Recent & Relevant
Sherry Southard, Editor

The following articles on technical communication have appeared recently in other journals. The abstracts are prepared by volunteer journal monitors. If you would like to contribute, contact Sherry Southard at southards@ecu.edu.

“Recent and Relevant” does not supply copies of cited articles. However, most publishers supply reprints, tear sheets, or copies at nominal cost. Lists of publishers’ addresses, covering nearly all the articles we have cited, appear in Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory.

Thanks to J. A. Dawson, who helped me assemble the manuscript for “Recent & Relevant.”

Collaboration

Content collaboration at Citrix: Strategic insights

To improve information sharing among the education, documentation, customer support, and other teams at Citrix, the company has created collaborative groups or “content councils” for each product released, with each council’s activities facilitated by a content architect. The councils’ goals are “to ensure content sharing and reuse and effective content delivery for a release.” Regular council meetings may involve subject matter experts, content developers, and product managers, and the meetings “provide the council with a clear vision of the [product] release.” For similar collaborative efforts to succeed, the article recommends that groups begin with clearly stated objectives, “innovate using existing tools and processes” to keep interactions simple, stay focused on audience needs, and meet regularly.

Lyn Gattis

Enhancing effectiveness on virtual teams: Understanding why traditional team skills are insufficient

“Virtual team interactions are almost always assisted by some form of computer-mediated communication technology. Computer-mediated communication is different in many ways from traditional face-to-face communication, perhaps most significantly because the communication is usually asynchronous instead of synchronous. Temporal independence of communication changes the patterns of work, decision making, and understandings about the work and the relationships between the individuals involved in the work. As a consequence, managing virtual teams is different and more complex than managing face-to-face teams, yet virtual teams are still groups of individuals that share most of the characteristics and dynamics found on traditional teams. The effective management of virtual teams requires knowledge and understanding of the fundamental principles of team dynamics regardless of the time, space, and communication differences between virtual and face-to-face work environments.”

J. A. Dawson

Politeness, time constraints, and collaboration in decision-making meetings: A case study

“Relatively little is known about the politeness strategies used by technical communicators and designers in group settings, particularly in the decision making, collaborative meetings of a real-world, naturally occurring group. This study explores the degree to which members of a well-established group linguistically express concern for their fellow collaborators and how that concern may be affected by the type and imminence of their deadlines.”

J. A. Dawson
**Communication**

**Ghosting authenticity: Characterization in corporate speechwriting**


“One of the most distinctive stylistic virtues of speechwriting is characterization, the art of capturing a client’s voice in a believable and engaging manner. This article examines characterization in the context of corporate communication, interweaving an interview with veteran executive speechwriter Alan Perlman with accounts from the ancient rhetorical tradition. As the analysis shows, Perlman’s approach to characterization confirms long-standing rhetorical wisdom yet incorporates insights that reflect the contemporary corporate context in which he has worked. The analysis also calls attention to enduring tensions in characterization—tensions between imitation and representation, effectiveness and ethics, and dramatic character and trustworthy ethos.”

J. A. Dawson

**The impact of the physical environment on supervisory communication skills transfer**


“This ethnographic study extends the findings of earlier research that examined the impact of workplace design features on newly acquired communication skills back on the job. The qualitative nature of this earlier study, however, limited quantitative measurement of the design features and learned skills. The present study examined supervisor perceptions about the relative importance of organizational factors affecting transfer, measured relationships between learned skills and workplace design features, and prioritized the importance of the design features to support learned communication skills. Participants in this case study held nonacademic supervisory positions at a major land-grant university. The supervisors had attended a communication skills training workshop and had been applying their learned skills for about 6 months. The findings indicate that workplace design appears to play a vital role in facilitating as well as impeding communication skills transfer in face-to-face interaction with employees. As a case study, organizations should not infer that these findings apply to all work settings as it may depend on the relevancy to the particular work situation and circumstances.”

J. A. Dawson

**Mindful learning in crisis management**


“All crises emit warning signals. And yet, organizations do not typically see the warnings in time to learn and adapt to prevent a crisis. This conceptual analysis bridges a theoretical gap by connecting current crisis management literature to rhetorical theories that identify barriers to organizational learning. Two connecting models are introduced to outline the barriers to learning, propose the inclusion of learning throughout the crisis cycle, and encourage the adoption of a mindful culture. Previous crisis models are described and an explanation of the similarities between Burkean philosophy and crisis research is presented. The Mindful Learning Model demonstrates how, if barriers are overcome, learning can not only lessen the impact of a crisis but also potentially prevent a crisis from occurring. Contentions of this analysis are detailed and a research agenda to extend mindful learning is outlined.”

J. A. Dawson

**Using communication theory to analyze corporate reporting strategies**


“Regulatory reforms in the United States, such as Sarbanes-Oxley and Regulation Fair Disclosure, emphasize the significance of timely and transparent corporate reporting. Analysis of corporate financial disclosures using communication theory can provide useful information to stakeholders. Communication is a goal-directed activity that involves a purpose, and one of the central goals of communication for the corporation is to maintain a positive image. Benoit’s
theory of image restoration says that management presents the messages (responses) that are instrumental in obtaining the firm’s goals. This article’s objectives are to summarize Benoit’s image restoration typology and to propose its potential use in analyzing management’s communication strategies in financial reporting. The authors provide examples from corporate U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and annual reports of computer companies to illustrate the use of various communication strategies based on Benoit’s typology.”

J. A. Dawson

Design

Fortune 500 homepages: Design trends

“This study is a comprehensive census of the homepage design practices of Fortune 500 companies, analyzing 46 elements of homepage design. The analysis establishes recent design trends of Fortune 500 homepages. In addition, it provides a snapshot of recent homepage design practices of the Fortune 500 that can be used for comparison with other populations and for future research and longitudinal studies of web design.”

Jenny West

Education

Argumentation across the curriculum

This article does not focus on technical communication, but addresses disciplines of students who complete foundational technical communication courses. “This study explores how different kinds of arguments are situated in academic contexts and provides an analysis of undergraduate writing assignments. Assignments were collected from the schools of business, education, engineering, fine arts, and interdisciplinary studies as well as the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences in the College of Arts and Science. A total of 265 undergraduate writing assignments from 71 courses were analyzed. Assignments were reliably categorized into these major categories of argumentative writing: explicitly thesis-driven assignments, text analysis, empirical arguments, decision-based arguments, proposals, short answer arguments, and compound arguments. A majority of writing assignments (59%) required argumentation. All engineering writing assignments required argumentation, as did 90% in fine arts, 80% of interdisciplinary assignments, 72% of social science assignments, 60% of education assignments, 53% in natural science, 47% in the humanities, and 46% in business. Argumentation is valued across the curriculum, yet different academic contexts require different forms of argumentation.”

J. A. Dawson

Connecting with the “other” in technical communication: World Englishes and ethos transformation of U.S. native English-speaking students

“This article reports my classroom-based qualitative research, conducted at a midwestern university, on the role of World Englishes in the ethos transformation of U.S. native English-speaking students. The 30 participants completed assignments that enhanced their understanding of how the English language affects discursive tasks in international audience adaptation. Efforts at internationalizing technical communication can benefit immensely from the inclusion of the World Englishes paradigm in training programs to account for students’ language attitudes.”

Sherry Southard
**Credibility judgment and verification behavior of college students concerning Wikipedia**


“This study examines credibility judgments in relation to peripheral cues and genre of Wikipedia articles, and attempts to understand user information verification behavior based on the theory of bounded rationality. Data were collected employing both an experiment and a survey at a large public university in the midwestern United States in Spring 2010. This study shows some interesting patterns. It appears that the effect of peripheral cues on credibility judgments differed according to genre. Those who did not verify information displayed a higher level of satisficing than those who did. Students used a variety of peripheral cues of Wikipedia. The exploratory data show that peer endorsement may be more important than formal authorities for user generated information sources, such as Wikipedia, which calls for further research.”

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**FYI: TMI: Toward a holistic social theory of information overload**


“Research into information overload has been extensive and cross-disciplinary, producing a multitude of suggested causes and posed solutions. I argue that many of the conclusions arrived at by existing research, while laudable in their inventiveness and/or practicality, miss the mark by viewing information overload as a problem that can be understood (or even solved) by purely rational means. Such a perspective lacks a critical understanding in human information usage: much in the same way that economic models dependent on rationality for their explanations or projections fail (often spectacularly, as recent history attests), models that rely too heavily upon the same rational behavior, and not heavily enough upon the interplay of actual social dynamics—power, reputation, norms, and others—in their attempts to explain, project, or address information overload prove bankrupt as well. Furthermore, even research that displays greater awareness of the social context in which overload exists often reveals a similar rationality in its conceptualization. That is, often the same ‘social’ approaches that offer potential advantages (in mitigating information overload) over their ‘non-social’ counterparts paradoxically raise new problems, requiring a reappraisal of overload that takes social issues into account holistically.”

Sherry Southard

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**Globalizing writing studies: The case of U.S. technical communication textbooks**


“In an increasingly globalized world, writing courses, situated as they are in local institutional and rhetorical contexts, need to prepare writers for global writing situations. Taking introductory technical communication in the United States as a case study, this article describes how and to what extent global perspectives are incorporated into writing. Based on an analysis of eight textbooks and a closer analysis of four of them, we illustrate the representation of technical communication and communicators as well as multiculturalism and multilingualism in these textbooks and point out the limitations vis-à-vis the cultural and linguistic complexity of global technical communication in today’s world. We conclude by considering implications for U.S. college composition as it continues to contribute to the international discourse of writing studies.”

Sherry Southard

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**“I really don’t know what he meant by that”: How well do engineering students understand teachers’ comments on their writing?**


“Text-based interviews that compared the teacher’s intention for a given comment on an engineering student’s paper with the student’s understanding of the comment were used to examine the extent to which students understand the comments they receive and...”

Sherry Southard
to determine the characteristics of comments that are well understood and those that are not. The teachers’ comments analyzed in this study were fully understood only about half the time. Inclusion of a reason or explicit instructions helped students understand the comments.”

J. A. Dawson

The media and the literacies: Media literacy, information literacy, digital literacy

“With the advent of digital technologies, awareness of media is acquiring crucial importance. Media literacy, information literacy and digital literacy are the three most prevailing concepts that focus on a critical approach towards media messages. This article gives an overview of the nature of these literacies, which show both similarities to and differences from each other. The various contexts of their functioning are outlined and additional literacies are mentioned. Special attention is given to the question of the blurring line between media consumers and producers …. There is no single literacy that is appropriate for all people or for one person over all their lifetime and that would not require a constant updating of concepts and competences in accordance with the changing circumstances of the information environment (Bawden, 2008). Media literacy is important for all citizens who intentionally, or without knowing it, consume media, the presence of which has become wider and more diverse with the new digital technologies and the growing participation of laypersons. Media literacy thus has to find its role both in primary, secondary and higher education either on its own, or presumably—with more likelihood—as part of some kind of multiple or multimodal literacy.”

Sherry Southard

Optimizing millennials’ communication styles

“Millennials, those individuals born between 1980 and 2000, compose the largest cohort of college students in the United States. Stereotypical views of millennials characterize them as technologically sophisticated multitaskers, capable of significant contributions to tomorrow’s organizations, yet deficient in communication skills. This article offers insights for business educators to help millennials understand the influence of communication styles when optimizing communication effectiveness. Developing style-typing and style-flexing skills can serve as building blocks for millennials’ subsequent interpersonal skill development in key areas such as audience analysis, active listening, conflict management and negotiation, and effective team building. An in-class exercise highlighting communication style-typing and style-flexing is included.”

J. A. Dawson

The role of online learning in the merit and promotion process: Is credit necessary or applied?

“Traditionally, universities have awarded promotion/tenure based on subjective criteria developed by the granting institution and disregarded credit for creating and teaching an online course. Current standards for promotion/tenure at Texas public universities and the role that an online course should play in tenure/promotion process are explored. Texas was selected to represent national standards in the promotion and tenure process.”

Sherry Southard

Teaching job interviewing skills with the help of television shows

“Because of its potential for humor and drama, job interviewing is frequently portrayed on television. This article discusses how scenes from popular television series such as Everybody Loves Raymond, Friends, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show can be used to teach effective job interview skills in business communication.
courses. Television episodes may be used to examine in detail topics commonly covered in textbook discussions of job interviewing, such as attire, behavior, and interview questions; they may also be used to explore topics not typically addressed, such as gender issues and involvement of family members. The use of appropriate television scenes can enhance the job interviewing unit by attracting the students’ attention and generating productive class discussion. The article also provides an overview of the relevant U.S. legality issues.”

J. A. Dawson

Teaching the IMRaD genre: Sentence combining and pattern practice revisited

“The authors describe two pedagogical strategies—rhetorical sentence combining and rhetorical pattern practice—that blend once-popular teaching techniques with rhetorical decision making. A literature review identified studies that associated linguistic and rhetorical knowledge with success in engineering writing; this information was used to create exercises teaching technical communication students to write Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion (IMRaD) reports. Two pilot studies report promising results: Preliminary findings suggest that students who were taught this method wrote essays that were perceived as significantly higher in quality than those written by students in a control section. At the same time, however, the pilot studies point to some challenges and shortcomings of exercise-oriented pedagogies.”

J. A. Dawson

Using key messages to explore rhetoric in professional writing

“This article introduces an assignment that uses key messages to introduce students to the different ways that rhetoric is used in professional writing. In particular, this article discusses how analyzing and writing reports about organizational web sites can help students perceive the rhetorical nature of professional communication, gain familiarity with several professional writing genres and writing conventions, become more critical readers, and recognize the relationship between an initial study and a report that communicates the findings from that study.”

J. A. Dawson

Unsettling assumptions and boundaries: Strategies for developing a critical perspective about business and management communication

“This article describes how a collaborative class strategy and an introductory activity were used to develop students’ thinking about business and management communication. The article focuses on teachers who want to integrate critical perspectives about business communication into their classes. A course ethos, learning groups, and an introductory activity were used to develop students’ thinking about business and management communication. These strategies encouraged collaborative peer learning in a large bicultural/multicultural lecture environment and developed learning relationships typically found in a small class context. In addition, the activities produced ongoing lecture learning groups in which business students could question their ‘trained incapacities,’ boundaries, and assumptions gained from their experiences of communicating and managing relationships during these activities.”

J. A. Dawson

Visuospatial thinking in the professional writing classroom

“It has been suggested that teaching professional writing students how to think visually can improve their ability to design visual texts. This article extends this suggestion and explores how the ability to think visuospatially influenced students’ success at designing visual texts in a small upper division class on visual communication.
Although all the students received the same instruction, students who demonstrated higher spatial faculties were more successful at developing and designing visual materials than were the other students in the class. This result suggests that the ability to think visuospatially is advantageous for learning how to communicate visually and that teaching students to think visuospatially should be a primary instructional focus to maximize all student learning.

J. A. Dawson

**When words fail us: Using visual composites in research reporting**


“This article describes a use of visual imagery in research reporting that helps to emphasize the human and social dimensions of research issues and encourage different ways of thinking about the findings and implications. During the literature review, in order to establish the authors’ longitudinal research into adult literacy, they observed that research participants’ own perspectives and rich life-worlds were usually invisible in final reports and articles, submerged under layers of governmental or scholarly discourse. An irony was that, while literacy theory was moving towards acknowledging multiliteracies, reporting of literacy research remained heavily mono-modal. The authors of this research wanted to differ from this trend by giving people who were affected by adult literacy policy a vivid presence within their reports. They were intrigued by the use of visual means to foreground interviewees’ own words both as a way to register their importance to readers and to try to signal the multi-modal nature of literacy. They depicted their interviewees’ words as language spoken by imagined individuals typical of the interviewees, grounded within photographs of their research site. In this article, the authors describe their intentions and methods in making their reports visual and artistic composites rather than more traditional densely worded policy reports; they deconstruct some of the key images contained in their report in order to critique their efficacy in achieving their aims.”

Sherry Southard

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**Information Management**

**Implementing the Big 3: A project management view on lessons learned on implementing an XML/DITA/CCMS publishing environment**


“Adopting a new document format, a new set of standards, and new database model for both development and delivery of content affects just about everything in a technical publications group…. It’s an overhaul of process, tools, skill sets, mind sets, scheduling, workflows, [and] ownership.” This article reviews the successes and lessons learned from the implementation of “a DITA-compliant, integrated component content management system (CCMS).” The article describes the sequence of implementation, including setting expectations at the start, building a strong project team, establishing efficient communication methods, researching the product, and planning carefully for reorganizing content, testing, and training. Recommended lead time before going live: 18 to 24 months.

Lyn Gattis

**Industry trend: Quality at the source**


“Today, companies must reach global markets faster if they want to remain competitive. To reach those markets most effectively, corporate content such as web sites, product information, and sales materials must be translated into their customers’ native language. However, translation and localization are often roadblocks to successfully releasing products into international markets quickly …. [This article addresses] strategies for dealing with the biggest challenges with localization—cost, time, and quality … [It also explains how companies can] create an Information Quality strategy to decrease the cost of translation … [and] achieve their strategic objectives of reaching global markets faster.”

Lyn Gattis
Reusing your DITA solution (or how to get money to buy one)

Although a Component Content Management System (CCMS) is essential to using DITA effectively, a CCMS is a large investment. Management may be more willing to budget for a CCMS if the organization can expand its use of DITA from documentation to other divisions within the enterprise. This article suggests identifying new areas in which “adding structure to documents can improve business efficiency,” such as engineering, product support, and sales and marketing teams. Further, the article recommends ways to present DITA to these new groups: “[I]ntroduce DITA with a familiar interface and jargon, stick with a strict and relevant structure, and use the right authoring tool for non-technical authors....” By presenting evidence that shared content benefits the organization overall, documentation groups can build a more convincing business case for the resources to support DITA appropriately.

Lyn Gattis

Successful localization in DITA

“Using the DITA standard can bring enormous improvements in the efficiency of localizing documentation. Some organizations report efficiency gains of 30 to 50 percent over traditional desktop publishing systems and use the savings to expand further into global markets. While these numbers are compelling, localized DITA implementation is still a mystery to many potential adopters. The big picture of how it all works is not obvious, and the details affecting the quality and/or cost of localization are numerous. This article addresses the questions of ‘how does it work?’, ‘what do I need to plan for?’ and ‘what are the gotchas?’ Although DITA implementation strategies vary, and it is always necessary to adapt and test a localization system, this article can provide a starting point for adaptation and a framework for testing.”

Lyn Gattis

A study of the role of culture and communication in the CMS adoption process

“Information development groups are increasingly adopting component content management (CCM) technologies to efficiently author and manage content objects. Successful adoption of these technologies, however, requires a continuous exchange of knowledge, skills, and processes across vendor and information development group boundaries. Having an overly simplistic view of technology diffusion and insufficient training and resources, many groups struggle to achieve their CCM adoption goals.... [This article describes] some of the planning and learning challenges that one group faced when attempting to evaluate and adopt a CCM system, highlighting the role of culture and communication in that process.... [The article ends] with specific recommendations for information developers and vendors.”

Lyn Gattis
Culture, communication, and ICT for development: A Caribbean study

“Development projects in information and communication technologies may fail if local users perceive them as incompatible with existing work practices or cultural values. The present study examines cultural communication in the design of a prototype information-management system for the social service department of a developing Caribbean nation. The requirements-engineering process required communication within a culturally heterogeneous group of local and outside stakeholders. A capacity-building writing workshop sought to integrate the database into workplace practices. The experience highlights professional communication’s role in mediating cultural difference and facilitating stakeholders’ self-determination in the improvement of their work practices.”

Jenny West

Integrating intercultural communication into an engineering communication service class tutorial

“Engineering programs in the US made notable efforts to develop students’ intercultural competence, but they tended to overlook the teaching of intercultural communication. Technical communication teachers can fill this gap by addressing intercultural issues in the service class. This proposal faces challenges: the lack of class time, teacher training, textbooks, and teaching methods. To address these challenges, this tutorial uses various materials and genre-based instruction to integrate intercultural communication into the service class. This approach helps to raise students’ intercultural awareness and sensitivity as they learn engineering communication genres. This tutorial may be used in service classes for other majors.”

Jenny West

There’s no place like home: UK-based financial analysts’ response to Dutch-English and British-English annual report texts

“The introduction of international financial reporting regulations has caused European multinationals to be increasingly reliant on the nonfinancial multimodal sections of the annual report as a means of informing and persuading international stakeholders. Due to the growing status of English as an international financial communication language, moreover, these annual report sections are usually produced in English. This experimental study compares the effectiveness of texts and photos in Dutch-English and British-English management statements from the perspective of financial analysts in the UK. The research results largely confirm the similarity-attraction hypothesis: Among UK-based analysts, typically British communication features often yield a more positive effect than the features that are typical of the Dutch-based statements.”

Jenny West

Management

An empirical investigation of the impact of individual and work characteristics on telecommuting success

“Individual and work characteristics are used in telecommuting plans; however, their impact on telecommuting success is not well known. We studied how employee tenure, work experience, communication skills, task interdependence, work output measurability, and task variety impact telecommuter productivity, performance, and satisfaction after taking into account the impact of communication technologies. Data collected from 89 North American telecommuters suggest that in addition to the richness of the media, work experience, communication skills, and task
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interdependence impact telecommuting success. These characteristics are practically identifiable and measurable; therefore, we expect our findings to help managers convert increasing telecommuting adoption rates to well-defined and measurable gains.”

Jenny West

The illusive, writing productivity metric: Making unit cost a competitive advantage


“Cost per topic” is a “fair, valid, reliable, and easy” metric for departmental writing productivity, “when calculated properly.” This article recommends that managers measure by topics instead of pages because a topic count gives writers incentive to produce more topics and eliminate unnecessary words. A topic count also “encourages reuse… [and] process improvement and tool development.” The article advises managers to include a trend line in graphical displays of topic counts and costs to statistically normalize data and present an actual picture of productivity over time. “By showing only the department average, individuals will feel protected from personal scrutiny, but will acknowledge that they have a personal stake in the measure.” The article states that the cost per topic method is consistently “beneficial in showing how productive the writing team really is.”

Lyn Gattis

Research

Emerging methodologies in engineering education research


Although this article focuses on engineering education research, the content is suited for anyone designing research projects. “Methodology refers to the theoretical arguments that researchers use in order to justify their research methods and design. There is an extensive range of well established methodologies in the educational research literature of which a growing subset is beginning to be used in engineering education research …. A more explicit engagement with methodologies, particularly those that are only emerging in engineering education research, is important so that engineering education researchers can broaden the set of research questions they are able to address …. Seven methodologies are outlined and for each an exemplar paper is analyzed in order to demonstrate the methodology in operation and to highlight its particular contribution. The methodologies are: Case Study, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Action Research, Phenomenography, Discourse Analysis, and Narrative Analysis. It is noted that many of the exemplar papers use some of these methodologies in combination …. Seven methodologies are outlined and for each an exemplar paper is analyzed in order to demonstrate the methodology in operation and to highlight its particular contribution. The methodologies are: Case Study, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, Action Research, Phenomenography, Discourse Analysis, and Narrative Analysis. It is noted that many of the exemplar papers use some of these methodologies in combination.”

J. A. Dawson

Professional Issues

Freelance technical writers and their place outside corporate culture: High and low corporate culture styles


“Freelance technical writers perform their work outside their clients’ corporate culture, and this occurrence is becoming more and more common. It is important to understand the significance of the separation between technical writers and corporate culture, especially given that some freelance technical writers never meet their clients in person. Does corporate culture play a significant role for the freelance technical writing professional?”

Sherry Southard
Recent & Relevant

Using NVivo to answer the challenges of qualitative research in professional communication: Benefits and best practices tutorial

“Recent updates in qualitative data-analysis software have provided the qualitative researcher in professional communication with powerful tools to assist in the research process. In this tutorial, we provide a brief overview of what software choices are available and discuss features of NVivo, one prominent choice. We then use our experiences with the software to discuss how it enhances three specific dimensions of our research: efficiency, multiplicity, and transparency. We end with a compilation of best practices for using the software.”

Jenny West

Scientific Writing

Health literacy: Developing a practical framework for effective health communication

“Health literacy—the ability to access, read, understand, and act on basic health information—is a relatively new concept linked to health status. Recent reports indicate a national and international lack of health literacy skills, leaving many individuals vulnerable to poor health outcomes. Adequate health literacy is necessary for people to access health information, take control of their health management, and positively affect their overall health status. Health communication is an integral part of health literacy and is an essential skill in health promotion. We examine the concepts and definitions of health literacy and provide a framework for medical communicators to use in developing effective health communications.”

Dennis Chan

Meeting the challenges of health literacy: The medical communicator’s role

“Health literacy, the ability to access, read, understand, and act on basic health information, is a complex, pervasive problem.” In this introduction to three articles about health literacy, Nancekivell provides context about health literacy as well as useful resources about writing plainly for lay audiences, including ones particularly related to health literacy documents and patient education guides. She states that medical communicators “need to educate ourselves about the scope of the health literacy problem, equip ourselves with the necessary tools, especially the techniques of plain language and cultural competency, to make our health communications effective and actionable, and, most importantly, directly engage with our intended audiences.”

Dennis Chan

Opposing broad patent: Scientific American’s response to Morse v. O’Reilly (1848)

“In 1848, Scientific American, a popular science and technology journal, published a series criticizing Morse v. O’Reilly’s (1848) confirmation of Samuel Morse’s broad telegraph patent and patenting scientific principles. It attacked the decision using copia and classification, rhetoric echoed by the Supreme Court and others in reversing the 1848 decision. The journal was particularly concerned with the case’s implications for Morse’s patent battles with Royal House and Alexander Bain. The articles offer an opportunity to examine the rhetoric of patent debates and differences in the rhetoric of professional and scientific journals without the emotional attachments of examining contemporary issues.”

Jenny West
Use of the passive voice in medical journal articles

“A common criticism of medical writing is excessive use of the passive voice, but there are no published data on its frequency in medical journal articles … We studied the frequency of sentences with a passive voice construction in 3 types of articles from 3 medical journals: Opinion Papers, Review Articles, and Original Research Reports from the Journal of the American Medical Association, the New England Journal of Medicine, and The Lancet. To compare these results with those for a mainstream nonmedical publication, we also analyzed the frequency of passive voice in articles from the front page of The Wall Street Journal …. The wide range of passive voice frequencies recorded in this study suggests that writing with a high passive voice frequency is a style of choice rather than a requirement for publication. Our data suggest that a passive voice frequency of 10% is a reasonable upper limit for all types of medical articles because there were multiple articles in every analysis that met this standard. We recommend that medical journal editors make a passive voice frequency of ≤10% a publication requirement for all types of articles.”

Dennis Chan

Writing for readers with a wide range of reading skills

“This article deals with medical writing for a wide audience—including those with low reading skills. The focus is on writing strategies that foster readers’ understanding, recall, and problem solving. Strategies include enhancing readability, placing context first before new information, using simple pictures to accompany text, and making the text look easy to read. Differences between readers with high and low reading skills are defined and explained. Individuals with low reading skills read more slowly, skip words, take words literally, and may miss the context. Research-based strategies to cope with the differences, along with examples, are offered. Briefly addressed are texts associated with videos, Web sites, and legal health care-related documents. Methods to assess the suitability of documents are also described.”

Dennis Chan

Blogs and blogging: Current trends and future directions

“Adopting an interdisciplinary scope, this paper presents a review of research on blogs and blogging within the social sciences and the humanities. It maps out what kind of research has been completed, how it has been performed and what gaps that might need to be filled in this relatively new area of research. More specifically, the paper will analyze all articles on blogs and blogging published until 2009 and indexed by the *ISI Web of Knowledge.*”

Sherry Southard

Digital divides revisited: What is new about divides and their research?

“This article aims to critically review well established and recent trends in digital divides literature and research, examining what is new about divides and related research and making recommendations about future research. The key question the article attempts to answer is whether and the extent to which research on digital divides over the last two decades has managed to capture the scope and role of interactions between technology, society and politics when examining the nature and especially the importance of digital divides. To this end, this article discusses how digital divides have evolved in the last two decades and how research literature has approached their nature, scope and significance on the basis of different attempts at contextualization. On the one hand, it appraises the departure of conventional binary accounts and those restricted to access and usage factors of divides and
the introduction of the term ‘inclusion’ rather than ‘exclusion’. On the other hand, it suggests that digital divides be revisited in order to better contextualize them and that less linear explanations of the divides phenomenon should be developed. At the core of this suggestion the article builds the argument that the web of cultural traits in a society with its own gaps and disparities, as well as policy and regulation dynamics, are in a constant dialogue with technology, together influencing digital divides and holding implications for other forms of division in society.”

Sherry Southard

**Does cloud computing have a silver lining?**


“There are almost certainly millions of servers associated with the internet. Cloud computing merely adds a new kind of service to those already available. But the addition of bulk storage for industry, academia and government is now a significant part of the overall load of internet server traffic, and a growing one. In what follows, we will explore the environmental impact of this growth in server use, suggesting that such accounting needs to be taken on board when migrating from local computing or from analog systems to the apparently weightless world of digital media and real-time remote access. We will concentrate on the server business of one of the major players in the digital market, Google …. What digital media have demonstrated is that a different type of economy is possible, one grounded in collaboration … and peer-to-peer systems …. The intensification of private property rights over inventions, innovations and created works only serves to encourage the proliferation of copies, even when agreement is reachable on shared cross-platform technical standards. It is clear that proprietary solutions will benefit only sectors of a global network, not the whole system. For that, we require social as well as economic reactions to the emerging energy crisis of information.”

Sherry Southard

**Environmental website production: A structuration approach**


“The World Wide Web has excited much speculation, and a growing body of scholarship, about its potential to advance the communicative power of social movement organizations. As a medium that enables online publishing, and selected features and functions, websites could be important in this regard. Yet, studies of social movement websites have documented these groups’ modest uses of the medium, and few scholars have studied the organizational factors shaping social movement website production. In this study, I examine US environmental group website production practices. Drawing on structuration theory, I consider how organizational priorities, processes and resources limit and constrain website production. I use structuration theory to analyze environmental group website production practices as gleaned from semi-structured interviews with 28 environmental group webmasters. I conclude that despite their awareness of the Web’s capabilities, webmasters experience production constraints related to organizational norms, knowledge, and resources. Ultimately, I aim to provide an explanation for studies that find limited uses of the Web among social movement groups, to better understand the processes and practices involved in cultural production online, and to elucidate on some of the challenges website production poses for social movement groups.”

Sherry Southard
Usability Studies

Enhancing customer service to increase a journal’s marketability: Users’ assessment of Mayo Clinic Proceedings’ web-based tools


Because customer service is important to marketability, editors surveyed users to determine how to increase journal marketability. “This study was undertaken to assess users’ perceptions of and practices when using the Web-based manuscript submission and review system (ie, ScholarOne Manuscripts, formerly known as Manuscript Central) employed by Mayo Clinic Proceedings. Using the survey tool SurveyMonkey, the editorial office staff conducted a 16-question survey …. The recipients were 1,688 people with active user accounts in the database …. Of the 1,688 potential respondents, 462 (27%) completed the survey …. In conclusion, although only selected aspects of the Web-based manuscript submission and review processes were investigated in this survey, authors and reviewers were, in general, highly satisfied with these processes and the services received when using the Web-based system. Mayo Clinic Proceedings can use the suggestions provided by respondents to improve its customer service, increase the satisfaction of system users, and sustain the success of the journal.”

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