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## “Defining New Media...in the world of Tech. Comm.”

With a special interest in  
Medical Documentation for  
patients and caregivers via  
technology.

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### ***Abstract***

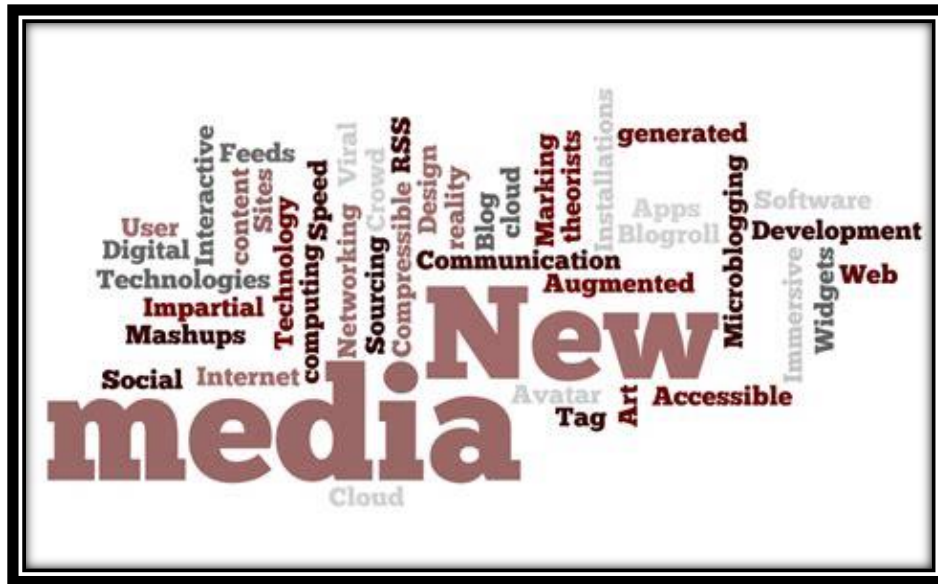
*In this paper I research the definition behind new media and how new media and technical communications comes together in the field of medical documentation (via the Internet). In my study we interview Executive Director for The American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders, Mary Jo Strobel and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth English professor, Katherine DeLuca. I chose to interview these two individuals because they have first-hand professional experience that shows multiple aspects to the field. The following paper explores theories given from theorists such as Douglass Eyman, Barry Thatcher, Alison Reynold and more. When selecting my articles, I made my choices based on what would enhance my paper and add to my argument. The overarching goal of this paper is to uncover a better understanding of new media and its important role in technical communications for medical writing. We want to explore the many definitions and portray how like rhetoric, there is not just one definition. Nor is new media just new media...we will learn that it is far more.*

***Keywords: New Media, Technical Communicator, Medical Documents, Cyberliteracy, Delivery, Community & Audience***

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“New media” is a term coined in the theory of rhetoric that technical communicators use to help facilitate in multiple areas of study including the sciences, medical, English and more. However, like rhetoric, new media has a vast array of definitions which can leave one thinking what really is new media? What makes it “new?” In this paper, I will examine definitions of new media as a way to highlight medical writing. The problem in medical writing is there is a gap in the info given to patients and caregivers. What may seem like a simple task is changing with societies movement towards more web based and social media platforms. It is here that technical communicators may need to adhere to societal norms and give voice to the patients/caregivers who need attention, versus just sending information to delivery without an awareness of what is going on. Furthermore, we will look at how this impacts the future through scholarship research and professional interviews to help us answer my research questions on new media. Through discovery we will successfully bring together a piece that will help readers understand the concept of new media in the field of medical writing.

## DEFINING THE TERM “NEW MEDIA”



*Photo Credit: [blarouche.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/new-media-tag-cloud2.png](http://blarouche.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/new-media-tag-cloud2.png)*

When examining the concept of “new media” it has been concluded that there is not just one definition in the rule book. As portrayed in the graphic above there are a lofty number of attributes that coincide with the term new media. At first glance one can see words such as “communication,” “technology,” “Internet,” and “web” as a few of the terms associated with the field. Even the name new media is just one way to call the field that is so deeply embedded in technology as we continue to explore the twenty-first century. Through research a combination of theorists have tried to define the field with close ties between each one, in “Old Rhetoric and New Media,” by Katie P. Bruner, Paul R. McKean, Ned O’Gorman, Matthew C. Pitchford, and Nikki R. Weickum states that new media is far from just being new. “When we refer to ‘new media,’ we may already be off to the wrong start, for new media are likely to become ‘old’ sooner rather than later. Maybe, following another convention, we should refer to them as ‘digital information and communication technologies’ (DICTs)” (Bruner 341). By changing the name of new media, the article is inferring that using a broader term would help in others understanding what new media is, rather than secluding it to look at one thing or one technology.

When looking at other theorists such as Jim Zappen in “Looking Back and Looking Forward: Digital Rhetoric as Evolving Field,” by Douglas Eyman, states new media as digital rhetoric. As viewed here digital media is multi-dimensional allowing it to bend and shape and adhere to almost any type of practice. It allows one to discover and communicate both individually and collaboratively. It’s a brand that needs to be identified, practiced and studied. Zappen’s rhetorical approach to new media is “The use of rhetorical strategies in production and analysis of digital text. -Identifying characteristics, affordances, and constraints of new media. -Formation of digital identities and potential for building social communities (319)” (Eyman 17). Eyman’s view is focused on digital rhetoric as identity building. The concept of digital rhetoric here can be viewed as one puzzle piece that is folded into the many parts of technical

communications. For English professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Katherine DeLuca the field is always changing, “New media is a loaded term and frequently becomes old. When focusing on media and technology and how they evolve over time it is hard to define. They are talking about digital media (web 2.0, social media and etc.). The way we use it, new media back then compared to today slips and slides” (DeLuca). This slippery slope reference shows how difficult it can be to define the study of new media.

Likewise, Barry Thatcher in “Understanding Digital Literacy Across Cultures” looks at the field as “accessing, understanding, and appropriately using digital media in specific communication situations. “Digital literacy across cultures means understanding how this access, understanding, and use vary according to the broad rhetorical and cultural patterns of a target culture” (Thatcher 169). When looking at Thatcher we can see how new media is in fact situational. In this case, one framework may not work for another. One example of digital literacy could be when looking at medical documents for caregivers and patients; a tool kit needs to be created to meet their needs. You can’t hand them the same pamphlet that you would to a scientist. Dense information needs to be broken down and distributed into new formats such as social media postings, where patients and caregivers can share and talk with one another. You have to keep your audiences’ “needs” in mind. With this being said people are visiting your webpage or social media sites for a reason, so invite them in, don’t leave them lost in the world of cyberspace. Longo states, “People sign up to meet their personal needs, but in doing so, they also sign up to be managed as one of a group” (Longo 157). By keeping an open mind in new media and using your expertise and resources that surround you, medical documents can be better facilitated (written, edited, published and distributed). You want to make sure you are answering what your audience is looking for both individually and collaboratively. What do they want on these platforms? Keeping a robust knowledge of the field is essential while staying up to date on all the latest functions, news, modes and research is important. You must know where your audience is, at all times.

### **Audiences as a concept of New Media?**

Along with the many definitions of new media audience has been a primary part of discussing the field. What allows new media to stand out in the field of technical communications is it has allowed audiences to participate in the receiving end of information as noted earlier in this paper. As leading social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* and email allow for communities to speak amongst themselves through comments, tweets, shares and likes. DeLuca has explored the world of new media greatly and teaches classes built around the concept both at the undergraduate and graduate level. DeLuca believes that social media deeply shapes society both inside and outside of the classroom. There are a wide variety of pros and cons to social media as DeLuca states:

(New Media) ... is built to benefit, and it is helpful in the fact that it helps to connect us and provides digital experiences and access to knowledge. It established a common alliance and forms movements such as #BlackLivesMatter

and #Me2Movement that are successful. The cons would fall into privacy issues and surveillances, a lot of these things are invisible to the average user so things can be used wrong and produce fake news. Sometimes it is good and sometimes it is bad (DeLuca).

When keeping the given point in mind one must take what they read online with a grain of salt. They have to do their research because most of the time comments do not come in filtered. These public forums become a place where a community can be formed in which we will further discuss later.

With the given interactivity of social media, it opens the floor to the world with almost no filter. This gives audiences free range to read and interpret information on their own and draw conclusions based on what they are viewing. The article “Old Media and New Media,” notes in their research about this interactivity. “New media...are often interactive, and their interactive nature changes how individuals and audiences read and experience these texts. Moreover, new media texts can appear in ‘fragmented’ form—a Tweet, a ‘like’ on Facebook, or a reply in a comment thread—which presents challenges for finding a bounded audience at all” (Bruner 343-344). With this being said if new media also has to do with audience, how do we continue to define new media if we do not have a sole take on what a new media’s audience is? Social media becomes a place for community; but is it the same community or a vast array of sub communities?



*Photo Credit: bobbleheadhall.com*

### **New Media as a Field**

Technical communicators are not subjected to learning just one area of study in fact it is better if they are able to be educated in multiple. According to “What do Technical Communicators Need to Know” by George Hayhoe technical communicators should value communications and be able to facilitate effectively. “...I believe that what sets technical communicators apart from word processing operators and desktop publishers is not our ability to use software but rather our ability to communicate technical communication effectively (Hayhow 1). Being able to communicate effectively is a concept that has progressed in much of my graduate level of study in the Master’s in Professional Writing and Communication program.

New media is part of that communication link and is dominating the field as more audiences are moving towards digital spaces.

There are special skills sets in which one must adhere to including but not limited to “writing, editing, visual communication, multimedia, document design, audience and task analysis, usability testing of products and documents, and interpersonal communication” (Hayhoe 2). Hayhoe believes in order to be successful one must have a mastery in the area. It is here that new media can be viewed as not just one word, but a word that is wrapped up into a package full of concepts and requirements that make up new media. Which leads us to think why do we call it “new media?” If DeLuca thinks that media becomes old and Hayhoe believes there are special skills sets. How do we create those skills sets if it’s constantly changing?

What is interesting is that new media does not stand alone in other words new media can’t work on its own. Each subject, such as medical writing, comes with a rhetorical situation. Becoming a technical communicator in the field of new media comes with trial and error and most of the time you have to play multiple job roles. Like DeLuca, I found an article that compares with her given thoughts. When looking at James A. Porter’s “How Can Rhetoric Theory Inform the Practice of Technical Communication” we are introduced to Max who is a technical communicator. He works “...on a development team for a software company developing applications for web-based social media. His job is to write and test online user documentation. So, he wears two functional hats: he serves as both documentation writer and usability specialist” (125). We learn throughout this article that you can’t just focus on the document you are creating, but must keep in mind the purpose, usability needs, and your audiences wants and desires. A rhetor must think about the rhetorical situation to select the best rhetorical approach for the message. Likewise, what may work for one audience may not for another. “A ‘one size fits all’ approach limits choices and problem-solving potential” (Porter 134). In order for a community to be formed a technical communicator must look at how new media fits into their network.

Another important concept for the study of new media in cultivating its definition is the link between the computer and the technical communicator. In “Human + Machine Where We Work,” by Bernadette Longo we learn that new media does not just hide behind a computer screen. Once sent, clicked, liked or tweeted your message automatically gets sent out as your computer works to publish this material to various platforms. We learn from Longo that there is a relationship between the computer and communicator (that works like a code) however, it goes far beyond that. “When I work at my computer, I may feel that my primary relationship is between myself and my machine. But whether I am writing an article, visiting an immersive world, or writing on a friend’s wall in Facebook, I have a sense that other people lurk behind my screen—and I want a relationship with those other people, even if it is mediated by the machine that is a physical manifestation of the virtual relationship” (Longo 147). Longo reiterates that it is our audience that shapes the documents that we publish. We are using them as our tour guides when sending out various forms of media. We can’t just get stuck behind our screens, we must be able to still connect with our audience in a virtual way. In combination new media is formed when looking at community, society and the culture we live in.

## MEDICAL DOCUMENTS FOR PATIENTS & CAREGIVERS

After developing my research, I was able to connect it to medical writing. In a case study on new media in medical documents for patients and caregivers it can be concluded that distribution, audience and research is prime. Mary Jo Strobel, the Executive Director of The American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders (Apfed), a 501c3 nonprofit organization with the mission statement: “To passionately embrace, support, and improve the lives of patients and families affected by eosinophil-associated diseases (eos) through education and awareness, research, support, and advocacy” (apfed.org) defines the field new media in terms of digital platforms:

To me that term (new media) would mean digital platforms, (back then) I was well versed with print media and plates for press and if making a mistake you would have to create all new plates, the process was very long compared to today with desktop printing which opened up a new way of quality, and is cost affective, said Strobel. There is limited capacity to store things with satellite offices and by having a virtual environment that is structed to archive all our materials for quick recall later has evolved and changed for the better. We have been able to produce and communicate faster on any given value in a click of a button. It can take up to a month for nonprofits to send out via mail. Digital media has evolved and changed how nonprofits communicate and operate (Strobel).

When chatting with Strobel it was noted that Apfed is run heavily on volunteers. When learning this it’s surprising to find out that there are only three paid positions. One is full time while the other two are part time. The organization manages a wide variety of patient communities and notes the value of new media and technical communications for delivering medical information to patients and caregivers. Within the field Strobel looks for someone with “strong written communications skills that is able to weed out and present what the nuggets of fact are and to present it without bias. It is important to process it accurately and have it medically reviewed before putting it out.” Furthermore, she states that “they need dedicated resources on staff to stay on top of it and someone who is able to get the material, to see what is out there and transfer that to our platforms and share it out.” Likewise, the term medical document to Strobel is a “broad term.” There is so much back work that goes into medical documentation from editing, to fact checking as it works through the network before being published on to the world wide web:

Journal publications would highlight findings in interest to our communities and then we will work to write a summery for it or approach someone from the study team that we will send out once complete. If we are writing, we will have our medical advisory panel review it. Often it is on case studies or specific patients who experienced something unique, consensus guidelines, diagnostics and management where we in turn share it on our platform with a summary, so the patient is well informed and will take it to their doctors with them (Strobel).

The given qualifications and skill sets seem to follow that industries standard; however, further research would need to be conducted to see the staff databases of other nonprofit organizations. This could follow a given genre convention in which pre-set standards have been established through cultural norms. It is alarming that nonprofit organizations especially those tied down to medical and rare disease studies have such a small staff. It makes one wonder how can the small sized nonprofit allocate enough time towards technical communications across the ever-changing new media platform? Shouldn't educated professionals be given a place where they can use their skills to curate the time and work that is needed to accurately push forth findings to databases? Executive directors are busy with their own job description and should not have to play multiple roles or rely on volunteers to carry the show. This seems to be becoming more of an industry standard when looking at the field as whole.

However, The American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders have been able to hold their own ground aside from their small staff through their strong awareness of the field and dedicated volunteers. Apfed uses e-news once a month to those who subscribe to the *Inspire Network* platform, which is an *EOS Online Community* and member newsletters that are put out quarterly. Likewise, the organization uses *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Pinterest* and *Instagram* to help push out newsworthy information. Strobel believes that these trends are essential. "Nonprofits keeping up with trends is important so we can obtain new audiences. New media helps to organize and push information out in a timely matter. Today, most generations own a computer and/or a smart phone that allows this quick on the spot access. This is a bonus for nonprofits seeing that they need to constantly display a public image. There needs to be new fresh content, evergreen topics under rotation and keeping up with latest content news that is of interest to our communities while staying relevant," according to Strobel. One must also keep an open mind when working in the field. "Keeping close attention to metrics what works, what does not and answering the question should there be platforms we should be engaging on?" In comparison, "editing" and "drafting" are two words that are still used in new media. "You do not want to put out anything that is misleading...Making sure we are presenting it in a way that someone busy on the go can pick it up and understand" is another aspect of the field (Strobel). When keeping this in mind you want to think "busy college student" or "working mom" for example. Keeping information easy and effortless in a click of a button will help your on the go audience. In addition, you want them to feel that your content is credible and believable, while easing their doubts.

When wrapping up my case study it can be concluded that there has been a shift for technical communicators in the field of new media. New media is constantly changing and is used to help nonprofits like Apfed to educate those on digital based platforms. "Digital media has changed and opened up new demographic's and all ages use different platforms to seek medical documentation differently and many do see this information online. There is so much misleading information on the Internet, so we have to be very careful and stay true to the process, and make sure its correct" (Strobel). Fact checking your sources and keeping a close eye to detail can help in keeping rich and notable content. This statement coincides with Dayne Sherman's review of *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*. An audience must be very careful about what they choose to believe when reading information on the Internet



(especially in medical themed documents). “...(Laura) Gurak further persuades that today’s Internet user, technology educator, and informed citizen must be more critical of what he or she sees on the screen. This need for a more analytical approach to electronic media is called cyberliteracy, ‘[a] set of concepts and critical views with which to understand today’s Internet’ (3)” (Sherman 352). Cyberliteracy goes both ways not only does the viewer have to be educated but the technical communicator too. They must know what is out there and learn to write it clearly and correct.



*Apfed's current picture on Facebook, being used to educate their audience about an up and coming medical conference.*

*Photo Credit: apfed.org*

As we look into the future one can see that technology has heavily influenced society and how technical communicators perform their job in new media. Medical documentation is just one area that uses new media and has to constantly reassess its measures to make sure it is following proper guidelines; what the audience wants they shall get, how they want it and where they want it. Alison Reynolds says it best in “Technical Communication or Information Design,” “Technology is now readily available to all consumers and not just confined just to those in high specialist technical and scientific areas” (Reynolds 185). Technology is limitless living in a timely fast paced society. Technical communicators must be trained in this industry standard to be able to multitask across various platforms.

As we come to a close the research mentioned above has helped me to uncover the hidden topics of new media and has helped to carve out my own professional identity. I have always enjoyed the concept of new media and technical communications, especially for medical documentation. With my experience interning for WPRI Channel 12, *The Rhode Show* and *Rhode Island Monthly* magazine along with working as a volunteer for the leading organization for Eosinophilic Disorders, The American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders I always knew this was my niche. This paper has reinstated my passion for the field and has helped me to better

understand new media/technical communications and its various definitions. I learned that there is never just one set of rules. Instead you must find what works and adhere to the many different formulas based on the company or organization at large. With given the time frame and space there is one limitation of my research on this study. A focus group of individuals in the area of medical documents would have helped to view “new media” from an audience’s perspective. We learn that audience is very much part of this new media system, but how can we improve this experience? If given more space this could have helped in forming a statistic of current information. Likewise, the question of where is new media going for technical communication seems to be an evergreen topic that can form much debate...However, can one ever know just where media is going if it’s changing every second?

In conclusion, the definition of “new media” is constantly changing from day to day. This can make defining the field difficult especially for the medical field that relies heavily on web-based platforms to spread their messages. Technical communicators need to be trained in the industry, while organizations need funding in order to curate jobs for these individuals in the field. This will help to facilitate to patients and caregiver’s important information effortlessly, which in turn will allow the audience to communicate amongst themselves and be incorporated into the process forming a community. However, through this study we see that the framework is all the same. There still is a need, an audience and a time frame. We still must go through the process of researching, writing, drafting, editing and publication. Medical documentation is just one field that is heavily influenced with “new media” as many organizations use it to bring information in a click of a button to patients and caregivers, as portrayed in Mary Jo Strobel’s interview. New media is a field that technical communicators need to be educated in as it all connects to the overall success of the industry. With this being said more awareness needs to be given to the medical field via online platforms in order to help support these communities. New media is a ball game and technical communicators need to stay on top of the industry in order to hit a homerun.

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