

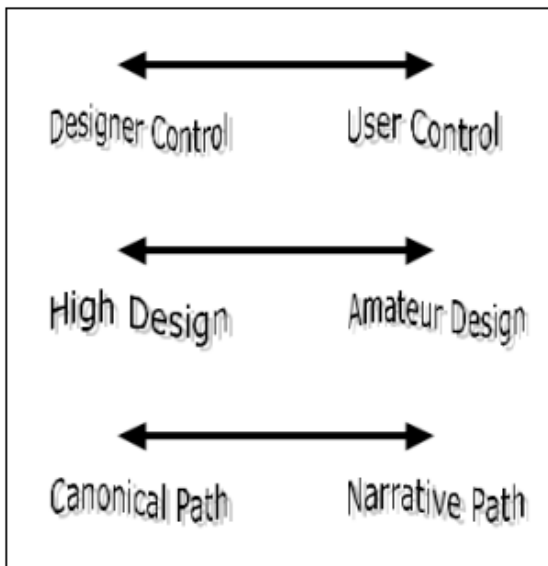
Mediated

Tech ^ Communication

Innovating the User Experience in a Mediated World

The Society for Technical Communication has just awarded its largest research grant to support the Tech Mediated Communication Project (TMC) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Over the next two years, a faculty team consisting of Cheryl Geisler, Roger Grice, Audrey Bennett, Jan Fernheimer, Robert Krull, Patricia Search, and James Zappen will be engaged in developing a set of useful paradigms for the analysis, design, and testing of technical communications in a mediated world. The TMC Project is designed to explore the implications of inserting technological mediation into the traditional Tech Com mix. How is this tech mediated communication different than traditional technical communication documents? What makes this tech mediated communication usable? What does it take to design such tech mediated communications?

The TMC Project builds on a year-long planning project also supported by the STC. In this work, three critical tradeoffs emerged to characterize what makes tech mediated communication a good

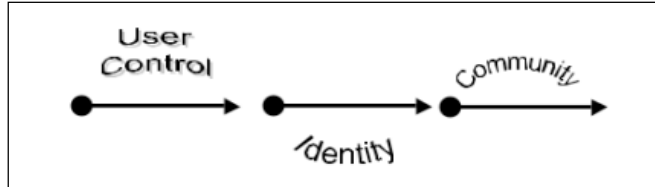


user experience. As diagrammed in the first figure, the first and most obvious tradeoff concerned the locus of control. In traditional documents like user documentation, the document designer is expected to be in control. In the tech mediated communications, by contrast, control has been ceded to the user in some way, whether it be the modest navigational control we see in the many webs, the intriguing control of an interactive 3-D graphics, or the overwhelming control often found in games. Interactivity is a concept closely related to control. Tech mediated communications often allow users to interact not only with content, but also with one another.

The second tradeoff emerging from the analysis of our tech mediated communication was that

between high design and amateur design. Traditional documents prized high design, but we often see that with the emergence of user control comes an inevitable decline in design standards. In the literature on tech mediated communications, little attention has been paid to this tradeoff. Indeed, much of the literature suggests that tech mediated communications require more design work than their document predecessors. These competing claims can be reconciled by noting that tech mediated communications require not so much a lowering of design standards as a shift in the locus of design work. In tech mediated communications that invite user collaboration many of the traditional areas of high design — text and graphics — are left to the user, and the work of the designer moves “under the covers,” to the functionality that will allow that user input and to the orchestration of an increasingly complex set of media.

The third tradeoff encountered in analysis of tech mediated communication was that between having a universal canonical path and providing a contextualized, often personal, narrative. In particular, digital storytelling is an emerging motif in tech mediated communication: a technology review may open with a story of a friend's need to upgrade; an exploration of the



cultural of Australian indigenous cultures might highlight the stories of individuals; a search for information about an ice skating rink can bring you to your own daughter's picture. Underlying this use of contextualize narrative is the growing prominence of identity and community on

the tech mediated communication. If the underlying document process could be said to involve the construction of a canonical path that will help the user avoid error, the tech mediated communication process might be conceptualized quite differently as shown in the second figure.

The diagram shown in the second figure articulates what seems to be a common underlying movement in tech mediated communications. First, we need to begin by asking ourselves, Why do users want control? What do they do with it? The answer seemed clearly to involve the exploration of identity. The users of our exemplary tech mediated communication are not so much engaged in getting information or completing a task as in using system-offered choices to explore their own identities. Second, we need to ask ourselves, for what purpose is such identity work supported? Why designers of do tech mediated communication create environments in which such identity work is afforded? The answer to this second question also seems clear: to build community. Motives for community building are various, of course. The designer of a non-profit might aim to provide help to those suffering from neurological disorders. A distance learning environments might be designed to provide a good educational experience for working professionals. An indigenous website might be designed to offer "a window into the remarkably diverse worlds of Indigenous peoples in Canada and throughout the world"

(<http://www.aptn.ca/content/view/21/31/>).

For whatever motive, the technical communicator who aims to create tech mediated communications, moving users from *control* through *identity* and toward *community*, clearly faces a different task than traditional document design. Traditional metrics of usability — efficiency, accuracy, and satisfaction — are no longer an adequate yardstick with which to measure the tech mediated communication. Instead, we must ask questions like:

- How much control does this tech mediated communication provide the user? Is it enough? Is it too much?
- In what ways does this tech mediated communication afford identity work? How well does it succeed in allowing the exploration of identity?
- How does this tech mediated communication build community? What kinds of interactions does it allow? What kinds of networks are built?

These questions, meant to be suggestive, clearly require a new body of knowledge on what makes technical communication usable in a mediated world. Over the next two years, the TMC Project will be working with the Society for Technical Communication to provide some answers.