

## Book Review

# *Wicked, Incomplete, and Uncertain: User Support in the Wild and the Role of Technical Communication*

Jason Swarts

Swarts, J. (2018). *Wicked, incomplete, and uncertain: User support in the wild and the role of technical communication*. Utah State University Press.

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In *Wicked, Incomplete, and Uncertain*, Jason Swarts examines the changing role of technical communication in addressing user problems that are becoming more specialized and situated within use cases that users themselves do not readily understand. These emergent and real-time problems have led to the rise of online forums and communities, which this book studies in depth. In particular, Swarts studies four community forums for software technology products—Microsoft Excel, Adobe InDesign, Gimp, and Mozilla Thunderbird—that are not only commonly used by technical writers, but also popular products with numerous plug-ins and end users across industries. As a technical writer myself, I have used all of these products, and participate in forums for open source and cloud computing products at the enterprise software company that I work at (IBM). This review seeks to synopsise Swarts’s book by reflecting upon how I have or have not used such techniques in my own workplace experience.

From this look at “user support in the wild” and the genre conventions that Swarts identifies, I came to understand that the products I write and the skills I need are also shifting into more rhetorical stewardship of technical content resources, not just writing manuals, reviewing content, or other more traditional, one-way communication products. Indeed, Swarts (2018) identifies three rhetorical challenges that the book attempts to address: “wicked and tame problems, the decentering of expertise, and help as a social act,” which emerge from “how knowledge creation is redistributed” in today’s business and technological landscape

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*Communication Design Quarterly*. ACM SIGDOC, New York, USA.

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Manuscript received September 25, 2020; revised October 3, 2020; accepted October 5, 2020.

CDQ 10.1145/3410430.3410433

(p. 30). Such problems are “wicked,” or shifting and undefinable (in contrast to “tame,” or clear and solvable problems) and reflect the situations that technical writers, engineers, and users alike increasingly find themselves in.

I must confess that whenever I hear words like “knowledge creation is redistributed,” my initial reaction is unease, because such terms seem to go hand-in-hand with organizational restructuring and other strategic initiatives that could make my job and thousands of others across the industry obsolete. However, I found Swarts’s book timely, relevant, and useful to the challenges that I come across in my day-to-day job, and an invitation to embrace the change by recognizing that writers have many skills that are critical to the shifting landscape. I apply the takeaways not so much in question-and-answer style forums that the study describes, but instead with conversations and more direct interactions with our product’s users. These conversations are increasingly mediated through technologies like instant messaging in group chat apps such as Slack or Microsoft Teams, or even with artificial intelligence (AI)-enhanced chatbots, as opposed to a forum. If there is a weakness of the book, I believe it lies in the fact that parts of the software industry that the book focuses on seem to be moving away from open forums and more towards these closed forums or personalized interactions, which might present their own challenges in surfacing back the information to the broader community.

Swarts (2018) begins by showing how technical communication emerged to accommodate technologies to the situated use cases of people, initially through text but increasingly through other media (p. 3). While still text-based, forums offer the opportunity for dialogue amongst developers, writers, users, and anyone else with internet access. One of the common issues writers face is that no one reads the manual. Yet people still need content to learn and use technology. Another issue is that technical communication usually describes how the technology begins in a prerequisite state, moves through interim states, and finally results in the desired state (Swarts, 2018, p. 18), similar to traditional task-based documentation that outlines prerequisite steps, tasks, and postrequisite steps. Increasingly, however, users combine technologies with other ones,

and the resulting combination can make it “wicked,” or difficult for the users and experts to know what state they are in, which affects how well they can use the documentation.

Forums arose as a convenient way for users to ask help from more experienced users and even the creators of a product. With forums, users can articulate their own problems instead of fitting them into a pre-written FAQ or topic, and also respond back to people, asking them for more information to help collectively troubleshoot a problem. Users tend to prefer this style of interaction, because talking is easier than reading. I have also found that triaging user questions in threads not only helps me identify real issues to improve the documentation that I write, but also helps me build relationships with the development team, which appreciates me proactively reducing support tickets and also funneling back select feedback to them on product usage.

Because forums are problem-based, they have their own unique style and genres of interaction. Building off Carolyn Miller who wrote of “genre as social action” in 1984, Swarts posits genre as a helpful way to look at the social nature and structure that forum interactions tend to take, and the rhetorical actions that are effective in moving the dialog forward towards a resolution. In particular, Swarts (2018) defines four types of genres: work arounds, work throughs, best practices, and diagnoses (pp. 101–102). Then, using verbal data analysis, he traces the rhetorical moves that each genre typically consists of, such as a work around consisting of identifying the actors that contribute to the issue (p. 103); narrating experience of previous user success in resolving the issue (p. 106); verifying and evaluating a solution (p. 107); and identifying impediments to the solution and causes of the failure (p. 109). I was curious whether every interaction follows these genres, or whether there might be more genres out there. In my own experience, user interactions are so brief that I do not think about the genre. However, the power of genre might be precisely that, that we do not think about it, we just act within it. As such, the explicit study of genres and rhetorical moves could be a helpful teaching tool or classroom exercise for learners to “templatize” how to conduct user conversations and think about problems, as well as an opportunity to roleplay with subject matter experts.

Although the required skills and products might change, Swarts argues writers are well-positioned to help users solve wicked problems in forums. Even though forums often invite non-writers to “write the doc,” forums actually extend the work that writers have to do, not replace them. Thinking of my peers at work, I wonder how writers will embrace these new responsibilities. I know people who relish the chance to participate, and others who reject it because of the additional responsibilities and devaluation of their editorial expertise. Editorial expertise, at least in my workplace, is linked to accessibility and internationalization concerns, because unless the source content is well-edited, it is difficult to translate. We can only do so much as individual writers, and if these increasing responsibilities are not met with increasing resources, other areas might suffer. In general, the book does not address how (or whether) forums are made accessible or translated. In my experience, forums generally are primarily English-based resources. I also have not tried to use a screen-reader on a tool like Slack. Further research might involve ways to extend the conversations that happen in forums to broader audiences in more accessible ways.

Similarly, some of the skills that writers are encouraged to adopt are familiar in a classroom, whereas others involve bringing in

knowledge from allied disciplines. In particular, Swarts (2018) suggests that writers focus on the following skills (pp. 138–149):

- Negotiating workflows and managing projects
- Interpreting and solving problems
- Facilitating interpersonal communication amongst community members
- Structuring information to develop community knowledge
- Encouraging good habits and good character
- Shaping user contributions into genre forms on the forums
- Articulating and preserving knowledge

I wonder, however, if the challenge of wicked problems might also push the field of technical communication towards technology-heavy framework issues, such as search engine optimization (SEO) for increasing the findability of content, or node.js and other web programming to enhance an online website with progressive disclosure features that might not even exist today.

In summary, although the title of *Wicked, Incomplete, and Uncertain* problems tempts one to think that the answer is more expertise for more answers, writers actually do not need to be experts to solve wicked problems. Instead, writers can help by being experts in making knowledge that scaffolds learning so that users can do more with the product. The primary strength of the book lies in the tools it gives its readers to think about the nature of our problems. Sometimes such thinking might result in a quick answer on a user forum, but other times it might be more systemic, such as identifying areas to automate a support ticketing process. Instead of throwing out a question in the hopes of a quick and easy answer (what often motivates forum posts), we have an opportunity as writers to be the people who step back and look at problems collectively, holistically, and humanely, and facilitate the work to meaningfully address these problems.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Art Berger works as a Technical Writer for IBM’s cloud services and open source projects. He creates a variety of technical documentation, including instructions, training materials, application program interface (API) documents, user interface (UI) text, command line interface (CLI) strings, error messages, videos, diagrams, and more. As the President of the STC Carolinas chapter, he enjoys helping people in the local area connect with other professionals, events, and resources to succeed in their technical communication pursuits.