

Technical Communication: A Cultural Studies Approach

Technical information is communicated by implied or explicit attempts for getting audiences to use common, expected forms of mass communication....The implied messages within forms of technical communication relate to the rhetoric of technology. As Bazerman (1998) defined, the rhetoric of technology “is the rhetoric of all the discourses that surround and embed technology” (p. 387). The cultural-specific messages are part of the discourse surrounding technology. Cultures produce technologies that conform to ideology. One can read technology through semiotics because the technology reproduces and, therefore, signifies concepts a culture understands—even on a subconscious level. In American culture, cars represent freedom, a concept Americans promote. Although an owner’s manual does not cover how one attains freedom with purchasing a car, Americans associate cars with freedom. Getting one’s driver’s license is a rite of passage for American teenagers and provides them with a sense of freedom because they are able to be mobile and drive to school, the movies, the beach, etc. This idea is communicated to teenagers (and others) through popular culture, commercials, and word of mouth. Even though the discourse is not instructive on how to operate a vehicle, as is the case with the owner’s manual, the message regarding freedom still acclimates users to technology. It is important to consider this type of technical communication as valid for study because it is potentially a powerful rhetorical aspect of communicating technical information. Another reason why users need to be acclimated to technology is because they are important “actors” or “relevant social groups” that are part of the social construction of technology (Bijker 1995, p. 48). Technology not adhering to cultural values or, at least, not being made to fit cultural values will not become realized.

—Toscano, p. 27

The goal of technical communicators is to present information in general terms. This does not necessarily mean the audience is completely ignorant of the concept, situation, technology, etc. Instead, “people enjoy things said in general terms that they happen to assume ahead of time in a partial way” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 2.21.15) means the audience has been exposed a priori to discussions of science and technology. As citizens in a technological world, we have assumptions about technologies because we absorb discourse about and have experience with these social artifacts. Audiences do not discover sciences and technologies in a vacuum: Scientists and inventors communicate their work, which gets filtered to lay audiences, but prior assumptions help those experts by conditioning the audience to already accept some information about the specific science or technology (e.g., knowledge of global warming) or a belief in the efficacy of science or technology to solve problems. To be successful, both technology and discourse surrounding technology have to adhere to audience expectations. One of the most difficult concepts to communicate is that these expectations are ideological and not mechanical/technological. If the origins of technology are demonstrated, this humanist endeavor might convince audiences to pursue socially conscious technologies. Students, for instance, might begin to understand that technology is not a given or that the “best” product does not always come to be.

—Toscano, p. 29

References

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