The technical writer is dead.

Long live the technical writer!

"Welcome to Technical Communication. I am 89% sure that the profession of technical writer will no longer exist in a few years' time." This is how I am going to welcome around 40 hopeful young people to the first-semester welcome event for the Technical Writing and Technical Communication course at Munich University of Applied Sciences on 4th October.

The statement that the days of technical writers are numbered has quickly spread in the field of technical communication and is proving extremely hard to dispel. It is now time to delve a little deeper into this topic.

Text: **Prof. Martin Ley**

In Germany, approximately 85,000 people are currently employed as technical writers, with around 80% of them academics, mainly from the engineering sector. Only a good third of all technical writers have graduated from an appropriate formal education course at a university or alongside their job. tekom (European Association for Technical Communication) predicts a labour requirement of 3500 jobs for 2016, meaning that our graduates will be spoilt for choice when starting their professional career (cf. Straub 2016). However, Frey and Osborne reach a sobering conclusion – which is also applicable to the profession of technical writer – in their study entitled "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible are Jobs to Computerisation?". As with almost half of all job profiles investigated (in the USA), technical writers are falling victim to computerisation. Almost all of the tasks performed by technical writers can be carried out by computers or computer-controlled machines and devices. Human technical writers would therefore be obsolete. Frey and Osborne consider the reason behind this to be continuous technical development, which has made a name for itself (albeit an exaggerated one) as the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Industry 4.0 among catch phrases such as

artificial intelligence, self-learning devices and machines, smart systems, big data and the Internet of Things (cf. World Economic Forum 2016).

It might therefore appear that a bleak future lies ahead of our future graduates. But not everything is as it seems. Although it is correct that the use of computer technology is constantly advancing, including in the field of technical communication, we have since accepted the departure from classic desktop publishing towards topic orientation and layout automation (with few exceptions). Content delivery, machine translation or natural language generation, i.e. the automated creation of natural-language texts, are areas where the use of computer technology is becoming increasingly widespread.

However, I do not view increasing computerisation as a risk to the professional future of our students, but rather as a unique opportunity in the long run. For example, autonomous driving or predictive maintenance, to give two examples, bring us face to face with developments which are reliant on "smart information". In addition to data security and data protection, smart information is also distinguished from other information in that it comes from different systems under certain circumstances and in that items of smart information can be linked together intelligently in an application for different usage scenarios. For example, for predictive maintenance this would be information about the machine and its condition, reference values for detecting anomalies, maintenance tasks, working hours, spare parts and much more. Ultimately, this information comes from "the pen" of a technical writer. It is highly structured and semantically "distinguished", in both senses of the word. If Industry 4.0 applications are to meet the expectations placed on them, high-quality information must be provided, in multimedia format where necessary. Information will be valuable and profitable for a company and information development can establish itself as an integral component of product development. The significance of technical writers within a company may therefore change (for the better), provided that technical writers use this opportunity. Otherwise, other people in companies would take on these tasks. For the purpose of educating prospective technical writers, this means that we famil-

iarise our students with both the theoretical and practical aspects of semantic information management. In terms of theory, this takes place in sessions on methods for technical communication, information modelling, linguistics and, of course, semantic technologies. In terms of practical experience, the students work on relevant industry projects and also learn how to use the GRIPS semantic information management system. It goes without saying that, in addition to these aspects, topics such as mobile documentation, creation of animations and videos, and engineering expertise cannot be ignored; these are among the tools of the trade for a technical writer – probably even more in the future than they are now. At the end of my introductory session on 4th October, I will hopefully have made it clear to our first-semester students that it is they who will lay the foundations for the future success of a company thanks to the information they record: Information must be seen as a central resource for a company. This is the only way to provide added value through services, for example, or to produce individual and custom-designed information products or services for users. Information is therefore also the basis for developing new business models as without smart data, there can be no smart products and without smart products, there can be no smart services.

Sources

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Prof. Martin Ley.

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With over 18,000 students, Munich University of Applied Sciences is the largest university in Bavaria and the second largest in Germany.
Over 500 professors and 750 lecturers teach more than 70 attractive, future-oriented courses. The Technical Writing course provides students with a comprehensive insight into all of the relevant topics involved in everyday writing work: In addition to the basics of documentation and communication, knowledge of media and technology is imparted. The students are optimally prepared for "reality" in a total of four industry projects and one practical semester.