

TC Talk Episode 11 Transcript

“Tech Comm’s existential questions”

B Hello folks and welcome back to TC Talk.

A I'm Abi.

B And I'm Benton.

A And this is the show where I do all the boring reading so that you get to hear the most interesting stuff from it.

B And I ask the obvious questions. Or sometimes less obvious questions.

A You can tell I've been listening to too much You're Wrong About podcast because they always open theirs that way. This is the show where, blah, and they do it a different way each time. And their ways are a lot more creative than mine. Shall we commence with the technical communication? A toast to the new year.

B Right, because it is now the new year.

A Well played. You know it's November.

B Shhhh.

A But we are ahead of the game. Pungent.

B A little bit, yeah.

A Moscow Mules tonight, made from homemade, authentically fermented ginger beer. That was a thing I started to get into in quarantine. And it's probably not something I'll repeat. Since it's a new year, wink wink, I thought we could use this episode to go back to the beginning or go back to the basics. I'll try to pull a nice alliterative title out of here at some point.

B Abi's alliterate awesomeness. Alliterative awesomeness.

A That's better than Abi's illiterate awesomeness, because that would not be awesome were I illiterate and a writing professor. But first, an announcement. I have decided to implement my terrible idea from a couple of episodes back. Do you remember what that was?

B Oh, flagicures.

A Yes. I am going to be that person who creates an intensely niche Instagram account of flag inspired nail designs. And what country's flag am I rocking today?

B Burkina Faso nails.

A It's honestly been giving me joy because I've been able to read the Wikipedia pages of these various countries as I go. And I also discovered this website that brings me back to like 90s' Geocities webpages. It's called Flags of the World, FOTW dot info. And it actually has a lot of information there, which appears to have been subsequently parroted by Wikipedia.

B Squawk.

A So I go to the primary sources.

B There you go.

A FOTW.info. Anyway, it kind of reminds me of when I was in high school and trying to memorize all of the world capitals in part because I was an insufferable know-it-all.

B Weren't we all.

A But I also thought to myself, every country deserves to be known. There's a whole world out there outside of the United States. Do you see how I just transformed my high-school pretentiousness into virtue. So try me.

B Maldives.

A You're supposed to set me up to look smart.

B Lesotho.

A Damn it.

B South Africa.

A That's a trick question. Because there's like three capitals.

B No.

A No? Okay. Johannesburg.

B That's it.

A *This is fact-checking Abi from the future. It turns out we were both wrong. South Africa does indeed have three capitals, but Johannesburg is not one of them.* Okay. Give me another one.

B Chile.

A Santiago.

B There you go. Ukraine.

A Kiev. Not Kiev. Is it? Oh, yeah, it is. Okay. So

B Tangent over.

A Back to the beginning of technical communication. And in order to give any sort of history, I should acknowledge that the phrase technical communication means a few different things.

B Before you get going. When you said, back to the beginning of technical communication, I imagine that that was two guys grunting as one tries to explain to the other how to make fire.

A One troglodyte to another.

B One troglodyte to another, yeah.

A Doesn't that remind you of troggles? You know what that is?

B Really? Number Munchers.

A Yes.

B Of course.

A Okay. I'm glad. I was going to say, we are the Oregon Trail generation.

B Who would we be if not defined by the Apple IIE.

A True that.

B Five and a quarter actually floppy, floppy disks.

A But Word Munchers is where I really excelled.

B You would.

A But you're not wrong. I think that's a fair starting point.

B Ugh, ugh, hit rock on other rock. Make hot good.

A Anyway, I realized I needed to start distinguishing my meanings of technical communication soon after I started teaching graduate students. It's easy to take those things for granted. So first, it can refer to a thing like a piece of tech comm. Here's a software manual.

B A document.

A Or the phrase technical communication can refer to a profession. Tech comm is a field that practitioners can work in, like, "I want to go into technical communication when I grow up," said no child ever.

B I want to be a computational fluid dynamics engineer.

- A Did you say that when you were a kid?
- B That was on PBS. I forget which show it was for, but it was 5, 6 year old kids laying down looking up at the starry night sky. "A movie star." "A pro quarterback." "I want to be a computational fluid dynamics engineer."
- A And that's where all of our pretentious assholery began. That PBS commercial.
- B Because we were like, I want to be that kid.
- A But in fairness, while I doubt a kid would aspire to technical communication, that's only because they don't know about it.
- B True.
- A When people get to college and they discover it, they tend to get really into it. Technical communication as a profession is a big umbrella. Underneath it you might find things like content writers, editors, UX and usability specialists. So that can make the job search process a little interesting. And finally, I use the term to refer to a scholarly academic field that does research and prepares teachers and future professors of tech comm. And when I first got to grad school, I didn't know this was a thing. It just didn't occur to me that different fields have their own journals and conferences and talk to each other and build on their ideas and disagree with each other. And they get together and they ask these compelling questions like, What are we? Why are we here?
- B I'm here because I paid to go to the conference?
- A You know, at like a disciplinary level.
- B Why are we technical communicators here?
- A Right. Even fields have to ask those existential questions.
- B From the evolutionary biologist perspective, why are we here?
- A But was it like that in engineering when you were an engineering student? Were you aware that this was a field that your professors engaged in, that they didn't just teach all the time, that they were in the business of creating knowledge?
- B I guess that my awareness of the
- A Disciplinarity?
- B You and your words.
- A Shall I problematize that for you?

B Oh boy, I am problematized already, thank you very much. My awareness of the research realm of engineering probably came into being when I took a class from the material scientist, I asked if there was any research work that I get into because

A Really, you initiated that?

B Yes.

A Look at you being a go-getter.

B I mean, I was aware that he had a research team. Meaning that I wouldn't really be doing the research. I would be assisting the grad students.

A You were the one who got to burn all the popcorn.

B I didn't actually burn popcorn. It was sunflower hulls. And more accurately it was quasi-torrefying them in a microwave. Smelled like burning popcorn, but

A Torrefying. Enlighten the audience.

B Ah yes. Torrefying is essentially taking biomass, mass from living things, exposing it to high heat in the absence of oxygen so it doesn't burn, but instead turns into essentially chunks of carbon.

A Thank you for your live demonstration of technical communication. Honestly, when I was an undergraduate, at least, I thought research was, you pick a topic, you look up stuff on the topic. But I had no concept of situating a topic or a research question into an existing body of work. Or that different disciplines will view the same topic in different ways. And here I'll mention why I wanted to touch on this topic for TC Talk. As you know, I teach in a master's program in technical communication at Minnesota State, Mankato.

B I do know.

A And a few years ago I was teaching our capstone course. That's the final course students will take. And I had students saying, I don't even know what technical communication is. And I'm like, there are some key things you should be able to confidently say about it by the time you graduate from a program in it. So I was like, shit, this is a problem. It's a program-wide fault that students don't have any specific point during their education where they get that kind of shared foundation. So we proposed a course in Foundations of Technical Communication that students are meant to take in the first year of their program. And hopefully it sets a foundation for the work they'll do in the program. We bookend the curriculum with this foundation course and then the capstone course.

B Wow, that is so architectural right there. Start with the foundation.

A Oh my goodness.

B End with the capstone.

- A I like that. I didn't even think of how that metaphor was like parallel. Now I'm extra happy about it.
- B Bookend though, that's wrong.
- A Right, now I'm mixing my metaphors. In effect, I'm using this episode to get my bearings on the kinds of things I would want to cover in such a course. Because we just started offering it. History of tech comm as a thing. Going back to the beginning of time because I am comprehensive. You mentioned one troglodyte teaching another how to make a fire. And what I like about that is that you didn't automatically limit your vision of technical communication to writing because presumably that would not have been a written example.
- B Yeah, I'm not real familiar with the anthropology of troglodytes and how, how advanced they were in alphabet, but probably not.
- A I am familiar with the etymology of troglodyte. It comes from a word meaning cave dweller, if you're in search of a gender-neutral term for caveman. I expected you to say something like the first Egyptian papyrus or something.
- B The earliest Egyptian papyrus, diagramming how to make papyrus.
- A Which came first, the papyrus or the papyrus explaining how to make papyrus. We'll never know.
- B I think the papyrus did.
- A Now, when you follow how technical communication in the scholarly realm characterizes, or characterized, past tense, the history of technical communication the thing, you very much see this great man model.
- B Like your Isaac Newton.
- A Precisely. So these articles by tech comm scholars back in the seventies, eighties, when they called it tech writing, in a lot of those articles, they would describe these great historical figures who happened to create technical communication. Geoffrey Chaucer apparently wrote more than *The Canterbury Tales*. He wrote *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. What is an astrolabe? I expect you to know.
- B An astrolabe was meant to work not with the sun, but with stars, so that you could figure out where you were at night if you had your star charts.
- A Cool. So Chaucer wrote this medieval manual, essentially.
- B I could be way the heck off too.
- A But I'm going to fact check you.
- B Thank you.

A And I do joke that you are like a walking Wikipedia page.

B Yes.

A You are a good one to turn to for random questions. And tech writing scholars were obsessed with Benjamin Franklin. Have you ever read his stuff?

B He had some inventions. He had that one important thing that he thought he discovered called electricity.

A Hmm. Was the kite with the key thing, did that actually happen or is that just lore?

B I have no idea.

A Okay. I had to read his autobiography in ninth grade. He seemed so full of himself. Okay, this was before the age of self-quantification and tracking. He had these charts where he would mark out, these are the virtues that I must exhibit.

B It's really funny because he was a total lecher too, right?

A Was he?

B He was like going to sex clubs and

A Going to a secret European sex club doesn't make you a lecher.

B I suppose that isn't the same.

A I mean, that could be a perfectly acceptable lifestyle choice.

B Okay. Wrong word.

A He did straight up write fake news as we discussed in the last episode.

B Correct.

A And here's my favorite article of all from this early tech writing scholarship. I'll give you the subtitle, see if you can guess what it's about. "A whale of a handbook for teaching technical writing."

B Whaling?

A Well, yes, but more specifically, Moby Dick.

B Moby Dick?

A "Moby Dick: A whale of a handbook for technical writing teachers."

B I suppose that there's a lot of the trade of whaling, which is now internationally illegal.

- A And pronounced with an H at the front? “Whaling?”
- B Yeah, all of the wh words are, in Mid-Atlantic English, supposed to be pronounced with the h first.
- A But who speaks Mid-Atlantic? That was literally an invented accent for old timey movies and plays.
- B True. But British, and in a lot of places around the United States, it is
- A What?
- B What!
- A How could this have happened! Anyway, nice one, Deborah Kilgore, with your punny title. She writes, “It supplies ample models of technical definitions, descriptions, processes, and theories. Moby Dick demonstrates the kind of energetic technical writing that is needed today.” In 1981. Apparently. That would not be my go-to thought. I don't think it's a particularly energizing experience to read it. And it's not even the story that's energizing. It's the technical descriptions.
- B He's talking about a gaffe now. Oh boy.
- A What I see going on in these super early articles is, I think, technical writing still building off a literary tradition. So they were used to exegeting famous authors and applying literary analysis and
- B Exegeting. You said that.
- A I did. Thanks, PBS commercial, for making me insufferable.
- B Yep, it's their fault.
- A But they were extending that practice to a new kind of author, technical writers. But as the field came into its own, there came those, again, existential questions of what are we. And for this question, I went to an edited collection that I had read as a graduate student in preparation for my PhD exams. And that was Central Works in Technical Communication, edited by Johnson-Eilola and Selber, published in 2004. And can I tell you something stupid?
- B Yes.
- A I checked this book out from the library. And at the university library, I can keep things for like a year. Even so, I didn't touch it until I started getting the e-mails that were like, Hey, your library book is due. And I thought there's no way I can do justice to reading these articles in that short of a timeframe. So I'll just scan some of them and save them for later. So I was frantically, manually scanning these chapters. And just this week, I was back at the office to pick something up, looked on my bookshelf and I already had the book.

B What.

A Like, I owned it. And those very chapters were like already highlighted and everything. Listeners, has this ever happened to you? Comment below.

B Like and subscribe.

A Hit that notification bell. Oh wait, wrong medium. But I'll read to you from their preface. "Central Works in technical communication provides newcomers to the field with a coherent map of our maturing profession."

B Maturing. So it's like coming out of puberty or?

A Pretty much.

B Awkward.

A Well puberty doesn't need to be inherently awkward. It can be an opportunity.

B An awkward opportunity.

A An awkwardtunity. It seems like something you would say.

B I definitely do have an unreasonable affinity for portmanteaus. That, however, is beyond the pale, speaking of Moby Dick.

A What about backformation? That is another morphological process which I happen to appreciate. Liposuct became a verb because first there was the noun liposuction. Anyhow, I'll touch on some of the pieces from this central works compilation, but I'm also going to add a couple of newer ones to add to the map, so to speak. Robert Connors in this book tells about the rise of technical writing instruction in America. And that coincided with some big cultural and historical things at the time. Have you heard of the Morrill Act of 1867?

B Land-grant.

A Nailed it. The Morrill Act

B At that point in the history of our country, they viewed education as a Morrill imperative.

A There you go. I'm glad you seized on that awkwardtunity. The US gave, granted, this, you know, stolen indigenous land to the states to create colleges focused on agriculture, military, industry. So the idea was to prep folks for life in the industrial age, which was a contrast to colleges at the time, which were largely liberal arts-based, often religious, just not as accessible to the whole population. People were taking engineering courses in these land-grant universities. But by the 1900s there was widespread complaining about engineers' bad writing. So Engineering English, the course, was born, later to be renamed technical writing.

- B In this case, “engineering” being an adjective and not a verb,
- A Right. But engineering English is the kind of thing that technical communicators like to do.
- B Mind blown.
- A As you can imagine, there was some antipathy between the arts and the sciences that still echoes today. And for tech comm that comes out in the question of Where do we belong? Like literally, in what department do we belong? What building are you going to put us in, with the engineering folks or the English folks?
- B Where's the money going to come from?
- A So technical communication has an interesting relationship to both the sciences and the arts in that I see it as a bridge between them. Connors writes, “English teachers saw engineers as soulless technicians, while engineers saw English teachers as dreaming aesthetes, promoting refinement and culture to the exclusion of reality.”
- B Boy, It sounds like engineers of the past, even though they were bad communicators, they still had much better vocabularies than engineers of now. Aesthetes.
- A Dreaming ones, at that.
- B Dreaming assthetes.
- A And my question is, did Bob Connors in 1983 just anticipate a primary tension of our dating relationship?
- B You're right.
- A I thought you were a soulless technician. You thought I was a dreaming aesthete.
- B Could it be any more obvious?
- A Oh my gosh, I was thinking of the same thing. And I was like, I could sing that right now, but I will use my better judgment.
- B But you're going to let me do it. He was a soulless technician, she was dreaming aesthete. Could it be anymore obvious?
- A That's enough. We have come to appreciate our respective strengths.
- B Yes.
- A Another shift came with, take a wild guess.
- B War.
- A Yep. World War Two. Because of the demand for people to

B engineer things for war

A and to tell other people how to use weapons and other war-related equipment,

B Ah yes, user manual.

A the profession of technical communication grew.

B Face towards enemy.

A This was around the time when technical writing wasn't just something that engineers did, it became a profession in and of itself. So people who were good communicators were brought into these processes to work with subject matter experts, the engineers, because the engineers' time was too valuable, apparently, to spend writing manuals.

B They had eight different weapons that they needed to get at.

A But who was going to tell people which direction to point the weapons? The field kept growing after the war too, with soldiers returning home and enrolling in college. And over time we see a shift in how tech writing and tech writers are viewed. Initially, per Slack, Miller and Doak writing in 1993, this time period corresponded with a transmission view of communication. Have you heard of Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver?

B Why would I have heard of them?

A They were famous mathematicians, scientists. This seems like the kind of thing that Bentonpedia should know. They created a model of communication that looks like what you'd expect a mathematician's model of communication to look like. Sender transmits a message through a channel to a receiver who receives it. Very linear,

B Very logical.

A So tech writers were glorified transmitters. Not even glorified, I would say, but certainly not seen as authors in their own right. And these attitudes and misperceptions unfortunately persist to this day. And I've noticed them when I collaborate on like university-wide committees with faculty from other disciplines. And they hear that I am a Technical Communication professor and instantly, Oh, great. Now we have someone who can proofread and make the report pretty. And I'm like, I can do those things and in fact love to do those things. But I have actual content knowledge to contribute in and of itself.

B You're not a soulless technician.

A I'm a dreaming aesthete, dammit. In the 1950s, technical communication really began to professionalize. That's when some of these professional organizations came into being like STC, Society for Technical Communication. They added journals, conferences. And essentially were aiming to make a place for themselves beyond glorified transmitters. In 1983, we get one of our first efforts at defining tech writing as a thing from David Dobrin, "writing that accommodates technology to the user." And in this edited collection, the articles are all prefaced by a note from the author written in the present day that kind of

reflects back on the influence that their piece had had. And I just have to mention this one because it's so sad. He says of his own piece, "Should it have died? Reading it over, I wonder. I can see that the ambitious young author wanted tenure at MIT a little too badly."

B Aww.

A At any rate, though, this definition launched a thousand other articles about whether we should define technical communication and if so, what that definition should be. Good job, David Dobrin. And his efforts at bringing humanism into technical writing were very much in line with some other influential pieces at the time, such as Carolyn Miller's "A humanistic rationale for technical writing" or Russell Rutter's piece that shows an explicit connection between tech comm and rhetoric because of the audience awareness piece. And these articles were and are important for clarifying that tech comm isn't this objective transmission of neutral information, right? It doesn't represent a window pane that clearly shows reality free of any bias. Let's bring the story a little more up to date. Miles Kimball, in 2017, described the development of tech comm through the metaphors of the brass age, the beige age, the glass age.

B Beige age?

A Beige age.

B Say that 10 times fast.

A Be my guest.

B I am your guest.

A So brass because military. And this was a boom time for technical writing. To the point that quote, "greedy and corrupt technical writers were even the subjects of an FBI probe for providing technical manuals stuffed with duplicated content to fulfill a lucrative contract."

B Wow, I cannot believe that.

A You cannot associate such scandal with the profession of technical writing?

B No. What I am shocked by is that the FBI would get

A Cared?

B off their ass.

A There's a lot of other bullshit to investigate.

B A mosquito in a nudist colony and they go after the technical communicators?

- A Then the beige age is thusly named because the first personal computers were beige colored.
- B Oh.
- A This is late 80s, 90s. Kimball makes what I think is a nice revision to Dobrin's definition of tech comm that we talked about before. So Dobrin had said tech writing accommodates technology to the user. But Kimball says, that's not quite right because the technical writer had no power to change the technology itself. So it was more like accommodating the user to the technology or training the user into how to use the technology. And now the emphasis is on designing products that are so intuitively usable that you don't ever have to turn to a manual,
- B Right.
- A Can you think of the last time you used, say, a paper an instruction manual?
- B Actually, yes. It was about four years ago, for navigating a 3D modeling environment. Which, you would think that is well beyond the point when you would want to use paper for such a thing.
- A Conversely, can you think of any tech products maybe that you've used recently where you didn't have traditional instructions, but you didn't need them because of how the product kind of trained you in how to use it?
- B Like there was an app that I tried out for a little while that was kind of explicitly, like they went all in on no instructions.
- A Okay.
- B And it was kind of a feature instead of a bug. And it was basically figure out how to play this game.
- A That was the game? Figure out how to play it?
- B And every level was different, so you had to figure out like, so what do I drag something here or?
- A I kind of like that, you're exploring, you don't have a map.
- B My experience of it was more like, This is frustrating.
- A Also very fair. I'm thinking of something like logging into a new website. And they're like, hey, let's take a tour. And then it gives you the handy little bubbles where you need to click stuff. So it's very integrated,
- B An integrated manual, rather than it being so intuitive that you don't need any instructions.

- A Yeah. I mean, it's still documentation, but it's
- B They just put them out there before you need to look for them.
- A And sometimes those annoy me and I click through and then I regret that I clicked through them.
- B Please identify me as newb.
- A Put me in newb mode, please. And technical communicators have had to adapt to that shift. That's why usability and user experience is something that the field has kind of expanded to include.
- B What is usability?
- A The idea is you go on a website and you just know where to click to accomplish what you want.
- B Excellent example of this, in my opinion, is the McMaster-Carr website.
- A You are not a car person.
- B It is not a car website. McMaster C A R R, it's like a last name. Dot com. They sell anything like from raw materials to safety equipment. If I had asked for it, it would be like a six inch thick catalog.
- A Yes.
- B The way that you search is so intuitive that you can find pretty easily anything that you're looking for. So you can be like like, Okay, I'm looking for aluminum sheetstock. So kinda scroll down. Oh, there's raw materials, aluminum. And then it brings up like, okay, what shape or what physical format are you interested in? Or what grade of aluminum, or? So it basically intuitively helps you to narrow down your search. And like it's got a really nice interface for that.
- A Okay.
- B Sorry. This is the engineer coming out.
- A Aluminum sheet stock?
- B Sheet stock or block stock or rod stock or tube stock.
- A Aluminum sheet stock!
- B Sounds more like an exclamation right there.
- A Right.
- B Aluminum sheet stock!

A My favorite that I just learned. Focaccia.

B Yes.

A Which our daughter said her third grade teacher says in class. And she was probably wondering where we were laughing so hard.

B Yes.

A So yes, usability. Thank you for that oddly specific answer. Next is the glass age representing the fiber-optic network that brings us the internet. Do you think he had fun brainstorming?

B I bet it took ages.

A I mean, what else would you call it? The what other materials are there? The aluminum sheet stock age, the titanium carbide age. I don't even know what that is. Did I just make that up?

B No. It's a, it's a real metal. It's what my ring was made out of.

A Oh that's why I know that. Your wedding ring that no longer fits. I mean, it was \$50 on Overstock, so

B It was like 20.

A I spent \$20 on your wedding ring!

B It was fancy. It had a carbon fiber inlay.

A That, beautiful. But you know,

B I don't know.

A Our anniversary is coming up. It'll be time to search for a new titanium carbide fiber inlay wedding band for you.

B Maybe a different material. Maybe something that could be cut off if it gets too tight, you know.

A Ooh, right.

B Because when I went rock climbing with that thing, you had to take it off because if it got caught on a rock, it would take your finger off before it broke.

A Okay, okay. Back to the glass age. Ages later. In, I want to say the early 2000s, there became this focus on single sourcing and reusing content and that kind of thing. So in essence, separating content from medium.

B Please explain what is single sourcing in the context of technical communication.

A Okay. Picture a traditional instruction manual.

B Okay.

A A technical communicator might be responsible for not only the text, but how they format that text, the visuals they incorporate with the text, etc. It's a whole document. But let's say you need to save time and money as a company. So you would instead write chunks of content that go into a database and then that's where you update it so that it updates everywhere and can be duplicated in different places. And you can pull together a manual from these little chunks of text.

B What could go wrong?

A Yeah, I mean, it's not particularly elegant, but that's why we see evolution into roles like information architect or content manager or something. It's not about assembling the whole package so much as it is about managing how pieces will ultimately fit together.

B Okay.

A And I'll note here this is not my specialty area. So anyone listening, if I'm wrong, then, you know, write at me.

B Gently, please.

A Yes.

B So it sounds like single sourcing is that is that idea of making the whole package from one person, yeah?

A The content comes from a single source and then it like propagates out.

B Oh, I see. it's the opposite.

A So you're not updating in this file and that file and this file and that file.

B Got it.

A That brings us up to today.

B What age is it?

A The Golden Age. He doesn't even explain why. Technical communicators are still needed today, but the author here is quite honest about the fact that tech comm is not in demand in the way that it used to be. Meanwhile, academic programs in technical communication have proliferated. There's a mismatch there that could be cause for alarm.

B Ruh roh.

A How did that go?

B Ruh roh! There.

A He says not to worry. We've got a much broader audience that we can reach than just students training to become professional technical communicators. Of course, we can still train future engineers and doctors and scientists to write in their disciplines. But he also says today nearly everyone does tech comm. User-generated content. And he says, they could stand to learn more about how to do it well. Think about it. People are writing product reviews. People are making YouTube tutorials, TikTok tutorials.

B But apparently AI is writing movie reviews.

A Yes, tell the audience.

B I was looking at Prime Video and Aliens 3, which, you know, Sigourney Weaver. And the description for it was "Strange and deadly events occur."

A And we were picturing some disgruntled employee being like, hmm.

B Oh, this one's a sci-fi? Copy, paste,

A Paste, paste, paste. But somebody on Twitter noted that that was probably artificial intelligence. And AI is something that needs to fall under the tech comm umbrella as well. Again, not my expertise, but

B What are you saying?

A It's going to be part of technical communicators' jobs. Like, maybe cleaning up the messes of AI,

B Oh, teaching the AI to do better.

A Teaching people how to use AI, and hopefully bringing that humanistic thread we were talking about before.

B Ah, yes.

A So that it's not Terminator.

B Dun dun dun, dun dun. I'll be back.

A Can you think of any examples of technical communication that you encounter on an everyday basis, created by everyday people who are not professional writers?

B Nope.

A Oh, come on. You are in a Mushrooms of Minnesota Facebook group.

B Ah, yes. Foraging information. In all groups, Rule number 1 is, do not eat what you do not confidently know what it is.

- A And if you are teaching someone else about what's okay to eat and what's not okay to eat, you gotta be super specific and accurate. And people post photos. And they train you in how to look at mushrooms or whatever for certain features.
- B Yep. Sometimes people come with, I just found this on, on a this kind of tree. What is it? Then people who know will come in with the scientific name of what it is and say, toxic or good find.
- A And here's a recipe for it. Oh we'll get to recipes, just you wait. And why would you trust somebody in a Mushrooms of Minnesota Facebook group over, like, an official scientific guide? Or maybe it's not about trust, it's about some other factor that
- B Interesting you bring that up. The first book that I actually read because that's how I started getting into foraging is I read, *The Forager's Harvest* by Samuel Thayer, who incidentally is from roughly the same geographical area as we are. He wrote in there about how very many of the guides that he has read were just wrong. Were just completely wrong about a plant.
- A Who were these quote unquote guys who were wrong?
- B Guides. With a D.
- A Oh.
- B That was an example of official communication.
- A So don't go to the guides, go to the guys.
- B Nice one, I guess. Anyway,
- A But not gender inclusive.
- B Right. So he had noticed that there were a few plants that were, that were very often inaccurately identified as toxic or bitter. He noticed that, like in some cases, a lot of the same wording of how it was said was in different guides that were wrong.
- A Plagiarism?
- B Plagiarism. Absolutely. People who didn't have experience of their own that they were leaning on and were instead just parroting what they saw in these other books.
- A Like the way that Wikipedia parrots *Flags of the World* dot info.
- B You got it in there.
- A I mean, I wouldn't want to be that guy though who discovers that this thing that everyone else says its toxic actually isn't. Like that sounds like a trial and error experience I don't want to go through. So why did he decide all of a sudden, oh, everyone says this is toxic, but I'm going to

B There were some times when he found discrepancies between that and I think ethnographic accounts is the right phrase. Looking at what Native Americans had, and I'm sure that there's a whole lot of information that was just lost. We, white people, wiped out so many of them in "settling" America. But from that information that was retained from stories passed on from Native Americans who either kept it in their culture or relayed it to someone who put it down in words on paper. Sometimes it was a conflict between those two that clued him in that like, maybe we're wrong about this. And other times it was just that there was, it was growing in such abundance that he was curious and,

A And lived to tell the tale.

B Lived to tell the tale. It's not a stark, like there are ways of

A Yes, dipping your toe in.

B more carefully. I'm sorry we're, pun intended, we're getting into the weeds on this. But a lot of things depend on what what time of year you try to collect a plant, what part of the plant to try to collect, how you try to cook it, that sort of thing.

A What would you name the golden age of technical communication? Since we don't know why it's golden. Cardboard. Because of the unboxing videos.

B There's an idea.

A And I love this stuff. I, I'm especially, I especially love seeing how people communicate about health and medicine online because of what that can allow for that professional medical communication maybe does not offer, but also how it gets uniquely messy. Hence, my interests in misinformation and social media. If we are now thinking of technical communication as not just workplace writing, then we need to go back in time and recover all the other forms of communication that we missed when we were obsessed with writing manuals for weapons and teaching Engineering English.

B All right, let me fire up the DeLorean.

A Kimball acknowledges that scholars were doing this long before he was. And one of my favorite tech comm articles of all time is Catherine Durack's piece, "Gender, technology and the history of technical communication." In 1997, she asked, where are the women in the history of tech comm? And she had a few answers that all have to do with sexism.

B Oh, sexism.

A Number one, women historically have not had the leisure time that men have had to engage with technology and writing. Maybe historians excluded them. Women's work has been trivialized or credited to men. Can you think of any famous examples?

B The Double Helix, which was actually Rosalind.

A I cannot remember.

- B We can't remember her name because she didn't get the Nobel Prize, but it was
- A Watson and Crick.
- B Watson and Crick.
- A Here's another one, an ergonomic keyboard that was developed by Lillian Malt. She trained secretaries and notice certain types of errors and connected them with the shape of the keyboard. But that invention was credited to the man who manufactured it. And this isn't strictly a gender problem. I think there are problems generally with society's view of inventors and innovators.
- B Yeah, that's true. I mean, how many good-quality inventors were gobbled up by the shadow of Thomas Edison or Elon Musk.
- A Yeah. I noticed you corrected me when I told Zoe that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb.
- B Thomas Edison headed a team of scientists who figured out the best way to make a light bulb.
- A Also, technologies that largely affect women and home life haven't been considered as significant, like the baby bottle. Think about that. How that revolutionized life for mothers.
- B Infant care.
- A Yeah. Or sewing patterns.
- B The washing machine.
- A And with the Industrial Revolution, that's when the home sphere and the work sphere became
- B more separated.
- A Yes, and women worked in the home and men worked in the factories. Of course, with World War Two, men off to war, women
- B went into the factories to take their place
- A and kind of put to rest this idea that there's some inherent biological reason that there are these separate spheres.
- B It should have at least,
- A Yes. But the home sphere continued to be marginalized. And Durack in her article recounts the cookbook caper. This is our second technical communication scandal of the day.
- B What?

A In the late eighties, somebody submitted a cookbook to a technical publications contest held by the STC. And it was disqualified because it didn't count as technical. Nowadays, I regularly incorporate recipes into my teaching of tech comm because it's such a familiar and relatable genre that is absolutely instructive and technical.

B It's not necessarily written by people with high education. How can it be technical?

A Durack ultimately argues for a more inclusive understanding of tech comm. And this brings me to the last piece I want to discuss by Jones, Moore, and Walton, "Disrupting the past to disrupt the future: An antenarrative of technical communication."

B Antenarrative, is that with an E or an I?

A A N T E as in before. So like a before story. They make the case that tech come as a field has been and should be inherently focused on inclusivity, though those strands of inclusive research may have been overshadowed by this dominant narrative of tech comm as being about objectivity and problem-solving. And I love what they say here. "We too prefer our problems solved, but we do not believe the narrative of our field can nor should be so neatly encompassed by a coherently pragmatic identity." And that's their antenarrative, not a linear story. It's fragmented. And this is not necessarily in opposition to the dominant narrative but adds to it and challenges it at times. They start from the same humanist threads I mentioned earlier, Miller's humanistic rationale, the Slack et al., technical communicator as author. And they address different pockets of inclusive research in the field. Gender and feminism, like the Durack piece, race, international tech comm, public engagement, user advocacy, accessibility, disability. And they want to pull this together into a framework for inclusive, social-justice oriented tech comm research. And this is necessary. And this is exciting. And I will have much more to say about it in a future episode.

B Okay.

A Any final remarks from you?

B I think this was an interesting episode because, spanning the entirety of technical communication from

A the very beginning of time,

B the, you know, the concept of fire being shared from one troglodyte to another through technically grunting. All the way up to expanding our understanding of what is technical communication. De-snootifying it, in a sense.

A Yeah. To mushroom pictures on Facebook.

B Yes. That being pictures of actual mushrooms, not, never mind.

A Did you ever post the picture of your morel?

B I can't remember. I think I did. Yeah, I found one morel in the backyard.

A Ever. And since then you've been like, waiting for the day.

B I've been looking for more, but doggone it, it was a bad year for morels.

A Tasted amazing.

B It was quite tasty. Yes. It was everything you want a mushroom to be.