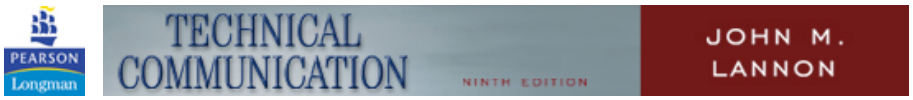

Web Pages and Other Electronic Documents

Chapter Overview

Along with traditional tools and methods, today's technical communicator now uses new media deliverables with developing computer and Internet technologies. These technologies bring new types of online documents that allow for quicker and more direct access to information than ever before. These documents contain design pitfalls and navigational problems as well as nonlinear linking advantages that you need to understand.

Online documentation and hypertext allow the user greater access to larger instruction and research texts, sometimes entire help libraries that would fill many shelves. Microsoft manages thousands of technical support and bug fix documents in its XML content management system. Behind Web front doors, massive databases and sophisticated search systems can be accessed. Even so, one of the more powerful search engines available, more powerful than many restricted and subscription-only database systems, can be found free online: Google.

Online tutorials eliminate the need for consulting manuals for every problem. Hypertext gives the users the ability to construct their own paths to the knowledge they seek. But online documentation also calls for differences in text and graphics compared to traditional documents. Print design and hypertext design are two very different things. It is not enough to take a traditional printed book and just post the content online. Adding the traditional table of contents or index is not the same as designing a hypertextual linking system, a site map, and a storyboard for interface design and navigation.

In the end, hypertextual systems often simply provide the illusion of interactivity, yet usually provide no more interactive choices than one's television remote control. These systems are still developing, and are also affected by the field of computer-supported collaborative work. They are evolving beyond the "horseless carriage" stage rather slowly. Ironically, the dot com boom and later bust actually held the field back more than advanced it. The boom created a lot of "pseudo-interactive" high-profile players who just threw sites up for thousands of dollars to get in the game. The dot bomb weeded out the least worthy of those ventures, but the herd mentality pulled funding from plenty of high-traffic, successful sites as well.

What is left in the fallout is still like green gelatin dessert that hasn't set. Tools are being built. XML content management systems are streamlining comprehensive systems far beyond what ordinary webmasters can create anymore. And yet some still believe there is a place and a voice for innovation and interesting work to emerge, now that the people with too much money for their own good have gotten out of the way. You can read more about the trends in these systems under **Hot Topics**, in both the Hypertext and Electronic Communication sections.