10

WHO ARE THE USERS?

Media Representations as Audience-Analysis Teaching Tools

Karla Saari Kitalong

If all else fails, read the manual.

Consumer of High-Tech Product

Although usually meant to be humorous, this clichè underscores a truism: Instruction manuals are often unhelpful and difficult to understand. In fact, the quote's bitter tone suggests that customers feel alienated from technological products and that they blame such alienation on flawed instruction manuals. Of course, the technical communicators who write these instruction manuals do not set out to alienate customers; in fact, just the opposite tends to be true—most technical communicators consider themselves to be user advocates.

Nevertheless, many technical manuals are, indeed, unintelligible to their intended readers. This problem affects two kinds of stakeholders. Obviously, unintelligible documentation affects technology consumers, the primary audience for documentation. But it also affects technical communicators, whose reputations and job satisfaction hinge on producing products that users can relate to. Audience analysis is touted as the way to get in touch with the users of technical documents; however, this mainstay of technical communication pedagogy and practice has changed very little in the past thirty years or more, despite all the technological changes that have occurred during that time period. Even a cursory review of the audience-analysis chapters in a selection of recent technical communication textbooks reveals that regardless of the theoretical allegiances of the authors, all textbooks recommend practically the same procedures for analyzing audiences. In most cases, textbook authors recommend a *classification* model like the one outlined by Karen Schriver (1996, 153). Such seeming agreement among textbooks concerning audience analysis implies that technical communicators have

settled on the best way to understand readers. As Jan Youga (1989), author of *The Elements of Audience Analysis,* puts it, "When the concept [of audience] is explained to us, we can all nod in agreement at this commonsense notion." However, I suggest in this chapter that the taken-for-granted classification method of audience analysis, while necessary, is not sufficient, especially given recent and continuing changes in both the technological landscape and the users who populate it. As Youga puts it, "to really understand what audience is and how it affects a piece of writing, we need to look at it more closely" (2).

To look more closely at audience analysis in technical communication, I characterize it in terms suggested by J. MacGregor Wise's (1998) concept of the differentiating machine and Bruno Latour's (1993) concepts of purification and hybridity. I propose an alternate or supplemental approach to understanding audiences that blends figural analysis, a method drawn from cinema studies, with what Schriver calls intuition- and feedback-driven audience-analysis methods (1996, 153–154). This alternate method involves regarding as representative users the figures who populate media representations such as advertisements, news reports, and cartoons.

WHY ARE TECHNICAL DOCUMENTS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND?

It's easy to blame technical communicators for inadequate technical documents and for the accompanying alienation that readers experience, as captured in the familiar saying with which I introduced this chapter, "If all else fails, read the manual." A number of authors, probably unintentionally, ratify such blame by recommending that technical communicators address documentation shortcomings by reconsidering how we teach and conduct audience analysis (for instance, Dobrin 1989; Alred, Oliu, and Brusaw 1992; Schriver 1996; Holland, Charrow, and Wright 1988).

Besides blaming readers' alienation on the writers who produce technical documents, one might also logically blame the readers themselves, reasoning that they are responsible for their technological weaknesses. Expressions such as "idiot-proof" and acronyms such as "ESO condition" ("Equipment Smarter than Operator," a term I learned from a student who formerly worked at a home electronics superstore) point unsympathetic fingers at users who do not understand technological devices.[1]

But professional user advocates and interaction designers disagree with both these blame games. The problem with technology, these

experts assert, is not that users—or technical communicators—are incompetent, but that technologies are needlessly complex (Norman 1990, 1994; Cooper 1999; Johnson 1998b; Head 1999; Mirel 1993). Users will remain alienated from technology and from technical documents, this line of thinking asserts, until those users have a say in how technological tools are designed. In recent years, a few forward-thinking companies have begun to implement user-centered design (UCD) in which representative users are involved in the design process from the beginning. Other progressive companies perform usability testing, usually late in the product development cycle, in an attempt to intercept and correct major usability problems before the product is released. But neither user-centered design nor usability testing has become widespread enough to prevent end-user alienation, especially because technology use itself has simultaneously intensified. If technical communicators, interface designers, or other user advocates were in control of their companies' product development processes, the transition to a more user-centered product development process might pick up speed. Unfortunately, such control usually rests with professionals like programmers or operations managers, whose priorities are elsewhere (and who coined terms like "idiot-proof" and "ESO"). However, technical communicators can influence segments of the product development process over which they exercise control, including audience analysis, to lessen the impact of customer alienation.

ALIENATION

Just as I don't believe that technical communicators deliberately alienate computer users from technology, I likewise don't believe that computer users have always been alienated in this way. Such alienation appears to be a relatively new phenomenon, fueled by two recent and related technocultural developments. First, there is the sheer proliferation of technology in myriad forms, from cell phones to ATMs to computers.[2] Everyday lives in Western societies are increasingly organized and overdetermined by technology: "Like the purloined letter, technology is 'there'" in plain view, yet it "cannot be located in any one place" (Ormiston 1990, 102). Not so long ago, the typical computer user was a professional computer scientist, engineer, technical researcher, or advanced technical student. In J. Macgregor Wise's (1998) terms, a *differentiating machine* was in place that successfully organized—or differentiated—technological artifacts and their users, so as to create easily

distinguished categories of technology expertise (67). Today, on the other hand, ordinary citizens participate alongside technological specialists in the effects of technological growth and overdetermination.

> Traditionally, the more complex a mechanical device was, the more highly trained its operators were. Big machinery was always locked away and operated by trained professionals in white lab coats. The information age changed everything, and we now expect amateurs to manage technology far more complex than our parents ever faced. (Cooper 1999, 34)

Even as both work and leisure activities compel us to operate, manage, and—we hope—also understand an unprecedented array of complex technological systems, information about technology comes to us, unbidden, from a variety of sources. Given all of this complexity, perhaps the instructional manual is the least influential source of technology information for most people. Although it is the mainstay of technical communication work, we have already established that the general public is granted license—by each other and arguably also by the media—to ignore instructional manuals, to read them only "if all else fails."

The previously mentioned proliferation of technology has led to a corresponding proliferation of users, who are now more fully diversified than ever before in terms of the traditional audience-analysis categories of educational background, profession, age, gender, race, and economic status (Cooper 1999). With the increase in technology use and the accompanying increase in users, then, a differentiating machine that functioned adequately in the past no longer creates useful categories of technological expertise (cf. Rubin 1994, 5–6).

Despite recent changes in technology habits, technical communicators still rely upon a simplified binary differentiating machine to classify audiences. First, readers are usually classified with respect to their tool proficiency, such that the tool separates novice from expert. This audience-analysis system prevails in textbooks aimed at technical communication majors (for example, Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu 1992), as well as in textbooks designed for technical communication service courses (such as Burnett 1994; Lay et al. 1995).

The differentiating machine also places writers in contention with their audiences (Youga 1989, 39). Like the binary that attempts to distinguish novices from experts, the writer/audience binary emphasizes

difference and opposition. Technical communication scholarship and pedagogy often suggest a user-advocacy role for technical communicators (see, for example, Redish 1993; Dobrin 1989; Cilenger 1992; Wells 1986). But I submit that the contentious writer/audience relationship outlined previously discourages technical communicators' user- advocacy role; thus, despite their best intentions, technical communicators may contribute to users' feelings of incompetence and alienation.

HYBRIDITY

For an alternative to habitual binary constructions, we might turn to Bruno Latour's (1993) work in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Latour posits hybrids, "mixtures of nature and culture," as a counterpoint to so called "purified" categories such as binary oppositions, which are mutually exclusive; that is, they do not overlap and cannot be conflated (30). Latour argues that the modernist paradigm disavows the simultaneous existence of purified and hybrid categories. Although he demonstrates that hybrids exist in a modernist world, Latour claims that they are not acknowledged. They are "invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable" (34).

Novice and expert are purified binary categories.[3] I submit that the privileging of purified categories limits current audience-analysis pedagogy (and may also limit practice, although additional research is required to verify this hypothesis). Like Latour, I believe in hybrids. In fact, I regard today's computer users as hybrids. Changes in the distribution and use of technology—changes that have led to the emergence of the hybrid user—suggest a need for technical communication teachers to develop an audience-analysis pedagogy that *disrupts* the binary differentiating machine's work, that *contaminates* the purified categories of novice and expert. One way to do this is to introduce students to media representations of computer users through a figural-analysis methodology, which involves close examination and speculation about the characteristics and motivations of the figures depicted in media representations.

Studying media representations in the technical communication classroom has several benefits. For one thing, media representations can suggest metaphors with which to frame instruction sets. If groups of technical communication students are assigned to survey technological metaphors used by journalists or advertisers, the resulting awareness of how technologies are described in the media can help them understand how their readers are taught to conceptualize technology. Moreover,

such a focused attention on technological metaphors can suggest strategies for countering unproductive metaphors as well as opportunities for building on sustainable metaphors. If the media use a particular term or concept to describe a technological process, for example, perhaps that term should be included in a document's index as a cross- reference to the term that the product employs. How do popular magazines refer to Web navigation strategies? If "surfing," "browsing," and "searching" are all popular terms, then all should be indexed. Similarly, hardware technical writers who observe that a competitor's ads promise an interesting feature that is perhaps not fully developed may be better prepared to explain the drawbacks of such a feature to their intended readers.

Moreover, as the figural-analysis methodology outlined in this chapter suggests, studying the figures presented in media representations of technology can give technical communicators a sense of a broader cultural view of the technology user. If popular culture represents society thinking about itself (Asimow 2000, n. 90), then images of technology users in popular culture represent what society thinks those users are (or should be) like. Asimow (2002) authorizes the study of popular culture in professional contexts: "The fact that works of popular culture tend to reflect (at least in distorted form) popular attitudes, misconceptions, and myths is itself important and justifies the study of these works as a barometer of public opinion" (550).

Of course, technical communicators are not accustomed to seeing relationships between their work and media representations. But in fact, the media engage in cultural pedagogy: they teach us, in multiple and diverse ways, how we are to understand and interpret culture and its contexts, including the contexts in which technical communication takes place. When I teach figural analysis in my technical communication classes, I begin with two cartoons that appeared about eighteen months apart in two different publications (*Newsweek,* February 27, 1995, 21, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education,*, September 20, 1996). Both cartoons depicted white, middle-aged, middle-class men struggling to use their computers. In the *Newsweek* cartoon, the man is working on his home computer; he complains to his wife that he can't figure out how to install a piece of software and then asks, "What's that neighbor kid's name again?" In the *Chronicle* cartoon, a curmudgeonly older man—presumably a professor—works at his office computer with a younger female colleague, who explains mouse operation in patronizing baby talk.

In both these instances, the male figures bear marks of success, such as the ability to make major purchases and work in well-appointed offices. But when a computer comes into the picture, the men's status as insiders is called into question. In both cases, the men are forced to learn *prefiguratively*—from a younger, less-experienced person, instead of in the more traditional *postfigurative* manner, from an older person (Mead 1970, 1).

On the surface, the cartoons can be seen simply as a commentary on the ineptitude so many otherwise competent adults feel when confronted with even the most run-of-the-mill computing tasks. For technical communicators, however, they provide anecdotal evidence of an inversion of the classic novice/expert binary. Analysis of the cartoons, including figural analysis, suggests that a purified novice/expert binary is still highly valued in Western technoculture while acknowledging that such a binary no longer functions as before. Thus, when technical communicators attempt to define expertise, they must acknowledge that so-called experts may have uneasy relationships with technology. Moreover, elders are expected to guide, protect, and educate younger people; however, especially in the *Newsweek* cartoon, age no longer guarantees status: in fact, it may hinder the achievement of certain kinds of status. Scrutinized through a technological lens, both cartoon computer users are found wanting, despite the status they have obviously achieved in other areas. But the prevailing educational model—Mead's postfigurative model in which adults teach and children learn—does not accommodate their learning needs.

Each cartoon character represents what I would call a hybrid user of computers. But the media, relying on purification, depict them as novices and denigrate their limited technological expertise. Similarly, technical communicators faced with writing manuals for these men, and reliant upon purified categories of audience, would also characterize them as novices on the basis of their lack of computer knowledge. However, addressing them as novices denies their achieved status and life experiences that originate outside the high-tech realm, in much the same way as does speaking in baby talk to a university professor. The cartoons offer two choices to adults struggling with technology: either they can suffer experts' patronizing attitudes, or they can step aside and permit experts to do the complex tasks for them. Neither approach suffices; the boundaries between novice and expert are fluid and shifting.

A figural analysis may also be conducted on news representations. By examining news reports, wherein words and illustrations work together, we can see that expertise with technology is again inscribed quite differently from a perceived lack of expertise. For example, the August 8, 1994, issue of *Newsweek,* which featured a Woodstock cover story, also included an article titled "The Birth of the Internet." The article explains that in 1969, while others were enjoying Woodstock, a "small group of computer scientists" was busily inventing the Internet, thereby "changing the future of computing" (Kantrowitz and Rogers 1994, 56–58).

Most of the people who developed the Internet in the 1960s are relatively unknown to us today; a few of the names are recognizable to computer industry insiders, but others mentioned in this article have faded into obscurity. These Internet pioneers had to learn from each other, in Mead's *cofigurative* mode, because there were no elders to lead them in their groundbreaking quest. The cofigurative, or apprenticeship, learning model, with its accompanying disdain for hierarchies, is commonplace throughout the computer industry (Levy 1984) and resonates to this day.

The 1960s Internet pioneers have led lives of relative obscurity. Given the fame and fortune enjoyed by today's Internet developers, one might expect some resentment to be expressed by the 1960s experts, but, as team member Robert Kahn asserts, he "doesn't like to dwell on the past." Moreover, the optimistic idealism of the men quoted in this article makes today's Internet heroes' work seem even more crassly commercial. Kahn, for example, optimistically privileges the myth of progress, as this closing quote from the *Newsweek* article attests: "Those were very exciting days, but there are new frontiers in every direction I can look. . . . A quarter century later, the future still looks bright" (Kantrowitz and Rogers 1994, 58).

This bright future, the foundation of which was laid by the 1960s Internet gurus, is now enjoyed by the experts who have more recently made their mark on the commercial Internet, and the latter-day experts didn't wait thirty years for their achievements to be recognized. But, as a figural analysis of the Internet pioneers illustrates, the experiences of the earlier experts differed greatly (and continue to differ) from the prominence and wealth enjoyed by today's well-known experts. For instance, the most famous of today's Internet gurus, Microsoft's Bill

Gates, routinely appears on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. This exposure is perhaps not surprising; he is, after all, among the world's richest men and his company arguably has set the stage for our turn-of-the-century computing environment.[4] But other technology figures also attract popular media attention.

Netscape developer Mark Andreessen was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (February 19, 1996) and touted as one of a group of "Golden Geeks." This hero of the cyber-revolution amassed, almost overnight, a wealth of $58 million. *Time*'s cover depicted the barefoot, twenty-four-year-old Andreessen wearing a crown and seated on a throne and responded to readers' interest, not only in Andreessen's and the other Golden Geeks' technological achievements but also in their private lives and their cultural influence: "They invent. They start companies. And the stock market has made them *instantaires*. Who are they? How do they live? And what do they mean for America's future?" Andreessen's overnight wealth is democratic, the article implied, because anyone with comparable intelligence, luck, and timing could achieve a similar status. The myth of progress resonates throughout the article, yet luck seems to play a role as well. These "instantaires" are not just ordinary folks who have achieved the American Dream; they are computer geniuses blessed with an incredible sense of timing. Barefoot, baby-faced Andreessen remains decidedly down-to-earth and modest despite his success.

On the one hand, then, in the mid-1990s, both the Clinton administration and the media were promoting the Internet as a culture-changing technology. Excitement surrounding the commercial prospects of the Internet intimated that no particular expertise would be required to take advantage of easy, in-home access to information, commerce, politics, and entertainment and that unprecedented economic growth would follow the acquisition of new global markets and the invention of innovative communication products and services.

On the other hand, however, in concurrent ads, magazine covers, and news and feature articles, the media presented the people who understood these new technologies as endowed with special powers not available to the average adult. This vision of "golden geeks" suggests a binary differentiating machine at work in a polarized Internet environment. Just as attention to Latour's work suggests, technology expertise retained a special prominence, with "golden geeks" and "instantaires" as

the poster children of this exalted and purified category. Because hybrid computer users are invisible to a culture predisposed to see purified categories, then, hybrids' wide-ranging, diverse, and idiosyncratic attributes, skills, aptitudes, and needs are unrepresentable as such in the media.

REPRESENTING HYBRID TECHNOLOGY USERS

As Latour (1993) suggests, hybridity may be masked by the expectation that there are only purified categories of expertise—namely novice and expert. But if we know to watch for them, we can find media representations of hybrid computing expertise. In fact, hybrids are present in two advertisements that appeared in *Web Week* magazine in August 1995. *Web Week* is a Web developers' magazine, aimed at experienced computer users. The center spread of that issue featured an advertisement for the Apple Internet Server Solution. Four experienced professionals of varying ages, races, and genders—marketing manager Lawson Clarke, biology department chair Lisa Honea, yarn shop owner Debbie Heick, and freelance artist Joe Rosales—are pictured in and addressed by the ad.

The advertisement's headline poses a question and answers itself with another question: "Looking for a compelling reason to set up an Internet Web site? How about the fact that you don't have to be a propellerhead anymore in order to actually do it?" Immediately, then, the ad sets up the binary between expert ("propellerhead") and novice (you, the reader). The ineptitude of novices is further alluded to in the ad copy, which begins, "It's called the World Wide Web (WWW). But that doesn't mean that you have to get tangled up in it." In language that alternates between technical jargon and comforting, respectful reassurance, the advertisement explains that the Apple Internet Server "represents the easiest, most affordable way for people to make their information widely accessible on the Internet." Expecting that readers will identify with one of the figures pictured in the ad, the copywriter allays some of their concerns: "Virtually anybody can now create a WWW site" that is "full of hyperlinked text, graphics, video and sound," and that site can be "up and running in minutes at less than half the cost (not to mention the headaches) of a typical UNIX-based server." As we keep in mind that this ad predated free-access Web sites like Geocities and Angelfire and WYSIWYG HTML editors like Dreamweaver and Front Page, a final statement in the ad perhaps reveals the company's attitude toward its

target audience: "The sample Home Pages can even be customized," the ad copy reassures us—as though customizable home pages, even in the early days of the Web, were unusual.

Each of the portrayed figures is a hybrid—an expert in his or her own field of art, science, marketing, or crafts, but inexperienced with computers. However, the ad ends up ignoring their hybridity and addressing them as novices based on their technology expertise alone. This is especially evident in that last sentence, but can be seen elsewhere in the ad as well. For example, the costs of mounting a Web site are mentioned, but no hard data are provided. Similarly, the ad mentions, but does not define, the volume of site traffic that can be considered "heavy." In short, the advertisement seems to expect that the reader will uncritically (perhaps naively) accept its claims—that is, that he or she will adopt a novice's mentality.

In contrast, the intended reader of a second two-page ad in the same issue of *Web Week* is addressed as a technological expert in charge of an existing company Web presence. Again, the ad copy makes a number of claims about the capability of the server being promoted—in this case, a Silicon Graphics UNIX-based Web FORCE server. The ad suggests that Web managers must build speedy Web servers to attract and retain customers. If potential customers must wait to enter your site, the ad copy admonishes, "they'll probably move on," which means lost customers and revenue.

The ad appeals to a different kind of hybrid: a system administrator or other technical professional who has assumed Web design and maintenance responsibilities. This techie is the person user advocates would least like to see running a company's Web presence. Lacking in user sensitivity, the techie interpellated by this ad is concerned with maximizing the technical capabilities of the company's Web site. The ad appeals to this reader by mentioning special customer analysis and tracking tools that can enhance a company's efficiency and competitive edge. "These days, it's not enough to set up a home page and wait and see what happens," the ad notes; in addition, you must build a "valuable database of who's visiting and what they are doing" so that you can "generate Web pages on the fly" to meet the specific needs of individual customers or particular categories of customers. The "unrivaled throughput and scalability" of Web FORCE systems "give your creative teams the tools they need" to make your site "attract and retain a crowd."

The image that accompanies the Silicon Graphics ad is particularly startling: it portrays site visitors as a flock of sheep trying to fit through a narrow bridge. By assuming that techies look down on less-experienced users, the ad gets away with referring to customers as sheep.[5] In short, the ad can be interpreted as saying that visitors to a business's Web site, like sheep, will always follow the flock. With text written in a coconspiratorial voice, the ad invites the techie who doubles as a Web master to regard potential customers as sheeplike; furthermore, these customers, although they apparently cannot make a decision for themselves, must be cultivated and flattered by high-speed connectivity and by compelling and individually responsive content, so that they will return to the site and ultimately purchase the product or service being marketed there. In short, we are left with the unsettling impression that Silicon Graphics regards the end users of commercial Web sites as passive consumers easily swayed by technological wizardry.

A PEDAGOGY FOR ADDRESSING HYBRID USERS

The media representations featured in this chapter were gathered over a four-year period from 1993 to 1997, as the Internet was emerging as a commercial force. Because I have worked with them for a long time, my interpretations are fairly detailed and may sound definitive, perhaps suggesting that meaningfully incorporating media representations into technical communication classes requires sustained attention and perhaps even some special semiotic expertise. However, if you pay attention to the content of your daily media dose, whether it consists of newspapers, magazines, television, radio, or billboards, you'll find more examples than you can use. Take Apple's iMac campaign, for example. To be sure, some of the ads in that campaign focus on hardware attributes (like "The New iMac," which appeared on the back cover of *Time*'s April 6, 2002, issue). However, another thread of that campaign features emails allegedly sent to Apple by average people who recently switched from a PC to the iMac. In the June 17, 2002, issue of *Time,* Mark Frauenfelder, a freelance writer and illustrator, writes that he switched because "I wanted a better computing experience than I had with my PC." Mark, pictured on the left-hand page of a two-page spread, at first resisted switching platforms because he thought it would be too much trouble. "I thought, why make the leap? It's like being stuck in a bad relationship: It works on some level, so you don't want to make the effort

to change." In the end, though, switching was no trouble at all, and he writes, "I'm GLAD I switched." The iMac, he claims, can do everything he needs it to do—except make coffee in the morning.

Mark is portrayed as a hybrid; although he's tied into computers for his work, we get a picture of him as an individual. We can relate to his comments about bad relationships and the body's need for coffee. He's not rich or glamorous—in fact, his picture shows a downright nerdy guy who, we might conclude, was photographed before he had brewed his morning coffee. Another figure in the iMac ad campaign is Aaron Adams, who says he works as a PC LAN administrator. In his email, he writes, "At work, I deal with PCs all day long and I can say without exaggeration that keeping those Windows machines running is a constant struggle." This ad, which appeared in *Time*'s July 2, 2002, issue, demystifies the work of the system administrator—the definitive techie—by revealing that Aaron regards his work as "fighting with computers." He doesn't mind doing so "on my employer's time" but wants an easier, friendlier computer to play with at night.

Buried in Apple's iMac campaign is an emphasis on cross-platform compatibility and ease of use. By featuring users' difficulties with the complexity of computers, the campaign suggests that even people we regard as experts struggle with computers and maintains that the iMac computer solves user frustration because it "just works" without a fight. One might say that the iMac ad campaign has incorporated hybrid users—people not defined solely by their technology expertise—but it does not yet displace purified categories of novice and expert.

IBM's countercampaign bears out this observation. Structurally similar to the iMac campaign, in that a typical user is pictured on one page with information about the circumstances of that person's use on the facing page, IBM's series of ads features the ThinkPad, a laptop that is the choice of "some of the world's most successful people," including Charles Nolan, a designer for Anne Klein. Nolan is pictured conferring with a colleague at a point "halfway through the fall/winter line." While the IBM ad calls upon us to emulate IBM ThinkPad users who have achieved success in their fields, the iMac ad incorporates the "authentic" user voice of regular working people from a variety of disciplines who have abandoned their PCs in favor of the more usable and flexible iMac. Although polarized novice/expert categories are not absent, in this genre of ads, we are introduced to hybrid users.

In proposing ads such as these as tools for audience analysis in upper-division technical communication courses, I might ask students to answer a rather simple question: "Who does the ad want us to be?" They articulate excellent and detailed descriptions of Aaron and Mark and Charles—the figures in the ads become very real to them. Nonetheless, in more general discussions of audience, some students proclaim that there's no excuse for user frustration; technology is just part of what we do as members of Western technoculture, they assert, so users need to get over their frustrations and get with the program. Thus, media representations of frustrated technology users are countered for many of them by their experience as successful technology users—graduating seniors in a technical communication program. The digital divide doesn't affect them much; in fact, every student in the class owns a late-model computer with Internet access, and class is held in a computer lab equipped with state-of-the-art computers and recent versions of key software. Although they hear about the digital divide—the "haves" polarized against the "have-nots"—these students don't have direct experience with that divide. Moreover, despite several years of classroom talk about audience analysis and user advocacy, some of them still exhibit a "blame-the-user" mentality. Media representations can be cited as the source—or at least as a reinforcement—for such a mentality. A case in point is Robert J. Samuelson's editorial, "Debunking the Digital Divide" (*Newsweek,* March 25, 2002, 37). In the middle of a technology-oriented issue of *Newsweek* that featured a cover story entitled, "Silicon Valley Bytes Back," Samuelson concludes his editorial as follows:

> The "digital divide" suggested a simple solution (computers) for a complex problem (poverty). With more computer access, the poor could escape their lot. But computers never were the source of anyone's poverty, and as for escaping, what people do for themselves matters more than what technology can do for them. (37)

It's hard to argue with Samuelson's contention that we are being overly simplistic if we assume that the application of computers will solve all the problems that the "digital divide" encapsulates. But isn't Samuelson also oversimplifying when he denies any connection between computers and poverty? Samuelson's essay highlights problems with our typical audience-analysis methods in ways that students and teachers should reflect upon in the context of the technical communication classroom.

In this chapter, I've suggested some ways of thinking about media representations in light of technical communication and outlined a few ideas for including media representations in the technical communication classroom—as aids to audience analysis and as sources of prevailing technological metaphors. Other innovative approaches to integrating cultural representations into technical communication pedagogy remain to be unveiled.