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Should technical writers question the technical side of information?

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There is a marked tendency to assimilate the scientific with the technical, and to assume that anything that is organised in a structured manner is necessarily objective and neutral. But is everything the industrial world produces good and useful by nature? To deserve the adjective "technical", writers should ask questions, even when provided with "facts" and "figures" that seem to be the essence of what they should write about. This may, in the end, help to achieve better products..

Given the way the question is formulated, the obvious answer would appear to be "yes". However, this answer is in no way obvious for students of technical writing, employers, or principals.

Perhaps we have too great a tendency to think of our technological society both as a logical conclusion and as the only possible solution. A logical conclusion, because we think in terms of economic development, which we equate with progress and call logical. Few people would question the comfort procured by modern medicine. The only possible solution, because even though its failings as a humane system are blatant, technology has everywhere been placed on a pedestal.

I don't wish to reject technology - not for a moment - after all, it's my bread and butter. I would only like to point out that technical decisions are not neutral, and have consequences on everyday life. The technical writer is constantly faced with such choices and should be aware of them, even if it is not always possible, within the framework of the job, to take them fully into account.

Transport is a good example. The countries in the ex-Soviet Union chose public transport for the majority of people, while capitalist countries have opted for individual transport. This example is the clearest illustration of a technological decision. What I am trying to impress upon my students is that even if individual transport has been selected, it is still possible to make other choices related to energy: petrol or diesel engines, gas engines, electric cars, etc. These choices have direct consequences on the quality of the air we breathe.

Fine, you may say, but what has that got to do with washing machines, VCRs or software applications? Aren't they all fully neutral products?

To answer this second question, think about how they are designed. Objects are a response to a demand expressed in a set of Specifications either written down or in the head of the designer. Of course, these specifications may not correspond to requirements or may have left out certain important aspects: we are not infallible. However, when technical writers appear on the scene, that is to say, much later, often when the product is almost finished, they are greeted with the following:

We have a product requiring documentation (that's a good start), it is almost finished (for software applications, this is bad news), here is the technical data, there won't be any problems, it won't take long (this ending always puts me on my guard...).

Our work then consists of asking questions to find out more about the product and the functions to be documented. At this stage, technical questions uncover power struggles within a company (users will no longer have access to a particular function with the new software application) and failings in product development (you cannot purge the database, you have to dismantle the engine to change the spark plugs, etc.). In the work of classifying and logically reorganising the functions to suit the end-user, the technical writer frequently discovers that certain things can or cannot be done and that the consequences of this can have varying degrees of severity.

The writer has to use this technical data which happens to be wrong. The project then turns out to last much longer than expected, especially in IT. If the writer is given the chance to participate right from the beginning of development, this may save the company from having to re-design the product in the final phases of development. Better late than never! The company must decide whether or not certain aspects of the product can be called into question or not.

In conclusion, far from relying on technical data, the role of the writer is to be wary of it, and check it whenever possible, to avoid documenting a product that does not actually work the way you describe. This is only possible if the writer is free to ask questions, get hands-on knowledge of the product and has the opportunity to talk to at least one ordinary user.

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