

Are chatbots taking over?

Chatbots in user assistance and multiple languages



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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Create dyslexia-friendly documents

Captivate content for the digital era

Stop being an imposter

Changing viewpoints over the decades





President's view

The first few months of a new year is usually the time we set aside for spring cleaning. Out with the old and in with the new. This tends to be the time we sign up for gym memberships, kick-start healthy eating habits, clear out our email inbox, and generally try and detoxify our lives. We promise ourselves that this year will be different. This will be the year that we try to do all our January goals. Of course, as soon as the cold weather sets arrives in late January, these goals are thrown out the window in favour of crashing on the couch under the duvet, binge watching tv shows on Netflix. This is the first year in a very long time where I haven't gotten on the spring-cleaning, health-kick bandwagon because I'm currently on maternity leave and pretty much all of my time is spent looking after my daughter. The thought of getting through the day without caffeine is just not on my radar at the moment.

Instead of getting rid of the old, I'm embracing the little things like the days where I can drink a whole cup of hot coffee while my daughter sleeps for more than 10 minutes. On the rare occasions that she does go to sleep early in an evening, and I am not completely shattered, I sit down and attempt to watch a movie. I recently saw the film *Arrival*. For those of you who haven't seen it, the film follows a linguist who has been enlisted by the U.S. Army to discover how to communicate with aliens who have arrived on Earth, and to do it before tensions between the two species lead to war. I first watched this film when it was released in 2016 and I found it interesting to see a communication

specialist as the lead in a Hollywood movie. The plot itself reminded me of a question asked during a TCUK session a few years ago. Some of you might remember the question 'An alien has landed on Earth and you have to explain how to use a mobile phone'. I still remember that workshop and feeling completely out of my depth as I wasn't expecting that kind of question to be asked, and I genuinely did not know how to answer it. It really stumped me because I just didn't know where to begin with the explanation. I wasn't the only one. As soon as I started to think about how to explain this device to an alien, I realised that everything I would say would lead to another question from the alien. And the answer to that question would lead to another question and so on. It was the first time I realised just how complex technical communication is and how important communicators are.


“ *An alien has landed on Earth and you have to explain how to use a mobile phone* ”

This question has stuck with me since then and I often use the premise of it when I am writing instructions for a new piece of software. I find that it is a good question to have in the back of your mind when you are writing about something that is completely new to your audience. My audience is the alien and I am the one trying to explain this concept and trying to guess what the leading questions will be that I need to answer. I find this a useful technique as it gets me thinking more like the novice user and it therefore helps form the questions I need answered.

Over the past six months I have found myself as the alien user more than once trying to understand how baby products work. I never would have thought the world of baby paraphernalia would be so complicated. I am the one asking the leading questions and trying very hard to find the answers. I have been at my wits end trying to assemble playpens with bars and numerous velcro straps that don't seem to fit the way they should, and of course the infamous pushchair and its numerous attachments is mind boggling. Trying to understand how to expand a carrycot and attach it to the pushchair took about an hour. The instruction

said to pull the tag to slide the bar into position. There is only one way to pull a tag, but that bar wasn't sliding anywhere. It took me about an hour of trying to pull the tag repeatedly in the same position, lifting the carrycot on and off the pushchair to see if I'd forgot to do something else before I finally thought of checking YouTube for an instruction video. Of course, once I watched the video, I realised I hadn't used enough force to expand the carrycot before I pulled the tag. Once I pulled the tag more forcefully, then the bar slid as required! Force is not something you can easily describe in a written manual and this is a great example of when a visual instruction is much clearer than a written one. It also shows that including a link to YouTube or online video instructions in the written manual is a good idea.

Back in the world of technical communication news, this year's TCUK will be held at the Chesford Grange Hotel in Warwickshire from the 10th-12th September 2019. TCUK is 10 years old this year and to mark this anniversary the conference theme has been set as '10'. The theme is deliberately enigmatic and is open to interpretation. There is a prize for the most innovative and imaginative interpretation of the theme. For more information, including submission deadlines, see the TCUK website.

The annual UK Technical Communication Awards are now open for entries. These awards recognise the value of clear and effective documentation whether in printed or online formats. You can apply as an individual or as a team and you do not have to be a member of the ISTC. For information on the rules and the closing date, see the ISTC website. All that's left for me to say is Beannachtaí na Cásca oraibh. 

References

Arrival
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrival_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrival_(film))
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www.istc.org.uk/professional-development-and-recognition/uk-technical-communication-awards
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