-Ferrand University, and provides translation services for a pool of international recurring clients.
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