TECHWR-L: A History and Case Study of a Profession-specific LISTSERV List

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SUMMARY

Until Spring 1993, technical communicators had few Internet resources of their own. They could find common ground in forums oriented toward specific word processing programs and other tools of the trade, but they had no place to discuss profession-specific, rather than tool-specific, issues.

TECHWR-L was founded that spring, and the growth, development, and response to the list has been remarkable. Most significant, however, is the effect that TECHWR-L has had on individual technical communicators worldwide. It demonstrates that the Internet can and should be used to provide more focused and comprehensive resources to technical communicators in the future.

This case study outlines the growth and development of TECHWR-L, discusses some of the more controversial aspects of the list, and outlines how TECHWR-L or other focused forum could prove an even more valuable resource for the profession.

THE NEED FOR A DISCUSSION FORUM

In early 1993, I worked as the only technical communicator in Oklahoma State University’s Computing and Information Services division. Although the administration provided very good support in terms of trips to conferences and other forms of professional development, I felt I needed more day-to-day interaction with my peers. I was struggling with the typical problems of being my own editor, my own technical support, and often my only critic. I knew that I needed feedback and advice, but I could not get substantive criticism within the organization.

My previous 9 months or so on the Internet had shown me that LISTSERV lists and newsgroups could be remarkably valuable. After searching the Internet without success for a specifically technical communication-related list, I checked with the Society for Technical Communication’s office staff and discovered the bulletin board. Unfortunately, the long distance calls required to use the bulletin board were not a feasible long-term option for me. I also inquired about the possibility of accessing the bulletin board through the Internet, but the
resources were not available at the office at that time.

**Creating TECHWR-L**

I decided to see what I could do on my own. Oklahoma State, my employer, had the technical resources to host a list—at that time a LISTSERV list required an IBM mainframe running CMS, a BITNET connection, and the LISTSERV software—but the time and resource issues were an open question.

After I explained what I wanted to do, the system administrators agreed to create a list for technical communication discussions. They warned me that they didn’t think it would ever amount to anything, but consented to set it up anyway. The only condition they placed on creating the list was that I would have to take care of all the technical issues associated with it.

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At about the same time, I’d exchanged e-mail with a couple of technical communicators I’d “met” on the Internet to gauge their interest in a technical communication list. Their responses were guardedly positive. One, from the Silicon Valley, noted that the misc.writing newsgroup included some technical communication discussion and suggested that there probably wasn’t a market for much more on the Internet. Another, from the Dallas area, thought it sounded good, but questioned how many messages there would be. I wasn’t interested in a contest to generate the highest traffic list on the Internet; rather, I wanted a place to talk shop with other technical writers. So I decided to go ahead and form the list.

Late one afternoon, I got an e-mail message announcing that the list was ready, the documentation was online, and the ball was in my court. I spent a few hours reading up on the how-to’s of LISTSERV lists, named the list, sent out a “new list” announcement, and posted notes about the list to related forums. With that, TECHWR-L began.

**How TECHWR-L Grew**

TECHWR-L grew rapidly, with occasional pains, from the beginning. About 90 people subscribed to TECHWR-L in the first couple of days after I announced it, even before any messages had been posted. The first real messages were posted on March 9, 1993. It’s indicative of the course of TECHWR-L that messages “very strongly” suggesting changes in the list format started the same day. Although the list has changed and developed over time, the changes have never kept up with the almost-daily, usually conflicting, requests for change.

The growth was fast and steady, with one big jump. Binion Amerson, general manager of the STC 40th Annual Conference, had been using the list extensively to promote the conference, and suggested that I write an article about the list and submit it to *Intercom*. I did so, and the article was published in April 1993.

Unfortunately, a couple of typos crept into the article, in the worst possible places. The description of the list was accurate and interesting, but the address to which to subscribe was incorrect, as was the address for posting messages. The only correct address was my e-mail address, which was promptly inundated with notes asking what the problem was. I spent the next 4 weeks telling about 10 people per day how to subscribe to the list.

Eventually, the commotion died down—and TECHWR-L grew to about 400 subscribers. By August 1993, the traffic was up to an average of 10 messages per day with peaks of up to 25. In January 1994, there were 600 subscribers. The growth continued steadily up to the current total (at press time) of approximately 2,300 subscribers and an average of 40 messages per day. An additional unknown number of technical communicators read the list through the newsgroup bit.listserv.techwr-l.

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This growth, far beyond my expectations and even farther beyond the expectations of the Oklahoma State University system administrators, caused a number of technical difficulties for the list.

The amount of traffic through the Oklahoma State host computer has caused, at times, a significant disruption in normal business activities. Some days there were delays of up to several hours to send an
e-mail message because the LISTSERV computer was so busy sending TECHWR-L mail, often more than 1 million individual messages every 2 weeks.

The January 1996 move to running the LISTSERV list on a Windows NT server eliminated most of the technical constraints involved in keeping TECHWR-L operating. The list no longer presented an impediment to campus business, and messages posted to the list appeared in a more timely fashion than previously. Of course, the remaining issues, primarily interpersonal ones, are the most significant anyway.

**WHAT'S RIGHT WITH TECHWR-L**

All things considered, TECHWR-L is a remarkable success based on any measure of traffic, people affected, or information provided. However, TECHWR-L is in an interesting position of trying to be all things to all technical communicators at the same time that it tries to be a valuable and focused resource for the profession of technical communication. TECHWR-L has, on a few occasions, lived up to its potential. Several members have written me to announce that the list has changed their lives by providing a sanity check, references and credibility for their position at work, or even the support and nurturing necessary over the course of 2 years to change professions and become a technical communicator.

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TECHWR-L has certainly fostered a close-knit community online. The community is capable of very effectively nurturing—or ostracizing—members. Although TECHWR-L’s purpose is declared to be anything related to technical communication—my own thoughtlessly vague phrase—the list often digresses into brief tangential episodes on “how do I configure my e-mail package to...” or the like. These conflicting needs of many subscribers in conjunction with the intensity of feeling on many of the topics covered lead to interesting emotional exhibitions.

When reading and posting to TECHWR-L, even people new to the Internet and online services seem comfortable. Just as many people put on a good show in the office only to vent their frustrations at home in a safe environment, it seems that many people also relax their guard on TECHWR-L. Of course, this relaxation also brings the tendency to casually throw out questions to a receptive audience, without too much regard for the appropriateness of the query. Although it frustrates many readers to have to wade through irrelevant topics, many other readers find it hard to be critical of people who fully use any information source. Perhaps, as people who spend their professional lives searching for information, we technical writers are conditioned to take advantage of any information proffered.

Particularly in this respect, TECHWR-L is unusual. Many popular lists focus on a specific topic—for example, Windows, UNIX, PageMaker, or rock-climbing. TECHWR-L ends up sprawling across myriad topics because almost anything can appear without raising too many red flags. As such, TECHWR-L is a victim of its own success. At any rate, the list provides information (of varying quality) on any topic under the sun.

That said, I sometimes fear that off-topic postings will be the death of TECHWR-L. While many list members are becoming conditioned to deleting the chaff, many other potentially valuable contributors are frustrated or completely turned-off because of the lack of focus. For that reason, I try, as far as time and energy permit, to focus the list strictly on technical communication. Whereas it may be frustrating to have to seek out and use other forums for questions that others on TECHWR-L could easily answer, there are other forums for the other questions. For example, questions about adjusting the configuration in an e-mail program or in Windows 95 should really be directed to other discussion forums, even though many people on TECHWR-L can and will provide answers. For better or worse, technical communication questions have no other home on the Internet.

**WHAT'S WRONG WITH TECHWR-L**

TECHWR-L’s growth has by no means been smooth. I don’t have the statistics to prove it, but I
suspect that as many people have tried TECHWR-L and given up on it as are subscribed to it today. By no means is it an ideal or even a particularly good method of communication among technical communicators. It does, obviously, meet many needs, but it offers many subscribers as much frustration as benefit on most days. Some of the most significant characteristics of an unmoderated list such as TECHWR-L, particularly the ability to spontaneously post messages, are also key aspects that limit both the depth and usability.

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"Unmoderated" means that everything sent to the list address appears on the list automatically, without screening, editing, or approval from anyone. This system provides spontaneity and immediate gratification: postings appear as quickly as the intervening computers allow. However, the freedom is often offset by irrelevant or inappropriate postings.

Many inappropriate threads (ongoing discussion topics) start as postings about tangentially related topics that veer into left-field. A part of the blame for that problem rests with me: I know what’s appropriate when I see it, but I apparently can’t articulate it very well. As listowner, I suggest appropriate topics periodically, but the nature of our profession makes it impossible to comprehensively list everything that "fits" on TECHWR-L.

The issue of how to provide a pure or focused resource to TECHWR-L members continues to be a problem. One extreme is completely open posting to the list with replies to messages also going to the list. That is where TECHWR-L started. The other extreme is a moderated list, in which all postings would be submitted to a moderator who would then forward the appropriate postings to the list. This approach, while effective in preventing off-topic discussions, comes at the price of limiting spontaneity and potentially quashing useful and relevant digressions.

A possible alternative used by some groups is to have two parallel lists, one open and unmoderated and the other tightly focused on topic. All substantive postings from the first would be forwarded to the second list. Unfortunately, this choice, as with other possible solutions to the problem, comes at the cost of a great deal of administrative time.

This dual list solution would answer some of the issues raised by what I call the drivel factor, particularly the "I’m too busy to go to the library" messages. People who have spent a few consecutive months on the list have found topics that recur almost like clockwork. Many of these issues could be easily resolved through a trip to the library or use of a dictionary rather than posting a question to 2,300 other technical writers.

**The future of TECHWR-L**

After trying many different approaches to focusing the list, I’ve resorted to posting a periodic note, plea, or explanation of why the list needs to focus on technical communication. Just as it was the only technical communication resource on the Internet when it was founded, it continues to be the only technical communication discussion group with general applicability to many technical communication professionals.

At this point, TECHWR-L has grown far past the point where anyone can direct or control it. I often feel that the potential of TECHWR-L tends to be limited by the superficiality of many discussions. For example, judging from the amount of list traffic, determining definitively whether on-line or online is "correct" carries far greater weight than determining how to present information online effectively. Likewise, comparing different opinions (expressed as inviolate fact) on obscure grammatical points is far more popular than determining how to reach a consensus within a workgroup on the same topic.

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I am slowly realizing that there is a real need for a forum in which to discuss the full spectrum of issues...
that concern technical communicators, whether it be comma usage or questions about time management issues. I realize that it is much easier to dash off a quick note about the importance of semi-colons in technical communication than it is to think through and cogently respond to queries about meatier issues. I personally would prefer that the list focus on more abstract technical communication discussion, but that reflects my personality and job more than any superiority of one topic over the other. The more concrete issues of grammar and style certainly also have their own role for technical communicators. On the other hand, it would be nice to be able to separate the issues of grammar and style from those of technical communication in a more abstract sense.

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I often feel that we’re missing the point and potential of this medium. Granted, one of the obvious advantages of TECHWR-L is as a resource or sounding board for technical communicators—the virtual office coffee pot. I probably underestimate the value of having a forum in which we can vent our spleens about day-to-day frustrations in our jobs. By the same token, it seems a shame to gather 2,300 technical communicators into the same room to discuss commas. If we’re going to get together, let’s solve the problems of our profession or at least move in that direction. The potential of sharing ideas about real issues and collecting a variety of perspectives on pressing questions from interested and vocal technical communicators is a wonderful but undervalued possibility of the list.

It seems that the next step for TECHWR-L or another forum would be to focus closely on specific topics, perhaps in rotation, and to attempt to use the list’s intellectual resources to develop information for technical communicators. By capitalizing on the experiences and training of such a relatively large portion of our profession, we have the opportunity to break new ground and develop our knowledge and our profession in ways we cannot even imagine today.

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Acknowledgments

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