15. History

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In technical communication, the term *history* may refer to a timestream of events or the past events themselves, as in the statement "technical communication cannot be understood as standing outside of history" (Longo & Fountain, 2013, p. 176). More often, though, the term refers to attempts to understand the past through such activities as ***researching***, interpreting, and narrating: for example, "if the field of technical communication is instrumental communication, communication that gets things accomplished, so must its history" (Brockmann, 1998, p. 386). The following questions drive many of the conversations that scholars have about the study of technical communication history: Why should we study history? What history should we study? How should we study history?

On the question of why we should study history, Gerald Savage (1999/2003) suggested that historical studies of technical communication help to legitimize the ***profession*** of technical communication by contributing to the development of collective historical consciousness. For those who view technical communication as a humanistic endeavor, the study of history is one way of humanizing the practice of technical communication (Rutter, 1991/2004). Many scholars have offered project-specific justifications for studying history. Edward A. Malone (2007) classified some of these justifications into four categories: invention, precedent, distance, and context. We may study the past to discover (invent) ideas and find inspiration; we may look for past analogues (precedents) that help us persuade others to make decisions or take action; we may use a historical perspective (distance) to help an ***audience*** view a situation with greater objectivity; or we may gain a better understanding of our work by investigating the past events (context) that gave rise to and continue to influence the work. These four categories are not exhaustive, but they describe some of the major uses of history in our discipline. (For additional uses of history, see Brockmann, 1998, pp. 385-395; Connor, 1991; and Malone & Wright, 2012.)

Studying history can also improve our production and consumption of scholarship. All topics in technical communication have a history, and sometimes that history extends back several decades in technical communication journals, yet too many new articles in our field have literature reviews that cover only post-2000 works or (conversely) a few dated works from the 1990s. A literature review can be a form of historiography that interprets the evolution of scholarly interest. The history of scholarship on a topic may suggest novel avenues of research even as it undercuts claims of novelty. When we consume scholarship, a well-developed historical consciousness can help us evaluate cited sources critically, readily noticing when older sources are being used inappropriately.

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The same kind of ***knowledge*** can help us evaluate claims about the discipline and decide whether to repeat those claims. For example, technical communication is often claimed to be a relatively new field, discipline, or profession. As Yvonne Cleary (2016) wrote, "technical communication is a new occupational field, relative to more traditional occupations such as medicine and law" (p. 126). Such statements stretch the meaning of "new" and are potentially misleading to students and others. Technical communication is, of course, an ancient practice. Technical documents have been produced throughout history around the world (e.g., Ding, 2020; Raign, 2019, 2022). And while technical communication may be "a new concept in China" (Yu, 2011, p. 72), "a new occupational field in Ireland" (Cleary, 2016, p. 127), and "a new profession" in Finland (Suojanen, 2010, p. 54), it is a well-established academic discipline and profession in the United States. The first university courses in technical writing were created at the beginning of the 20th century; the first academic degree programs in technical writing and ***editing*** were created in the 1950s (Connors, 1982/2004; Kynell, 2000). Full-time technical writers and editors in the modern sense had existed before World War II; these occupations grew quickly during and after the war, and since 1943 the job title "technical writer" has been included in the U.S. Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (Malone, 2011). A profession of technical communication began to emerge in the 1950s when technical writers, editors, illustrators, managers, and librarians formed professional associations, created codes of ***ethics***, published journals, and held conferences (Malone, 2011). Thus, we cannot say that technical communication is a "new" field, discipline, or profession in the United States.

Similarly, some claims should not be repeated without heavy qualification: for example, that "the history of technical writing still has not been written" (Moran & Tebeaux, 2012, p. 58) or that "we have no history to show our sustained existence in the world—just a collage of articles and a few monographs" (Tebeaux, 2014, p. 253). The situation is not as dire as these statements suggest. Scholars have been researching and writing about the history of technical communication since at least the 1950s. They have contributed many historical studies to the profession's body of knowledge, as documented in bibliographic essays by R. John Brockmann (1983), William Rivers (1994/1999), Edward A. Malone (2007), and Michael Moran and Elizabeth Tebeaux (2011, 2012). Their output has included more than a few book-length studies, such as the monographs by Brockmann (1998, 2002, 2004), Bernadette Longo (2000), Mark Ward (2014), Dirk Remley (2014), and Carol Siri Johnson (2016) and the edited collections by Teresa Kynell and Michael Moran (1999) and Miles Kimball and Charles Kostelnick (2017). Other disciplines, too, have shown an interest in technical writing history (e.g., Formisano & Van Der Eijk, 2009). Our discipline does not have a textbook or reference work that provides an overview of technical communication from ancient times to the present, but however useful such a work might be, it would still be just another thread in a tapestry of diverse perspectives on our history. (On historiography as tapestry weaving, see Brockmann, 1998, p. 3.)

What history should we study? Some scholars believe that the proper subject of historical study in our discipline is communication, usually in the form of documents. In their own research, they analyze historical texts and ***visuals***. They use the phrase "history of technical communication" to mean mainly writing in the past and seldom stray far from the artifacts they are studying. (For an example of this focus, see Tebeaux, 2014, pp. 253-258.) Other scholars in the field explore a broader range of history-related topics, such as the lives and careers of technical communicators (e.g., Hayhoe, 2017); technologies related to writing, ***designing***, and publishing (e.g., Durack, 2003a); the teaching of technical communication (e.g., Sullivan, 2012); the project of professionalization (e.g., Hallier & Malone, 2012); oral technical communication (e.g., Brockmann, 1998, pp. 99-116; Pochatko, 2017); communicative rituals in mathematics (Fiss, 2020); transmedia storytelling (Malone, 2019); and the subfield of technical editing (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2019, pp. 1-19; Malone, 2006; Warren, 2010). They may analyze technical documents as well, but they do not limit their focus to these artifacts.

A number of scholars have attempted to classify historical studies by historical period or theme (Kynell & Moran, 1999; Malone, 2007; Rivers, 1994/1999), but such classification systems inevitably break down because many historical studies cover material from more than one century or country, focus on more than one theme or topic, or include history as part of a larger discussion of a topic (e.g., Brasseur, 2003).

Over the decades, technical communication scholars have advocated for greater inclusiveness in historical research. Noting that historical studies before 1983 usually focused on "celebrated authors and scientists" as technical writers, Brockmann (1983) called for more studies of the "common man" as a technical writer (pp. 155-156). To investigate the work of uncelebrated and often anonymous technical communicators, a researcher must inspect unpublished (and often handwritten) documents, such as letters and memoranda; drafts of ***proposals***, reports, and drawings; job descriptions and personnel files; and other records in corporate archives and libraries' special collections. About 15 years after Brockmann's important contribution, Katherine Durack (1997) called for more historical studies of female technical communicators and their work, a project that required a reconsideration of what counts as technical communication. Thanks in part to her efforts, documents such as cookbooks, sewing patterns, and childcare manuals are more likely now than in the past to be recognized and appreciated as technical communication. Since 1997, there has been a steady stream of historical studies about female technical communicators and their work (e.g., Durack, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Hallenbeck, 2012; Lippincott, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Malone, 2010, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Petersen, 2016; Raign, 2019; Rauch, 2012).

Because most of these studies are about American or British subjects, however, Emily Petersen (2017) has challenged historians of technical communication to heed ***international/intercultural communication***, giving special attention to "women of color and women of the Global South" (pp. 1, 25). India is one

promising site for this research agenda, and oral history interviews may be the best research method (Petersen, 2017, p. 17). (For examples of oral history interviews with women in technical communication, see Lewenstein, 1987; Malone, 2014; Swent, 1989.) During her own interviews with female technical writers in India, Petersen (2017) gleaned information about the men and women who founded that country's decades-old technical writing industry. The first account of India's technical writing industry was published in a technical communication journal nearly 60 years ago (Sampath & Murthy, 1966).

How should we study history? Researchers studying the history of technical communication must use primary sources, such as the accident report of a historic train wreck, a map of the train's route and a timetable of its stops, interviews with passengers and bystanders, and even the train itself, but researchers must also conduct a thorough literature review and use relevant secondary sources, such as a documentary film or journal articles about the historic train accident or studies of other train wrecks. Beyond these basic working principles, several technical communication scholars have proposed multistep approaches to conducting historical research for either academic publication (Battalio, 2002; Connor, 1993; Kynell & Seely, 2002; Tebeaux & Killingsworth, 1992) or immediate workplace application (Longo & Fountain, 2013; Shirk, 2000/2004). These approaches emphasize the importance of understanding context, such as relevant details about the time period in which a document was created, the organization that created it, and its intended audience.

Sometimes, a researcher in technical communication may borrow a historiographic approach from another discipline, such as textual studies or literary studies. For example, W. Tracy Dillon (1997) explained how the methods of new historicism—a form of criticism once popular in literary studies—might be used to study historical technical documents. This approach is political and cultural as well as self-reflective. If the nature of historicity is such that every historical study is infused with the subjective ideologies of those who produced it (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 253), then acknowledging our own ideologies as historians may be more honest and helpful than claiming—or giving the impression of—too much objectivity.

Another promising approach to historiography is the use of antenarratives. The history that has already been written is a history that privileges some people and activities over others, often unfairly. A dominant narrative in this history tends to drown out other narratives as it creates and maintains its own homogeneity. One way to rescue the nondominant (usually unnoticed or forgotten) stories in our history is by telling "a disruptive 'before' story that seeks to destabilize and unravel aspects of the tightly woven dominant narrative about who we are as a field, what we do, where our work occurs, and what we value" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 212). By interrogating previous historical studies, and (re)examining historical evidence, researchers can sometimes lend new, stronger voices to nondominant stories. This approach is ultimately future oriented: "Antenarratives open up a space that invites reinterpretation of the past so as to suggest—and enable—different possibilities for the future" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 212).

For example, Miriam Williams (2010) and others have started important conversations about issues of race and ethnicity in historical technical communication, but thus far no one has written about (or even mentioned) the role of African Americans in the profession-building activities of technical communicators in the 1950s and 1960s, yet there is evidence of significant contributions and presence—for example, the safety posters by technical illustrator John H. Terrell in the 1950s ("His Cartoons," 1956); a 1956 article by Herbert Augustus in *Technical Writing Review*; an *Ebony* magazine cover story about La Bonnie Bianchi, the first African American woman to graduate with a master's degree in technical writing in 1960 ("Woman Engineer," 1961); three technical writing textbooks by radio engineer Rufus P. Turner in the mid-1960s; and the accomplishments of David J. Chesnut (see Figure 15.1), the first African American fellow of the Society for Technical Communication. Investigating and recovering this part of our history might help to change perceptions about the field.

Although there is already a large body of literature about technical communication history, researchers still have plenty of work to do because writing the history of technical communication is an ongoing project that will never be finished and will always need reinterpretation and revision.

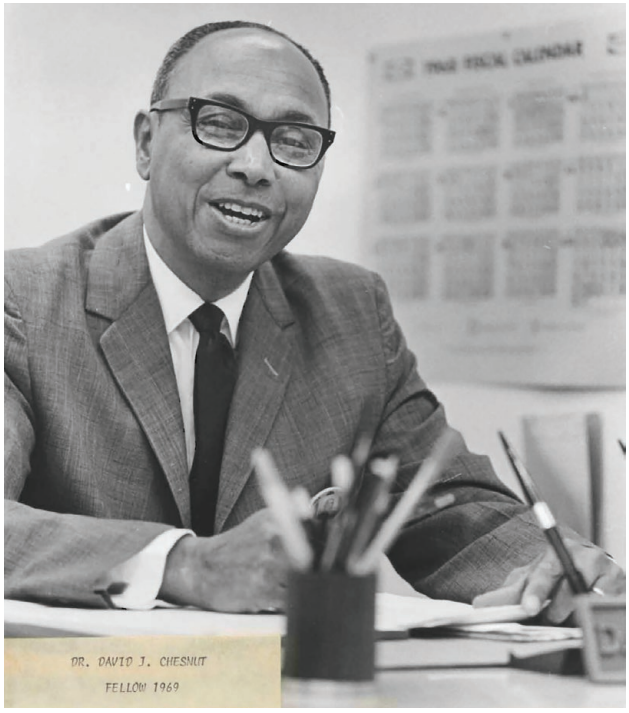

Figure 15.1. David J. Chesnut, first African American fellow of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). Photograph from the archives at STC headquarters in Fairfax, VA. Reprinted with permission.

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