

sound.views

the newsletter of the Puget Sound Chapter of STC

www.stc-psc.org

volume 9, issue 2 ~ nov/dec 2009

Book Review:

Twitterville: How Businesses Can Thrive in the New Global Neighborhoods

By David Kowalsky

Twitter is a huge phenomenon, but there are still plenty of us out there who have been slow to catch on to using any kind of microblogging software. Until recently, I was one of those people. I figured Twitter wasn't for me because I had no interest in sharing with anyone and everyone what I had for lunch in 140 characters or less. *Twitterville: How Businesses Can Thrive in the New Global Neighborhood*, is the latest book by Shel Israel, a speaker and advisor on social media and the co-author of the bestseller *Naked Conversations* (reviewed in the Jan/Feb 2009 issue of this newsletter).

Twitterville takes the highly entertaining approach of telling the personal stories of those who have successfully used Twitter. The goal is to provide the reader with a few interesting or useful ideas on how Twitter may help them. *Twitterville* emphasizes that Twitter works best when used along with other social media

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At The Next Chapter Meeting: Tuesday, November 17, 2009

Topic:	The ABCs of Documentation Usability Testing
Presenter:	Leah Guren
Time:	6:00-6:45 PM: Networking and Buffet 6:45-7:00 PM: Announcements 7:00-8:15 PM: Presentation 8:15 PM: Informal Q&A
Location:	Coast Hotel, 625 116th Avenue N.E., Bellevue, WA 98004 (map)
Registration:	Register online (https://asi-seattle.com/agent/stc3/register.php) or call 206-623-8632 by 10:00 AM, Monday, November 16
Cost:	\$10 for members; \$15 for non-members; \$5 for students, family Note: Price increases \$10 after deadline.

about sound.views

Sound Views is published for members of the Puget Sound Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

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Submissions

All members are welcome to submit articles, comments, and letters. Articles must address topics of interest to technical communicators, especially to those in the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Send articles in Word (doc), Rich-Text Format (RTF), or ASCII (txt) formats to the Managing Editor. Accompanying graphics or photos should be provided as separate files.

The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters and articles for length and clarity.

The submission deadline for the next issue of *Sound Views* is December 15, 2009.

Reprints

You may reprint original material appearing in *Sound Views* as long as you acknowledge the source and send a copy of the reprint to the Managing Editor.

For more information about the Puget Sound Chapter of STC, visit the Web site at www.stc-psc.org.

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From the President: *A Time of Harvest*

By Mike Brazill, Chapter President

*"For man, autumn is a time of harvest, of gathering together.
For nature, it is a time of sowing, of scattering abroad."
Edwin Teale*

It's autumn and at STC we are working on our yearly competition, our most important annual event. Our competition managers, Mary Ann Bartholomew (online), Elise Morrison (Technical Publications), and Michael Paul (Art) are very busy gathering this year's harvest of Puget Sound technical communication. Over 35 Judges are evaluating scores of entries. Other volunteers are working on awards, communicating with contributors, and coordinating the yearly competition showcase. I want to thank all of the volunteers who are contributing so much this year.

We're also laying the groundwork for a new community experience as we develop our new Web site. Based on new Open Source Web technology, this site will help our community to collaborate and join together in new ways. We are very excited about this project and want to invite volunteers who are interested in learning Web skills to come and join us in this effort.

And we are working on new events, workshops, and Round Table topics for 2010. As the new year approaches, check out the Events page on the chapter Web site for more information about the programs we plan to present in 2010.

I want to wish all of our community members a happy holiday season and an exciting new year.

Mike

Round Table Topics

Are you a recent graduate? New to Puget Sound STC? Looking for advice or help with a project? Check out our informal discussion and networking series, *Round Table Topics*, where technical communicators discuss innovative trends in the field, present their latest projects, and network with colleagues. The events are free, open to all, and held at a variety of Puget Sound-area locations.

Check our Web site (www.stc-psc.org) and e-mail announcements for times and locations.

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Editor's Corner

By Mary Corder

Social media and social networking are changing how we do business and how writers create content. We are more connected now than ever before, sharing ideas and writing content with other people.

The use of social media by technical communicators is a vast topic. We have writers who blog, who "tweet," who create content using wikis and even allow their users to contribute to the documentation, and who collaborate with other writers near and far. Writing is becoming a social activity.

This issue of *Sound Views* covers a few relevant social media topics and includes a review of a book about Twitter by Shel Israel, an interview with Anne Gentle about creating Open Source documentation for the One Laptop per Child project, and an article about putting the social back into social media.

The Puget Sound chapter provides opportunities for you to network with other members and keep in touch with what's happening with the chapter. You can attend chapter meetings and workshops, contribute to the Facebook or LinkedIn groups, or follow our Twitter feed.

We are always looking for volunteers to assist with writing for the newsletter, whether you'd like to help for the year or just for a single issue. I encourage you to contribute newsletter articles, suggestions, or ideas you have for improving *Sound Views*. Some ideas for articles include career or educational experiences, a review of a software tool, or a review of a relevant book.

Feel free to send me your newsletter articles and feedback at newsletter@stc-psc.org.

Puget Sound STC is on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn

Puget Sound STC Facebook Group:

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=21641844730

Puget Sound STC Twitter:

twitter.com/STCPugetSound

Puget Sound STC LinkedIn Group:

www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2009451

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tools, especially blogs, and advises the reader to consider Twitter as part of a larger toolset, which may lead to an entirely new way to conduct business.

In the foreword by Charlene Li (co-author with Josh Bernoff of *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*), Li makes a few important points: Markets are conversations. Twitter is not a technology. It's a conversation. Early in the book, author Israel expands on this, explaining that the term "Twitterville" (he's not sure if he was the first to coin it) connotes a "certain homey, small-town feel, a place where you meet people you know as you stroll down familiar streets." He then goes on to discuss global neighborhoods, which he argues is Twitterville's most important characteristic. In these neighborhoods geography is irrelevant; what matters is that they are full of real people, and real relationships are formed. *Twitterville* takes on the task of showing the value of all this.

The book is organized into three major parts: "How It Started," "What They're Doing," and "How and Why." "How It Started" is about very recent history; Twitter, Inc. officially formed as a company in October of 2006. The "How it Started" and "What They're Doing" sections feature a wide range of stories that have great potential for being idea generators for all kinds of technical communicators. For those working in large, multinational corporations, there is the case of IBM. IBM employees mostly use Twitter to talk with one another, but also to talk with their customers, partners, and other members of the company ecosystem. Israel enthusiastically reports "IBM is absolutely delighted with the results. Twitter saves time, brings employees and customers closer together, and makes the company collectively smarter."



For those working in customer-focused companies (who can afford not to be?), a good story example is Dell. Dell was an early adopter of Twitter back in 2007 with the Dell Outlet. Dubbed the first Twitterville retail shop, it offers things like discount coupon codes and has contributed to generating impressive computer sales numbers. Dell also has

hundreds of company tweeters who are identifiable by @NameatDell, each with an authentic photo. This is to emphasize that people would rather talk to a person and not a branded logo. Israel praises the decision, saying Dell "set a standard for transparency that has been followed by a great many other companies. Personally, I think it is the wisest course."

Let's not forget that Twitter is on the Internet, so is in no way completely immune from spam, scams, phishing, and identity thieves, which are all covered in a

chapter called "Dark Streets." Israel is still optimistic, saying "Twitterville is overwhelmingly comprised of honest people and businesses. It strikes me as an uncommonly generous place."

The "How and Why" part of *Twitterville* and the Afterward both provide plenty of helpful tips to new users and even walk the reader through the basic steps of signing up and starting to use Twitter.

The most surprising thing about reading *Twitterville* was how inspired and challenged it made me feel to actually go out and start using Twitter. I won't hesitate to recommend this book to others who are also still evaluating social media tools for personal or professional use.

David Kowalsky is a technical writer for NEC Corporation of America and a senior member of STC's Puget Sound Chapter. He can be reached at david.kowalsky@necam.com.

Writing for Free/Libre Open Source Software

By Robert Reynolds

When Tomas Krag needed a book on setting up wireless written in a short period of time, he compiled a list of smart friends, secured enough funding to buy a stack of plane tickets and also to pay friends of friends to vacate a London flat for everyone to squat in. Following a week of hashing out details, determining the writing scope, and developing an outline, everyone returned home with their writing assignments and within three months, the first edition was ready. That's what's known as a book sprint—the concept that Krag co-invented—when a bunch of smart people gather for a week to collaborate on a book. Also known as collaborative authoring, this concept has now been around for a few years.

The FLOSS acronym stands for **Free/Libre and Open Source Software**, so it refers to both free software and Open Source software ("Free Manuals for Free Software" is one of their mottos). In constructing the acronym, the Spanish word *libre* was included to emphasize the idea of liberty—the lack of boundaries—as opposed to the notion of something that is available free of cost.

Through book sprints, FLOSS manuals and other high quality manuals are developed in a short amount of time, and the Web makes it possible for writers from all over the globe to get involved remotely, if not locally. I interviewed Anne Gentle about FLOSS, its usefulness, and its implications for the technical writing industry. She is a senior technical writer at Advanced Solutions International, which provides management software for professional and social organizations such as STC. She also authored a book (*Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation*) and maintains a blog (JustWriteClick.com).



How did you get involved in FLOSS? Was it an epiphany, or the result of Open Source work you did?

I heard about the need for writers for the One Laptop per Child project through Bill Gearhart who sent out a call to writers he knew, right before the first major release of the little XO laptop. I had worked for Bill at BMC Software and was intrigued about writing for Open Source projects, especially since wikis were involved. As a parent of two young sons, I was immediately interested in the

OLPC mission of bringing durable laptops to children around the world. In 2007, FLOSS Manuals founder Adam Hyde approached SJ Klein, community content director for OLPC, at Wikimania, and that forged the relationship to document the XO laptop and Sugar education platform using FLOSS Manuals tools.

What are the long-term implications from a technical writer's perspective? What are the economic implications?

Open source success stories are everywhere, with Apache Web server being one of the quickest, easiest, most visible outcome that comes to mind for a lay person to grasp. Open source has so many projects with or without compelling stories though. Perhaps the software was built to fill a small need, and ordinary people may say "so what?" With either resulting uptake and popularity of a project, Open Source has introduced a new way of thinking about building software and with that, new ways of thinking about content—either the content that usually accompanies software or the content that fills a need at a particular point in time. From a technical writer's perspective, the ideas of sharing content, gathering a community with a common

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goal of creating content, and giving away content are brand new and somewhat intimidating at first. Those ideas are reinventing our careers as we know it. Writing in isolation contains less value for some projects. This value change represents the shift for technical writers—both in the short and long term, I believe.

Economic payments are changing from monetary to payments of attention, links, reputation, belonging, and other measurements of value that don't really have a dollar amount tied to them. By claiming this shift in payment will happen, I don't mean that technical writers won't be paid, but I do mean that a technical writer's value will be measured in more than just dollars or in return on investment in business terms. Your reach and influence may be valuable. Your reputation may be valuable. These areas are implications that I explore in my book, *Conversation and Community: The Social Web for Documentation*.

What are the advantages of the FLOSS method, other than the quick production cycle?

The quick production cycle of a book sprint is the result of weeks of planning and perhaps because content already existed that can be improved upon or "curated" into a more helpful collection than it is today. However, that advantage is the direct result of longer investment in background work. Other advantages include the basic rewards that people pursue by being part of an online community—your content can carry a reputation through attribution, be shared more freely, and gain attention through the event of the book sprint itself.

Another good explanation of the advantages of open methods for documentation comes from the FLOSS Manuals FAQ:

"when you use free/libre/open-source manuals, you have the right to use, modify and share the documentation freely. Manuals on the FLOSS Manuals site are no-cost to use online. For paper copies, we charge just for the paper and printing, and a little extra to support making more books. You can also take the online version as a PDF file and print it yourself. You can also edit the documents on

the site, for example, if you find things are incorrect, out of date, or incomplete. (You can also change your own copy, but we appreciate if you help us make the manuals on the site better.)"

What are the drawbacks? Too many writing styles? Does an editor monitor/assimilate the work?

There would be drawbacks to writing content only through book sprints, and it is not easy to get quality content written with one voice during that one-week sprint. Often we'll hire an editor for the week of the book sprint to help writers write better, organize better, and get the big picture. These editors are not the typical grammarian and style guide police types, but ask the tough questions and challenge the book sprint team to improve even when the going gets tough. Book sprints force decisions about documentation that may lead to conflict even during the week of a sprint.

Collaborative authoring is not easy and some professional writers haven't had to collaborate well in the workplace yet. A skilled editor and book sprint facilitator can arbitrate and help the team produce a higher quality book in the end.

Open Source has introduced a new way of thinking about building software and with that, new ways of thinking about content

What are typical contents and audiences of FLOSS manuals? Highly technical stuff for geek folks? Will it eventually evolve to simpler content for lay audiences (like our parents)?

That's a great question. Before writing FLOSS Manuals book (or any set of content), it's important to analyze the audience. One example of a book written to bring technical content to any audience is the book titled, *The GNU/Linux Command Line: An Introduction*. There have been many books written about the command line, but one participant even said:

I have written basic introductions to the command line in three different technical books on GNU/Linux and read dozens of others. FLOSS Manual's "Introduction to the Command Line" is at least as

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clear, complete, and accurate as any I've read or written. But while there are countless correct reference works on the subject, FLOSS's book speaks to an audience of absolute beginners more effectively, and is ultimately more useful, than any other I have seen. ~Mako

So the book projects themselves are carefully chosen and audience analysis occurs before a proposed book is even started.

The only requirement to have a book created in the FLOSS Manual system is that it is about free software. We try to write in a friendly and accessible style.

Can you talk about any future plans for FLOSS?

Currently the main project for FLOSS Manuals is to develop an Open Source software product for collaborative authoring and publishing called **Booki**. We are planning to work with Archive.org on its development, and it is in the very early stages of development. Using the lessons we've learned from our 14 book sprints to date, the platform would enable collaborative publishing as well as let anyone install and maintain their own installation.

The FLOSS Manuals tool used today at flossmanuals.net is a modified TWiki installation. For some of the enhancements beyond a wiki it uses extensions that are given back to the TWiki community. It is all free software. However, it does require user support, and the overall site may not be easily replicated. The Booki project starts from the beginning, developing the wiki and chat tools we've found useful.

Tell me more about the book sprints. Would this be a volunteer opportunity for STC members to gain more writing experience, network, etc.?

Absolutely. At DocTrain West last year, we had participants work on a Firefox manual and the chief engineer from Mozilla came to the event to participate. That book was helpful to many people and that sprint also enabled 14 remote collaborators to contribute within the sprint's timeframe. Students, writers in other countries, unemployed writers, you name it, all could benefit from

participating in the FLOSS Manuals community. In-person networking occurs at the sprints themselves, which may be in all areas of the world. Networking and connections can also happen on the FLOSS Manuals Discuss mailing list. Go to lists.flossmanuals.net/listinfo.cgi/discuss-flossmanuals.net to sign up or read archives.

Have you ever been approached or would you (FLOSS) ever consider working with non-Open Source companies to produce manuals? (This would obviously go against the Open Source model...).

Companies have asked to use the FLOSS Manuals toolset for authoring, but the basic goal of FLOSS Manuals is to provide free content for free software. If the software or project being documented doesn't meet the criteria, then a book isn't set up in FLOSS Manuals. You could use any tool such as FrameMaker for shortened manual production. For example, IBM uses an in-person collaboration approach to authoring RedBooks. They bring together a team of subject matter experts for a short period of time to work on the outline and some of the content, and then they finish their "writing assignments" within a short time period such as 4-6 weeks.

Would you consider selling or licensing the FLOSS collaborative publishing platform to non-Open Source companies?

The Booki platform being built will be available through an Open Source license, in hopes to bring more collaborative publishing options to more documentation projects.

It's an exciting time of growth for FLOSS Manuals—thanks for asking these great questions.

Additional Reading:

en.flossmanuals.net
www.booksprint.info
www.fsf.org/blogs/community/book-sprint

Robert E. Reynolds is in his second year as a technical writer after wearing hats as a software tester and landscape designer/environmental planner. He currently works at EDIFICS in Bellevue, and he can be reached at rer22@cornell.edu.

Putting the Social Back into Social Media

By Brad Lawless

When I was asked to write an article on social media, I struggled to select an appropriate, useful, and interesting angle for a group of technical communicators.

Social media can serve a number of purposes and solve innumerable problems. Twitter was initially conceived only as a status updating service among friends. The platform now enables brands to connect with customers, students to discuss homework with professors, and customer service representatives to troubleshoot issues before a customer even picks up a phone.



The power of social media lies in its fluidity of purpose. The community using the media defines its ultimate purpose and direction. This fluid nature is also what boggles most professionals seeking to implement social media in the workplace or in marketing campaigns.

Traditional business practices over the last 30 years have sought to control any message or communication about a company's brand or to its employees. In my opinion, companies never could really control how its constituents accepted and relayed their messages. In the world of social media, it's easier than ever for individuals to connect with one another and discuss a brand or product in any way they wish. Organizations can participate and influence this conversation, but they'll never control it again.

Creating or connecting to a community via social media isn't complicated, but it does take time. Too often, people focus on the technologies of social media at the expense of creating true connections with people. A Twitter account does you no good if you have no followers, and a Facebook page can't

promote your business if no one reads your updates.

Laura Fitton, a social media consultant, recently said that excellence in social media can be summed up in the following four words: "Listen. Learn. Care. Serve."

Listen

Listening is the most important step in any social media activity. If you don't understand what people are already saying about you, your company, your organization, or your brand, you can't know which social media properties you should

develop. If all your constituents are on Facebook, a Twitter account may do you no good. You should measure the conversation taking place around your topic of interest for at least several weeks. A number of tools exist in a wide range of pricing to assist with this monitoring activity. Some of the more popular include Radian6, Sysomos, ViralHeat, and Filtrbox. You can also find a number of free and paid Twitter analytics tools at oneforty.com.

Learn

After listening to the existing conversation, you can start identifying your target community. Every community has key influencers. These people have large numbers of followers on their blogs or Twitter feeds. When they post items on your particular topics of interest, their followers engage them in conversation by posting comments or replies. Compile a list of the top 10-20 influencers for your topic or target campaign. When building an internal support community, your key influencers might be your most knowledgeable subject matter experts.

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Blazek and Ashcraft Awarded STC-PSC 2009 Scholarships

By Diane Forsyth

Every year, the Puget Sound Chapter of STC awards two scholarships to undergraduate students and graduate students. The awarding of scholarships is something that is truly one of the best ways for our chapter to encourage and assist upcoming technical communicators.

Until recently, we had one scholarship that was set up several years ago (1986) to honor two University of Washington professors and chapter founders, James W. Souther and Myron L. White. Both did so much to get technical communication on the map in our region. Most of the Souther and White scholarship comes from investment in a CD, with the chapter making up any shortfall if the need arises (such as in a bad investment return year!).



We were able to add a chapter-donated scholarship in the past few years. Part of the rationale for this was that we receive many excellent applications and, the academic programs had grown and expanded. We noticed that roughly half the applications came from Master's and PhD students, while the other half were undergraduate students from both 4-year degree and 2-year certificate programs. It was difficult judging equitably the varying levels of submissions, especially for the work or class assignment samples which are a requirement for submission. So, we decided to offer the second scholarship for undergraduate students to level the playing field and add some clarity to the decision-making process.

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Care

How do you develop a relationship with someone? You care about them. That doesn't change just because you're developing a relationship with a blogger or other key influencer. Participation in social media is voluntary. Your community members must want to participate on their own. If forced to participate, they will do it grudgingly or might refuse altogether.

Serve

When serving members of your community, you don't have to rake leaves in their front yards or take their kids to school. Instead, you must ensure that your social media solutions contribute positively to their online experience. Your key influencers have better things to do than simply make your campaign a success. If they are public bloggers, consider how your campaign will help to drive traffic to their own site. If you are developing an internal support community, help your subject matter experts understand how a bit of community-based support can increase productivity and organizational morale.

Following these steps will help you construct an initial social media strategy for your project or organization. Properly understanding your community will help to ensure the success of that strategy as you translate it into tactical business operations.

Brad Lawless is director of brand strategy for Collective Bias (www.collectivebias.com), where he provides social media training and strategy recommendations for the agency's clients.

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We are very pleased to announce the recipients of this year's scholarships and want to share some information about them.

Laura Blazek, is a full-time student at the University of Washington in the Visual Communication Design program and is in her senior year of a BFA. Laura was on the Dean's List for five consecutive quarters, and her interests lie in the areas of publication, interaction, and exhibition design. Her interesting sample submission was of a high quality, and one of her references cited Laura as an exceptional student who "works very hard, she is extremely articulate, and her approach to design is solid."

Jake Ashcraft, also attending the University of Washington, is working on his master's degree in Human Centered Design and Engineering (formerly Department of Technical

Communication). Jake is also pursuing advanced education in the Department of Chemistry, where he was a teaching assistant in 2008. Having a strong background in both the communication and scientific disciplines puts him in an ideal position to attain his long-term professional goal of communicating science in the nonprofit arena. He has already achieved much, as a former museum educator and Peace Corps volunteer.

Additionally, we received strong recommendations from his professors and his writing samples were very readable examples of technical/science writing.

On behalf of the STC-PSC chapter, I'd like to wish Laura and Jake all the best in their professional pursuits after graduation.

Time to Renew Your STC Membership

STC membership is based on a calendar year. All memberships expire on December 31.

Dues Information

Individuals joining STC for the first time (or former members whose membership has lapsed more than a year) pay Society dues, a \$30.00 enrollment fee, chapter and SIG fees (if applicable). If you are reinstating your membership after a break of less than one year, you will pay the dues amount, a \$15.00 reinstatement fee, chapter and SIG fees (if applicable). You can find information about dues on the STC Web site (www.stc.org/membership/join-the-society-for-technical-communication.asp#dues-information).

Your dues may be tax deductible. For more information see the STC Web site (www.stc.org/membership/member-tax-benefits.asp).

Payment Plan

STC is offering the option with online renewals to pay for dues in four equal installments. The monthly installment payments will be automatically deducted from your credit card (or credit card-backed debit card) and will begin the first business day after your application has been processed. They will continue approximately every 30 days for the next three consecutive months.