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Channeling Experience: Reflections on Developing a Technical Communication YouTube Channel

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ABSTRACT

This experience report shares reflections and observations from launching a YouTube channel dedicated to broadcasting research in technical and professional communication to a wide public audience. Authors note the importance and potential for such work to amplify scholars from marginalized communities, to publicly showcase the value of TPC scholarship, and to reach new non-academic audiences with TPC research. The authors also note the challenges of such work, describing the difficulty of developing a content strategy for public academic work on YouTube beyond the role already fulfilled by podcasts.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Education; Interactive learning environments.

KEYWORDS

video production, social scholarship, remote teams, YouTube

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1 INTRODUCTION

YouTube is among the most dominant social media platforms on the internet, with over 2.6 billion monthly users and more than 1 billion hours of video watched per day [1]. As scholars in technical and professional communication (TPC) have identified, a sizable part of YouTube's video content functions as a source of technical communication in the form of instructional and educational videos [2–4]. However, there have been few studies that focus on videos that actively and expressly discuss the field of technical communication itself and how YouTube content presents a translation of the academic knowledge of technical communication for a wider audience. This particular function may play a small role in the broad ecosystem of YouTube content, but remains critically important in its potential for acting as a public face of scholarship in TPC [5] and for combating misleading and reductive presentations of writing [6] and research generally [7].

This experience report showcases perspectives from five graduate students and one faculty member who began working on such a channel in July 2021 and began publishing videos to YouTube as of August 2022. After briefly reviewing key studies on the need for public-facing scholarship and the link between video production and TPC, we transition to a brief overview of the content strategy for the project before reflecting on two key themes in technical communication. First, the team will outline our approach to remote collaboration for public-facing scholarly video production and the successes and limitations of that approach. This will include approaches to creating a brand and identity, pitching ideas, and coordinating production roles. The report will then reflect on the videos that we have produced for the channel thus far, again highlighting the successes and limitations of our approach.

By outlining our experiences with creating the channel, we hope to highlight key bottlenecks and obstacles for creating (and importantly, sustaining) a YouTube channel that overtly acknowledges a relationship to the field of TPC. We hope this information contributes to scholars, programs, and organizations that sense there are hurdles to developing a scholarly YouTube channel, but are unsure of which obstacles may be the most challenging as well as how they can be successfully navigated.

2 THE NEED FOR PUBLIC FACING SCHOLARSHIP

Traditional models for scholarship depict scholars working within university spaces, conducting research and sharing their findings with other scholars via academic journals and with their students by teaching courses. Though research is frequently conducted outside of the university and engages with external communities, this model keeps research within universities where only a small fraction of the public can access it, even if the research is valuable outside of academia. In technical communication, St.Amant and Graham

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[5] find researchers within the field face difficulties sharing their research with others, as those outside of technical communication may be unfamiliar with what research within the discipline entails. They advise scholars to reflect on how durability and portability impact their research and to consider also how each impacts the resonance of their work. As Gonzales and Turner [8] show, this lack of shared understanding between communities can have a tangible impact on collaborations between academics and industry partners. To address this challenge, they advocate for more open lines of communication when working across spaces.

Greenhow, Gleason, and Staudt Willet [9] coined "social scholarship" in 2014 to describe scholarship that uses social media's values and affordances to "reframe the ways in which scholarship is accomplished in academia" (pg. 4). Social media, despite its constraints, provides an easily-accessible route to sharing scholarship with public audiences. Chapman and Greenhow [10] note that by using social media, scholars promote "wider access, openness, transparency, and collaboration" (pg. 5). By using YouTube to discuss research with technical communication scholars, we respond to St.Amant and Graham's call for results "to be shared. . . across spheres of resonance" [5] by opening paywall-blocked research to wider communities outside of the university model. As we discuss, this public-orientation toward scholarship also aids in our efforts to amplify the work of marginalized and early-career scholars.

3 POTENTIAL FOR VIDEO AS SOCIAL SCHOLARSHIP

Video has long been of interest to technical communicators in both industry and academia stretching back to the era of tape-based instructional cassettes [11, 12]. In recent years, scholars in technical and professional communication have embraced instructional video as a critical modality for technical instructions, particularly because of their ability to nurture short-term comprehension [13] and to expand the foci of technical communication toward understudied non-white communities of practice [3, 4]. Given the importance of video, scholars have offered useful tools for assigning video-projects in tech comm courses, including categorical breakdowns of different types of videos [5, 14] and rubrics for assessing video genres [15]. Relatedly, a quick search of YouTube for terms such as "technical writing" and "technical communication" reveals a wealth of content including lecture-based overviews of general concepts for technical writing (such as "Writing Clearly"), practitioner-targeted walkthroughs (such as "A Day in the Life of a Technical Writer"), and advertisements for particular programs in TPC.

Despite this broad attention to the role of video in the field and the broad and meaningful presence of TPC on YouTube, there are few examples of readily available public-facing TPC scholarship on YouTube that demonstrate the "spheres of resonance" suggested by St.Amant and Graham [5] or that represent the broad reach of TPC into adjacent fields of inquiry like user experience, content strategy, and data visualization. The YouTube channel TC Camp [16] is one such source, hosting engaging discussions between academics and practitioners. There are also several podcasts that work toward a similar goal, such as the long running series Ten Minute Tech Comm [17]. However, these public-facing media are rarely described in the scholarly literature of TPC. By discussing our process in developing a scholarly YouTube channel, we hope to shed light on the difficulties of starting and sustaining these public media channels.

4 CHANNEL OVERVIEW

The provenance of the YouTube channel, which we eventually named *More Than Memos*, began with the coordination of several journal editors in TPC, who selected our team of one faculty member and five graduate students. Though the editors provided general goals for the content on the channel and its relationship to the journals, they left our team with the autonomy to determine the content strategy of the channel, from fundamental questions about content governance and workflow (Where will we house these videos? How many videos can we make?) to more narrow questions about the design of the videos themselves (How long will each video be? What kind of music will be involved?). Broadly, we broke down these questions into the four groups of the "content strategy quad" featured in contemporary guidebooks on content development [18]: substance, structure, workflow, and governance. In this section we outline the first major stages of our process in answering these central questions, primarily focusing on the areas of workflow and substance.

4.1 Developing An Organizational Structure and Workflow

One of the first decisions to make was to determine the various titles and roles of those of us on the production team. Our outward-facing titles were drawn from current terminology in content development, with the faculty member acting as the "managing producer" and the graduate students serving as "content creators." However, we found this broad categorization was not clear enough to divide the work on individual videos. If two team members were collaborating on one video, who would do the editing? Who would do the interview? How could we divide this work evenly and make the process clear for all involved?

Our first tactic for clarifying the per-video work was to turn to common conventions in YouTube video production, though these roles proved too granular for categorizing the combination of tasks that individual team members would complete. For a team of our size (3 – 4 people per video) the typical credits include a host, a producer, and an editor. As teams scale up, these credited roles expand to include script writers, sound designers, fact checkers, graphic designers, and additional producer roles (executive, managing, director, etc.). However, early on in the process we discovered that in order to develop a unified video, both the host and the editor needed to be deeply involved in tasks typically managed by the producer, such as contacting interviewees and requesting footage for b-roll. In effect, each team member was performing producer-level work.

Given that our team was creating this content in addition to our normal academic loads, we broke down each video into *groups* of smaller tasks, leaving us with 3 specific "roles" corresponding to concrete sets of tasks. One group of responsibilities included all of the production-work that occurred before filming would take place: writing the script, contacting interviewees, developing interview questions, and serving as the on-screen talent. These responsibilities

were packaged together under the role of "front-end producer." The second group of responsibilities covered all of the tasks after the footage had been recorded. This included assembling and editing footage in Adobe Premiere Pro, creating graphics for the intro and outro, and exporting the video in the necessary format. We termed the position responsible for these tasks as the "back-end editor." The final set of responsibilities fell to the role of "associate producer," who would upload the video to YouTube and add necessary features such as the description, transcript, metadata, and captions. This third producer would also double-check accessibility issues in the design and distribution of the video. By dividing individual videos into these three separate roles we hoped to clarify the expectations for collaboration. Though all members of the team would act as "content creators" broadly, they would also be assigned and credited with particular tasks through these roles.

4.2 Developing Content Strategy

Another major task in starting the channel was deciding on what genre(s) of video to produce. As stated, in initial meetings journal editors mentioned the hope that these videos would present TPC research to 1) scholars who were outside of the paywall, and 2) audiences beyond our immediate academic field. They also mentioned that the channel could host pedagogical videos, topical videos, and a broad range of content beyond the research-focused scope. Provided with this broad range of possibilities, we needed to find a place to start.

We began by searching YouTube for existing models of content to follow, considering those already produced in the field and those that were produced by other academic fields. Some of the videos we found mimicked the genres discussed by Mogull [14], particularly with respect to interview videos, documentaries, and lecture videos. However, we also noted a few genres that reconfigured these categories as YouTube content, such as explainer videos, video abstracts, and video essays.

Using our analysis of the available genres, each team member pitched their own idea for a type of video that we could use for the channel. From that list, Daniel, as managing editor, selected two video-styles that could prove as a firm starting point for the channel. Splitting into two groups, the team produced two pitch videos to demonstrate how these concepts might work in practice and to gauge complications in the production pipeline. Based on the pitch videos, Daniel, as managing producer, decided to devote our first videos to interviews with multiply-marginalized scholars (later named as the "*Talking Bout Tech Comm*" series). We hoped this style of video would be relatively easy to serialize and produce at a continual pace, given that the primary visuals would draw from the recorded interviews and scripted elements would be limited. Additionally, by this point in the process we had been developing the channel for nearly 6 months, and we were hoping to shift from planning the channel to producing content.

5 SUCCESSES

Once an organizational structure, workflow, and content strategy were developed, the *More Than Memos* team began work on actual videos in the "*Talking Bout Tech Comm*" series. A variety of successes and challenges accompanied the production of the initial video in this series, as both anticipated and unforeseen opportunities and problems arose that the team navigated on both a collective and individual basis. The successes, which included navigating remote work conditions, fostering community, and amplifying work of scholars from marginalized communities eventually led to a sustainable workflow, defined production roles, and production of multiple effective videos with potential for more in the near future.

5.1 Remote Collaborative Video Production

The team began the video production process with clear roles related to remote work, labor distribution, and content creation responsibilities. As we detail in the "challenges" section, this is not to say that these roles worked flawlessly or that producing video collaboratively was an easy task. Still, the division of labor into the three roles allowed us to take the full responsibility of any one video off the shoulders of any one member of the production team, which was critical given that our content is mostly produced by graduate students.

One of the more surprising successes of our collaborative process was the successful integration of multiple technologies as we recorded, edited, and published the video. Our process required the footage to move across 8 different compositional technologies, including Zoom, Open Broadcaster Software, Adobe Premiere Pro, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Lightroom, Google Drive, Google Sheets, and YouTube's own platform. Even though several of these programs are designed to work together for this very purpose, the transfer of footage from program to program invites opportunities for technical errors. We were happy to discover the relative ease of collaboration from this technical vantage.

5.2 Fostering Community

As we know, many of us have experienced disconnection and isolation from our academic and professional communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Canceled conferences, remote teaching, and a sharp decline of in-person networking have all contributed to a general sense of isolation and burnout among many academics. However, the *More Than Memos* team has come together from across several institutions to share, learn, and connect with one another on many facets of technical communication scholarship and pedagogy. Relatedly, the MTM team has used social media platforms—primarily Twitter and Instagram—to connect with other TPC community members. This has proved to be valuable not just in amplifying *MTM* videos, but also in tapping into ongoing conversations, sourcing ideas for upcoming content, gathering sources to further inform our workflow and professional development, and in fostering an active and engaged community across the field of technical communication.

5.3 Scholar Amplification

From the start, the *More Than Memos* team aimed to highlight early career scholars, marginalized voices, and researchers traditionally underrepresented in the field of technical and professional communication. Rather than highlighting scholarship and research that is likely already familiar to many academic audiences arising from established scholars, *MTM* instead invited early-career scholars to

contribute their voices and research. Within the framework proposed by St.Amant and Graham [5], we categorize this work within the "domain" sphere of influence, allowing audiences to "identify prospective research partners and effective candidates for service roles and distinctions" in the field (pg. 107).

However, amplifying marginalized and early-career scholars is not only important to expanding avenues for professional success among those scholars, but it is also a critical aspect of TPC's increasing commitments to social justice [19–21]. By actively seeking to center the voices of those who have historically been excluded from more traditional academic scholarship, we hope to contribute work furthering efforts to reject and replace structures of injustice and oppression [20, 22] by amplifying frameworks, methodologies, and heuristics that have not been granted the same visibility and status afforded to dominant—and often, white, Western, and colonial—lenses for meaning-making. As Dr. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq explores in *MTM*'s first video, [23] this might look like cutting through decolonial metaphors in TPC work and more critically interrogating what values drive our research projects. Or, as Modupe Yusuf and Veena Namboodri Schioppa explore, [4] this could also mean recognizing the critical role of embodied and situated knowledge in shaping user experience for non-white audiences. While these are only two brief examples of the diverse work that marginalized and early-career scholars offer to the field of technical and professional communication, the *MTM* team is committed to participating in justice-oriented efforts to share marginalized, non-dominant scholarly perspectives with our viewers.

6 CHALLENGES

These successes were balanced out by a number of challenges that the *More Than Memos* team faced along the way. These challenges related to remote work, to differentiating the YouTube channel from podcasts, to labor and time constraints, and to tensions accompanying reliance on scholarship while also pursuing a broad audience base.

6.1 Remote Work

Determining a stable workflow and content production structure is an ongoing challenge for the MTM team. Navigating this labor reality was both a success and a challenge. Remote work in video content production involves a number of team members collaborating to edit video files, design graphics sequences, construct credits, decide upon music, record raw footage, edit footage to a reasonable length, and perform other tasks that are part of the video creation process. As none of the *MTM* team members lived near any others, work was done entirely remotely and in-person meetings were impossible. Remote working conditions necessitated the division of labor into front end, back end, and associate producer roles. However, necessities and problems arose that didn't fall neatly into any pre-decided roles. Additionally, each level of production seemed to require the previous person's work to come to a conclusion in order to begin, leading to production workflow confusion and a slight delay in production time. For instance, the back-end producer didn't have much to do until the front end producer's work was finished, and the associate producer was required to wait for the back-end producer's work to be finished before they were able to prepare an audio transcription.

6.2 The Podcast Problem

One consideration involved differentiating the *More Than Memos* YouTube channel from other media products related to technical communication, most notably the many podcasts that have been produced by academics and industry experts. Though focusing on interview-footage did allow the team to avoid the production stages of writing and approving a script, we quickly discovered that to avoid posting the interview in its entirety, we needed to use a narrower editorial focus to decide which clips to use and which story to tell. Without that focus, there would be less difference between MTM's content and the conversation-focused podcasts that already exist.

Another challenge related to differentiation involved incorporating as many visuals into the videos as possible, including B-roll supplied by the authors to the front-end producer and then incorporated into the video by the back-end producer. Incorporating visual elements beyond presenter and interviewee faces was vital, as one key advantage to videos over podcasts is the ability to provide audiences with images relevant to the argument being made. For instance, in the first "*Talking Bout Tech Comm*" video, B-roll footage supplied by the interviewee provided context and background, helping to illustrate the guest's experiences foraging in a Utah park, making decolonial dinners, and collaborating with a research partner. Incorporating B-roll footage in this way provides viewers context and added dimensions of meaning, in addition to the improved visual experience that accompanies a YouTube video. However, B-roll and other visuals effectively remains a challenge for MTM content production, as not only is it supplied almost entirely by channel interviewees, but also is incorporated into the videos through a series of rhetorical choices that are difficult at times to match up with the interview format effectively.

6.3 Labor and Time Constraints

Perhaps the biggest challenges the team faced related to labor and time constraints. Members of the *More Than Memos* team are all either graduate students or early career faculty members, groups that are already marginalized to some extent within the academy. Furthermore, MTM team members were not paid or compensated for their labor, instead being compensated through professional development, networking opportunities, and service to the field. Throughout the duration of the first year of their MTM term, team members were enrolled in PhD coursework, underwent comprehensive examinations, wrote and revised dissertation chapters, published articles, conducted original research studies, attended professional conferences, and taught undergraduate courses for limited TA wages. The realities of graduate student labor delayed the back-end producer from completing a rough video edit during the decided timeframe, for instance, as more pressing needs related to teaching, dissertation writing, and research necessarily were prioritized first.

Relatedly, while *More Than Memos* seeks to amplify marginalized and multiply-marginalized voices from within the field of technical communication, neither interview participants nor the *MTM* team are compensated for their labor. While centering non-dominant

experiences is an important goal in justice-oriented work, the team acknowledges that discussing one's work asks additional time, labor, and energy of graduate students and faculty who are already expected to do more than their fair share of emotional and professional labor.

6.4 Tension Between Serving Academic and Non-Academic Audiences

A final challenge that the MTM team needed to navigate involved tension between relying on academic scholarship in the "*Talking Bout Tech Comm*" series while also serving both non-academic and popular audiences. Among the core goals of the channel is the diversification of what counts as "valuable" in technical communication discourse, a goal that benefits from translating scholarship into more approachable forms. Translating scholarship and research into forms that are valuable for industry, professional, and more casual audiences is not always an easy task, however. The *MTM* team faced some difficulties in serving multiple audiences, with some non-academic audiences not requiring as much in-depth consideration of research or "state-of-the-field"-type analyses and other audiences potentially desiring these features.

Our experiences reflect St.Amant and Graham's [5] commentary on what they term the "portability" of academic research: the ease of sharing research between and beyond academic disciplines. They note that while portability is critical to the value of academic work, it must work against not only challenges of access (e.g. who can access particular journals) but also challenges in the very language and style of academic knowledge production in general (pg. 109). In turn, serving a range of audiences and their varied expectations is a challenge that disciplinary YouTube videos will likely be figuring out for the near future with no easy or perfect answers. All in all, though, the first *More Than Memos* videos offer academic, professional, and industry audiences a fair number of takeaways and deliverables, so we imagine this challenge to have been navigated successfully overall.

7 CONCLUSIONS

YouTube already serves an important role in technical communication, hosting countless forms of technical instructions and a variety of lectures on core concepts in the field. But YouTube also presents a key opportunity for expanding the range of scholarship beyond the paywalls to new academic and non-academic audiences and for amplifying the work of marginalized and early-career scholars in new venues. This opportunity arrives pre-loaded with substantial challenges, but by locating these challenges and responding to them, we may find enduring, valuable connections that help sustain TPC research concerned with reaching broad audiences in the future.

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