

Forum Moderation as Technical Communication: The Social Web and Employment Opportunities for Technical Communicators

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Abstract

Purpose: This article examines online help forums as a form of technical communication. The purpose of the article is to explore the similarities between moderators of help forums and technical communicators. The article argues that technical communicators are uniquely suited to step in as “community managers” of companies’ official online help forums.

Method: This study reports on qualitative research done with 23 help forum participants. The researcher used an iterative grounded theory approach to seek out research participants and code the interview data to examine emergent data categories. The research was also supplemented by six months of observation and an extensive memoing process.

Results: The interviews with forum moderators show that help forum moderation requires many of the skills technical communicators already possess. Moderators play an important role in the health of online help forums, and they must be able to work with subject-matter experts, edit content, organize material, create content, and shape the overall tone of the forum.

Conclusion: Many companies now sponsor official help forums, and these companies need community managers to run these sites. The data reported in this study show that technical communicators possess the skills to succeed in these positions and help develop professional online help forums. In conclusion, technical communicators have a strong case to make that they are well positioned to step in as community managers, especially of professionally sponsored online help forums.

Keywords: online help forums, social media, help documentation, technical communication jobs, moderators

Practitioner’s Takeaway

- Companies such as Apple, Microsoft, and Home Depot (to name a few) have created professional online help forums that can supplement professionally produced help documentation.
- These forums feature a mix of subject matter-experts and novices who post and answer questions, in effect creating a networked form of help documentation.
- Technical communicators possess the skills necessary to be employed as forum moderators, and “community management” may represent a growth area for the field.

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Introduction

How-to guides for thriving in the digital age are filled with discussions of technical communication even though they rarely, if ever, use the term. For example, Howard Rheingold's (2012) *Net Smart: How To Thrive Online* devotes multiple chapters to the topic of finding help information. However, what is notable is that Rheingold and others do not point readers to traditional forms of help (Bellanca, 2010); instead, they urge readers to go online and participate in online help forums to figure out how to accomplish various tasks. While they may not use the term, what these books describe is a fundamental shift in how documentation is produced; many people now rely on networked forms of help documentation as a supplement or replacement for traditional technical documentation.

The growth of online help forums does not mean companies no longer employ technical communicators to produce documentation. Products obviously still ship with instructions and professionally produced online help systems. However, the field of technical communication must recognize that, as Gentle (2009) argues, people increasingly turn to user-generated content when seeking out help. They may be just as likely to Google a problem as they are to consult a manual, and importantly, many of Google's top results for help information come from various online forums. Some technical communication researchers view this shift towards online, amateur help communities negatively. For example, Carliner (2012) believes that online help forums are a form of "contraprofessionalization" that "circumvent paid technical communicators and engage others in preparing technical content for publication" (p. 55). However, this article makes the case that the growth of online help forums can present opportunities for technical communicators. As Gentle (2009) points out, technical communicators can work to position themselves as "community managers" who have the technical and communication skills to properly moderate growing online help forums. A cursory glance for "community managers" on careerbuilder.com returns many position listings, but many of the job ads are targeted towards people with backgrounds in marketing. This article draws from Gentle's work and argues that technical communicators are just as qualified to step in as community managers, particularly in the context of

large, professional help forums such as those sponsored by Home Depot, Apple, Microsoft, and others.

To support my argument, I draw from qualitative work I did with online help forum participants. For my project, I engaged in six months of observation in a variety of online forums, ranging from StackOverflow to a popular online plumbing forum. I also conducted 23 interviews with people who actively participate in online help forums. Of the 23 people I interviewed, 19 moderate at least one online help forum. I focus on the role of forum moderators in this article to show that my data reveals that technical communicators are well-suited to moderate online help forums and act as community managers. Before moving on to my data analysis, I first discuss literature on forums and technical communication and then examine literature on how collaborative sites require some form of structure and moderation. After reviewing literature, I explain my methods and my data analysis and conclude with a discussion of the implications of my data.

The argument set forth in this paper—that forum moderation requires many of the same skills as technical communication—is relevant for both technical communication practitioners and educators. I hope to show that technical communicators are well suited to step in as community managers and also suggest that technical communication educators may want to consider adding a required course on social media to existing curricula.

Online Help Forums and Technical Communication

Online help forums cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from programming languages to home improvement projects. Most of these forums follow a question and answer format where users post questions for members of the community to answer. For example, StackOverflow and Reddit's r/techhelp have thousands of users who post questions about technology. The popular DIY forum has tens of thousands of experts and amateurs who ask and answer questions about home improvement projects.

Technology companies have also created forums in which users can discuss products and turn to the community for help. Apple has a vibrant Apple Support Community, as do both Microsoft and Adobe. In addition, many popular open source projects, such as

Apache, rely mainly on online forums as a source of help documentation. As Lanier (2011) writes,

P2P online forums typically represent the only user assistance found in OSS systems. They are also becoming a model for commercial software (CS) systems. In fact, many commercial organizations, especially smaller ones (e.g., TechSmith and MediaLab), put their own material resources into product forums. (p. 350)

Importantly, tech companies and open source projects are not the only official company forums. Home Depot and Lowes both have official forums people use to ask and answer questions. Even tool companies such as Caterpillar feature official forums in which people can connect with others who use Caterpillar technologies. While it is impossible to include a full list of companies that have official online help forums, it is important to note that these forums are a growing source for help information that spans multiple industries.

These online help forums are examples of how the Internet and social media have impacted the practice of technical communication. As Gentle (2009) argues, people often go online before checking official documentation, and many searches direct users to forums. These forums become part of what Bleiel (2009) calls “Convergence technical communication,” which takes advantage of the capabilities of the social Web to engage users in the content production process. O’Keefe (2009) also identifies forums as an increasingly valuable source for technical documentation. She claims that despite the fact that the popularity of community-generated documentation may seem “uncomfortable and vaguely insulting” (p. 4) to professional writers, 21st century technical communicators should think through how to incorporate social media content in their documentation strategies.

Importantly, Gentle, O’Keefe, and Bleiel do not view the growth of crowd-sourced documentation as necessarily negative for technical communicators. While Carliner (2012) argues that these types of forums “circumvent paid technical communicators,” Gentle claims that technical communicators may be ideally suited to work as community managers who moderate and encourage people to participate in these forums. She writes that technical communicators will have to “find the correct value proposition for [their] work

and determine whether [their] role is an enabler of conversation or an instigator of conversation” (p. 69). Berglund and Priestley (2001) also argue that technical communicators can play a valuable role in online help communities “as gatekeeper and moderator for FAQs and formal documentation” (p. 132). As I discuss in more detail in the next section, vibrant online help communities all require some form of moderation. These communities all need moderators who establish community norms, engage members, and encourage participation, and technical communicators can step in as the moderators who make sure the forums run smoothly. As the growth in company-sponsored online help forums show, community management may provide a growth area for technical communicators.

While not directly related to online help forums, a related strand of technical communication research is Mackiewicz’s work on similarities between various social media sites and technical communication. Mackiewicz (2010a) examined how online reviewers establish credibility using many of the same techniques as technical writers. She also focused on how volunteer advisors on the site Epinions.com can “take on a role quite similar to that of a technical editor” (Mackiewicz, 2011, p. 423). Her research extends Durack’s (1997) earlier work that argued that we need to expand “the range of texts that ‘count’ as technical writing” (Mackiewicz, 2010b, p. 403). This article has a similar goal and sheds light on the content in amateur help forums as a form of viable technical documentation. I also build on Mackiewicz’s observations that social media moderators and reviewers often exhibit many of the same skills as technical communicators, and I use that point to argue that technical communicators may be uniquely suited to manage the growth of professionally sponsored online help forums.

Online Forums and Moderation

Research shows that the design of online forums plays a significant role in encouraging people to participate (Barab, Makinster, Moore, & Cunningham, 2001). This research includes how best to foster trust amongst participants (Rheingold, 2012), how to use economic models to encourage participation (Vassileva, Greer, McCalla, & Deters, 1999), and how to incentivize people to contribute content in peer-to-peer help forums (Jain, Chen, & Parkes, 2014). All of the forum designs

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examined in these studies require moderators to play an active role in shaping conversation and molding community dynamics. In other words, as Barab *et al.* (2001) argue, a successful peer-to-peer help forum is never simply the result of design; instead, forums are sociotechnical environments shaped as much by user practices as technical solutions.

Research has also examined the essential role user-generated online documentation has played in the growth of open source software (Lakhani & von Hippel, 2003). Coleman's (2013) ethnography of hacker culture details the important role documenting software development and providing feedback to participants plays in open source environments like Debian. As Coleman argues, these collaborative communities can often be hostile to outsiders, and moderators play an important role in setting the tone for the community. Once again, her work shows that individual actors play a significant role in how user-generated documentation is disseminated and developed.

Finally there is research that explicitly examines roles moderators play in online forums; however, little of this research specifically looks at online help forums. Instead, scholarship has focused on moderation in political forums (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wright, 2006; Wright & Street, 2007), feminist forums (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002), and health forums (White & Dorman, 2001). These studies all point to the importance of moderators for managing large forums, regardless of topic. For example, Coleman and Gotze (2001) argue that "mechanisms of moderation and mediation are crucial to the success of many-to-many, asynchronous dialogue" (p. 17), and Herring *et al.* (2002) point out that moderators must be skilled communicators to defuse tension among forum participants. Wright (2006) examines how different moderator roles impact forum participation and found that both "silent moderation" and "mechanical filters" that automatically block certain messages negatively impacted political forum conversation. Wright's conclusion was that successful online forums require active moderators who can guide conversation and set the overall tone.

While the research on online forums cited above shows the importance of moderation, little research specifically looks at popular online help forums. The research also does not examine the specific tasks of forum moderators or the skills people must have to

succeed as moderators. The data discussed below addresses that gap in the literature by examining the main tasks of forum moderators, and I later discuss the links between my data categories and the already existing skills of technical communicators.

Methods

For this project, I first received approval from my University's Institutional Review Board and I then began observing interactions in a variety of forums and participating when possible. Over a six month period, I took notes on interactions in a variety of online help forums including the Google Android forum, Reddit's r/techhelp, StackOverflow, and a forum dedicated to DIY flooring and plumbing projects. I took notes on these observations by noting situations in which moderators intervened during forum discussions and situations in which forum participants seemed to have difficulty communicating help information. I also took notes on different forms of help documentation found in forums, such as the "how to ask a question" pages discussed later.

I also recruited interview participants by posting requests in a variety of forums. I intentionally sought out participants from a range of forums as a form of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a concept developed in grounded theory approaches to qualitative research and refers to the purposive recruitment of participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I sought out participants who participate frequently on forums and who cover a range of subject areas because I wanted to gain a dense theoretical understanding of help forums in general. At the beginning of the research process, I targeted any forum participant who wanted to participate in my study. However, after coding my initial interviews, my data began to show relevant links between forum moderation and technical communication. After identifying those links, I began specifically targeting forum moderators for interviews. I contacted 26 different forum moderators and received responses from 12 of them. I interviewed these 12 moderators and these participants then referred me to another 7 people who moderate forums. In total, 19 of my 23 research participants had experience moderating online help forums, 20 of the 23 research participants are male, and the participants' ages ranged from 19 to 58 years old. Most of my participants participated in technical forums, though three participants were only active on plumbing

and flooring forums. As a final note, I cannot provide the names of each forum I recruited from because it would risk my participants' confidentiality. Some forums only have one or two moderators, so saying I interviewed the moderator of one of those forums would potentially violate their confidentiality.

I conducted each interview over the phone or on Skype because the participants were not located in my area. The interviews lasted between 30–100 minutes, and I recorded the interviews and had them fully transcribed to allow for more thorough coding. The interviews covered multiple topics related to online help forums, including why people participate, how to incentivize participation, community dynamics, and most importantly for this article, the role moderators play in online help communities. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Charmaz, 2006) "publisher": "Sage Publications", "publisher-place": "London, England", "event-place": "London, England", "author": [{"family": "Charmaz", "given": "Kathy"}], "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2006}]}}}, "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json", and I began with a general script I followed, but I deviated from the script to ask participants to expand upon certain topics. I also altered the script throughout the research process to take into account interesting data that emerged from earlier interviews.

I drew from grounded theory throughout the entire research process. Grounded theory is likely the most popular approach to social scientific qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and it is a rigorous process that shapes the entire research design (Charmaz, 2006). At its heart, grounded theory is an iterative process that requires researchers to code early interviews, develop categories, and then use that early data to shape later interviews. I coded my early interviews and used that coding to identify interesting areas I focused on in later interviews. These early rounds of coding also shaped the types of theoretical sampling I discussed earlier. For example, as mentioned earlier, I did not set out in my early interviews to focus mainly on people who have experience moderating forums. However, my early interviews began revealing interesting links between moderator practices and technical communication; consequently, I actively sought out forum moderators for my later interviews and took advantage of the emergent nature of grounded theory approaches.

I coded all of my transcripts using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.Ti, and I went through the data multiple times throughout the research process using a constant comparison method where I constantly refined existing categories, merged categories, and created new ones (Huberman & Miles, 1994). My iterative coding process allowed me to identify emergent patterns in my data, and I report on the moderation categories in this article. I supplemented my coding with an extensive memoing process in which I defined the codes and began forming conceptual links among my categories. Memoing is a key part of grounded theory coding, and I used my memos to trace and define my categories, identify links between categories, justify why pieces of data fit within certain categories, and explain to myself as the researcher why certain categories should be merged. Finally, I wrote detailed vignettes of each of my participants as a way to maintain a holistic understanding of my participants that can be lost when fracturing interview data into distinct categories (Clarke, 2005).

Results

The data presented below cover categories relating to forum moderation that emerged from my research. Those categories are: (1) Moderators as knowledgeable non-technical experts, (2) Moderators as quality control experts, (3) Moderators as translators, (4) Moderators as information architects, and (5) Moderators as tone-setters. After describing each of these categories and including a few representative quotes from my participants, I then link these categories to my overall argument in the discussion section.

Moderators as Knowledgeable Non-Technical Experts

The online help forum moderators I spoke with came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were experts in the topic they moderated, but some were not. For example, I spoke with a moderator at an online plumbing forum who was not a professional plumber. He enjoyed moderating, and he had recently become the moderator of other forums, including a flooring forum and a computer programming forum, that covered topics with which he was not particularly familiar. I also spoke with moderators of computer programming forums who, though they knew programming basics, did not have the level of expertise of many of the people who actively answered forum questions.

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My participants repeatedly stressed that moderators' most important skill was not technical knowledge. They could moderate a flooring forum without being professional floorers; they could moderate a technical help forum without being IT experts. Instead, participants reported that communication skills were more important than technical knowledge, and multiple participants were asked to moderate forums outside their area of expertise mainly because they showed solid communication skills, as the quote below suggests:

Interviewer: So as a global moderator, is it important for you to be an expert in the forum topic?

Participant: Oh, no. Not at all. It's really more about making sure people are following the forum rules. You know, we can take care of spam posts if they see them, we can have a little more ability to delete things or move things around to the appropriate places, we can step in if a member's being rude or somebody's breaking rules, they can step in and enforce the rules as we see it. It doesn't hurt to know a lot, but it isn't necessary, and I have actually had friends from other forums ask me to help out as moderator because they saw I handled things well.

However, some technical knowledge is often important for moderating forums. The following categories all examine different roles help forum moderators play, and these different categories implicitly relate back to moderators' role as knowledgeable non-technical experts. Each task described below can be performed even if a moderator is not a subject-matter expert, but these roles all require moderators to be willing to learn new material and familiarize themselves with the topic being discussed.

Moderators as Quality Control Experts

One of the main tasks of forum moderators is to maintain the quality of forum posts. This task mostly concerns working to combat spam. Every single moderator I spoke with told me that spam is a problem in forums, and moderators must be able to spot spam, delete it, and ban the users:

Participant: You know, someone will pay \$100 to a foreign phone company to just blast the sites with spam. And we go in there and try to knock it

off. And those, we don't even second guess it. We just, if the IP address comes through India and the hyperlinks in their questions, then we just ban them. 'Cause what they do is they get money by clicking. If you click on the hyperlink, and they'll get a penny a piece. So, you know, say "I got a great plumbing site. Click here." If you click on it, it's Joe Blow's Plumber from Indiana and they get paid a penny every time you click on it. So I'm not going to allow them to make money by spamming our sites.

Identifying spam, however, is not always easy. It requires practice and a certain amount of technical knowledge. As the quote above points out, one of the main ways in which moderators identify spam is through IP addresses, meaning many moderators had to have a basic knowledge of how to understand IP address information. Moderators also had to know enough about the forum topic to be able to identify the difference between spam and a poorly worded post that might get caught in a spam filter. They also had to read closely enough to tell the difference between someone posting useful information and someone only interested in getting people to go to his or her Web site.

The prevalence of spam varied from forum to forum. Basically the more popular the forum, the more spam it got. Moderators were all responsible for controlling spam, and in some cases the task could be quite complicated. The most extreme example that arose in my interviews was a moderator who focused solely on spam. He moderated over twenty forums and called himself the "spam cop." Other moderators would reach out to him if their spam problems became serious, and he would go in and clean up the forum and ban people from posting links to certain Web sites. He even created a basic algorithm that could detect likely spammers by comparing their post count to the types of Web sites they shared. While deleting spam may seem to be a monotonous, straightforward task, my data showed that it can require an attention to detail, language, and content that is not dissimilar from the content management practices of skilled editors.

Moderators as Translators

Most of the people who post to online help forums are not professional writers. They tend to be experts in a certain area and occasionally lack the communication skills necessary to clearly respond to questions. The

struggle to communicate effectively on forums can be particularly pronounced when an expert user responds to a novice's query. For example, two participants I spoke with, one of whom moderates an Android programming forum and one who moderates a Microsoft forum, told me that experts often responded to questions by using jargon or explaining things in a way that made little sense to the person requesting help, especially when the original poster did not have advanced subject-area knowledge. My interviews suggest the same communication problems arise regardless of the topic of the help forum.

My participants also told me that one of their roles as moderator was often to step in as “translators” to help more beginner forum participants understand complicated material, which included responding to a more technical response to clarify it in an accessible way. This form of translation not only required moderators to translate from an expert to a novice, it also required tact so they did not seem to be belittling the more expert poster's valuable advice:

Participant: There's too much volume now for me to go through every post like I used to. But certainly, some people are better at explaining things for their audience than others. I see explanations that while correct were not clear. I've seen some that were clear but incorrect. I've seen ones that were correct and clear but were very much going to be over their head of someone who had just started their programming. Sometimes I have to just jump in and clarify a little bit without offending everyone. Not everyone is a fantastic communicator; that's just not their skillset.

Moderators also acted as language specialists in guiding beginner users on how to ask questions. Regardless of the subject matter, my participants told me the most important skill a forum participant can have is the ability to properly ask a question. Questions are often overly vague and do not contain the necessary information to provide an adequate response. This came up most frequently in my interviews with people who moderate computer programming and IT forums. People asked questions about installing software or writing lines of code that did not provide enough background information. Moderators often stepped in to ask them to include the necessary information, and

moderators also created sidebars participants could read that gave them explicit guidelines for how to properly ask a question (see Reddit's Learn Programming subreddit for an example). These guidelines worked as a de-facto style guide for forum posting and attempted to standardize content to improve the flow of the forum, and I cover the shaping of a forum's content in more detail in the next section.

Moderator as Information Architects

Most of the people I spoke with moderated forums that were required to follow a certain design. For example, all subreddits are constrained by Reddit's overall interface, every DIY subforum had to mirror the overall site, and other forums are constrained by the site building template they use (for example, vBulletin). However, moderators worked within those constraints to create and organize material to make the forums more usable.

The most frequent example of moderators creating content for forums came in the form of FAQ sections. Many of the questions posted to forums cover similar material, whether the topic is laying a tile floor or building a computer hard drive. Consequently, some moderators I interviewed created an FAQ people can consult before asking their question. As multiple people told me, most people do not bother to consult the FAQ before posting, but the FAQ can still serve a useful purpose by providing a document other participants can direct the original poster to rather than answer the same question over and over again.

Forum moderators are also able to create sets of guidelines that can help people ask questions, which I discussed in the previous section. One of the difficulties beginners face when asking questions on a forum is asking questions in ways that make sense so moderators can create a guide to help beginner users:

Participant: The necessary details are commonly lacking in questions on technical forums. So I created posting guidelines try to address that, say, “Here's how to get the best response from us. And that's to provide us with all the information that you know, the things that you've tried, things maybe you haven't gotten around to yet or the need results thereof.” Yeah, so that's what the posting guidelines are for, to try and address the common shortcomings in technical forums.

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Finally, moderators can also play a role in organizing content in online help forums, especially on larger sites that have multiple subforums. The Android help forum, for example, has over 50 subforums devoted to different Android phones and different programming questions. A flooring forum I researched looked much the same, with different sections devoted to general questions, laminate flooring, carpet, subflooring, professional advice, and various types of tile. The moderator is often responsible for identifying these various categories of content and creating the subforums so that participants can focus on their areas of knowledge rather than wading through every single posted question. Moderators also are often tasked with moving questions that may be posted to the wrong sections. So if someone posted a general flooring question in a laminate flooring section, the moderator would move it to the general section where it is more likely to be answered. In this way, the moderator plays a role in shaping the organization of the entire forum, which is important on forums that cover multiple help topics.

Moderators as Tone-Setters

Social dynamics vary from forum to forum. Some help forums are welcoming to beginners; others foster a dynamic that discourages beginners from participating. Some forums encourage posters to focus solely on the forum's topics; others encourage a more open community approach. The moderator often plays a major role in both setting the tone of the forum and establishing what is and is not appropriate:

Participant: Moderators absolutely do set the tone for how conversations are handled in there, and, you know, are involved with the administrative staff in setting the rules for that forum. So that kind of controls the conversations you hold there. As you may see in some forums, even technical ones are very broadly focused. They have conversations that always seem to diverge; others are very focused, very spot-on. And when a conversation is over with, that's it. Move on to the next thing. As the moderator, I do a lot to kind of direct how the forum works.

Moderators also tend to write the rules for the forum, and it is up to them how to enforce the rules. Some people told me they take a "hands off" approach,

only stepping in when someone obviously crosses a line and makes threats or starts flaming. Other moderators take a more active role in shaping help forum dynamics by messaging people whenever they are rude or critical and, in effect, making it clear to participants that they must be polite:

Participant: That's the job for moderators to read that and go, "there's no business for that." And that's when you send them a private message saying, "Hey, knock it off. If don't you have any good things to say, then say nothing at all." And that's what makes a good or bad forum. And I've experienced it myself.

An important point to make is that not all moderators or forum participants *want* their online help forum to be welcoming and polite. One of the ways forums can be exclusionary is by promoting a certain level of expertise and ostracizing beginner users. Some of my participants described certain online help forums they felt intentionally promote a less welcoming environment as a way to keep less experienced users from participating. For example, a participant told me that on the forum StackOverflow people often posted responses like "we're not going to do your homework. Google it and you'll figure it out." The same participant told me that the subreddit r/techhelp, on the other hand, was welcoming to beginner users and that kind of response would not be accepted by the moderators.

Discussion

When I began coding my early interviews with forum participants, I did not focus on forum moderation. I was initially more interested in exploring why people participate and what can be done to encourage participation. However, in one of the first of many attempts to code my early interviews, I realized the categories emerging from my data analysis concerning forum moderation closely resembled the roles many technical communicators play in the workplace. I then changed the focus of my project, which is one of the strengths of the emergent nature of grounded theory approaches, and recruited interview participants who had experience moderating forums. I want to conclude here by explicitly linking the data categories discussed above to the field of technical communication.

The first category explained that many forum moderators are not necessarily subject matter experts. In many cases, strong communication and organization skills were more important to successful moderation than an expert-level grasp of the subject material. However, the moderators did have to be comfortable with familiarizing themselves with new material and learning enough to make informed decisions about content. These behaviors closely resemble the activities of technical communicators, who are often required to work with subject-matter experts to create material (Lee & Mehlenbacher, 2000). The expertise technical communicators bring to a project often focuses on their communication skills, but they often must be able to familiarize themselves with technical material to create adequate content. Technical communicators already have experience working with subject-matter experts and communicating material clearly, so they will be well-suited to step in as community managers on professional forum sites even if they do not have expertise in that area.

Technical communicators also have extensive experience with the next two categories that emerged from my data analysis: moderators as quality control experts and moderators as translators. As I explained, one of the major tasks for most forum moderators is ensuring that a forum is not overrun with spam. Fighting spam can be more complicated than it might seem. Moderators often have to go through the spam filter to make sure viable, though often poorly worded, questions are not being marked as spam, and doing so requires close reading and a familiarity with the types of questions being posted. Moderators also must police the forums and recognize certain posts that may violate community guidelines. The moderator's role as quality control expert can require many of the same attention-to-detail skills that are a hallmark of successful technical communication, particularly technical editing.

Ensuring the quality of forum content can also require moderators to translate information among multiple audiences, as shown in the translator category. Help forums often feature experts and amateurs, which can lead to communication problems when experts have trouble writing posts at an appropriate knowledge level. Multiple people I interviewed told me they stepped in as moderators to "translate" information to the amateur audiences, which clearly shows a link between forum moderation and technical communication. As my research showed, managing the dynamic between

expert and amateur audience is key to establishing a vibrant help community; as professionals who translate information between subject matter experts and the public every day, technical communicators have the professional skills to manage this complicated forum dynamic. Technical communicators also have experience working with subject matter experts and suggesting changes in a tactful way (Mackiewicz & Riley, 2003), which earlier research showed is necessary for diffusing tension in online forums (Herring et al., 2002).

Translating between experts and novices is not the only thing moderators can do to manage tension between those asking and answering forum questions. Moderators also often play a role as the information architects of the forum. Most forums follow a prescribed structure that limits changes administrators and moderators can make; however, within these constraints, moderators can add content and organize content to improve help forums. The most frequent content they create is posting guidelines, which is fairly similar to designing an overall style guide posters are expected to follow. But my research also supported Bleiel's (2009) point that technical communicators' have the skills to create valuable forum FAQs and guides on how to ask questions, and both these types of documents require content creation skills and an ability to write to diverse audiences. Moderators also must be able to organize content by creating new subforums when appropriate and moving posts to the correct subforums. In fact, one moderator told me that improving the architecture of the forum he moderates helped almost double the number of new posts over a six month period.

All these different categories show the similarities between the skills of forum moderators and technical communicators. The final category—moderator as tone-setter—possibly shows the link most explicitly. The moderators I interviewed help dictate the overall feel and dynamic of forum participation (Wright & Street, 2007). They choose what to allow and not allow and craft the overall "voice" the forum presents to new users, just as a technical communicator may work with subject matter experts to craft the "voice" of a large report or grant application. As communication experts, technical communicators are prepared to understand how to manage the dynamics of help forums to present a certain image to new users. This skill can be particularly useful in the context of professional help forums, which may be required to present a more refined image and strike

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a different tone than an amateur online help forum. As more people continue to turn to the Internet for help information, the dynamics of these professional forums will only become more important. My data suggests that technical communicators have the skills necessary to succeed as community managers for many of the professional online help forums that have become an increasingly crucial part of the informational landscape.

Conclusion and Implications

Technical communication research features many examples of how social media have impacted the profession (Ferro & Zachry, 2013; Hea, 2013). One of those impacts is in the area of help information. Social media sites ranging from Wikihow to YouTube have provided people with venues for seeking out help. Online help forums are also a major source people use to access help documentation, and guides for thriving in the digital age often point readers to the importance of participating in and using help forums (Rheingold, 2012).

The ability to find amateur help forums online has not replaced the need for professionally produced documentation, and many technical communicators still write manuals and design help systems. However, Carliner (2012) warns that some companies have begun to cut the resources they devote to documentation and instead rely on amateur users to produce this information. This move away from professionally produced documentation will in some cases hurt technical communicators. However, the growth of online help forums can also present new opportunities for the profession. As Gentle (2009) argues, technical communicators may be able to step in as “community managers” ready to help develop and run official help forums such as the Apple, Microsoft, Adobe, and Home Depot forums (to name only a few). This article provided support for Gentle’s point by arguing that forum moderation requires many of the skills already possessed by technical communicators.

The argument set forth in this article has implications for both technical communication practitioners and technical communication educators. For professionals, I hope to have shown that technical communicators already have the skills necessary to work as moderators of online help forums. While many community manager positions target people with marketing degrees, technical communicators can

make a persuasive case that they have the technical and rhetorical skills to manage large communities, particularly communities focused on producing help information. Most of these forums feature participants of various levels of expertise, and technical communicators are already familiar with how to work with subject matter experts to communicate messages to novice users. Technical communicators also have the attention to detail necessary to combat spam and the writing and organizational skills to contribute to a thriving professional forum community.

This implications of this article also suggest that educators should consider how best to prepare students for the contemporary informational landscape, and technical communication programs may want to consider adding courses that specifically focus on how social and digital media have impacted the profession. These courses could help students compete with students from other majors for positions as community managers and forum moderators.

In conclusion, I hope that this article has persuasively made the case that technical communicators are uniquely suited to step in to a variety of social media management positions. Existing jobs and existing professional responsibilities will not disappear. Professionals will continue to develop help documentation of various types. However, the growth of online help forums and the creation of professionally sponsored forums have impacted how people seek out help and will continue to do so. Our profession has a strong case to make that we are prepared to adjust to these changes and adapt to 21st century online help environments.

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Forum Moderation as Technical Communication

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