TECHNICAL WRITING AS THE JUNGIAN SHADOW OF THE TECH INDUSTRY

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Abstract: The tech industry thrives on innovation, speed, and disruption, often driven by fragmentation and a division of labour that prioritizes specialized tasks over holistic thinking. Yet technical writing demands reflection and integration. This paper explores technical documentation as the Jungian shadow of the tech sector: an essential but devalued aspect that reveals systemic blind spots. The resistance to documentation mirrors shadow projection, where teams externalize discomfort onto the writing process rather than confronting gaps in their own knowledge. The assumption that technical writers can be replaced with AI reflects an impulse for quick fixes—shortcuts that avoid the deeper work documentation requires. Ignoring documentation leads to fragmentation, inefficiency, and knowledge loss—symptoms of a repressed shadow. By recognizing documentation as a process of individuation, tech organizations can move toward greater maturity, sustainability, and self-awareness.

Keywords: documentation, technical writing, Jungian psychology, labour, tech culture, organizational psychology

1. Introduction

The tech industry often overlooks one of its most essential components: technical writing. This disregard for technical communication reflects a deeper psychological dynamic within the sector, where certain aspects of its operations are repressed, leading to dysfunction. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Hollow Men*, “Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow.” The tech industry often fails to bridge the divide between its vision and the reality. In this context, technical writing becomes the “shadow”—a crucial element that is either undervalued or neglected, resulting in missed opportunities for clarity, communication, and quality. This paper will explore how the industry’s failure to fully embrace technical writing is symptomatic of a broader trend of repression, ultimately hindering the possibility for healthier, more mature organizations.

Like many, I entered the tech sector drawn to its vision: intelligent, open, and innovative—embodying a progressive ethos of challenging the status quo. But the reality was different—fractured, bureaucratic, resistant to change, and at times, outright toxic with tech idealism co-opted by corporate interests Turner, 2006. Likewise, I went into technical writing with the vision of unifying knowledge, showcasing sophisticated technologies, and providing clarity for stakeholders. What I encountered, however, was fragmented knowledge, resistance, and frequent devaluation—even outright dismissiveness.

After working in multiple tech workplaces, I began to notice a pattern: high turnover, dismissive comments, and a persistent devaluation of technical writing. Structural problems with both the product and the organization were projected onto documentation, as if hiring a technical writer could solve deeper dysfunctions. Employees with lower pay and less job security were expected to explain every aspect of complex products—a task

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that even so-called “subject matter experts” often struggled to do. Yet, despite carrying this burden, technical writers were repeatedly told they were less skilled and important than everyone else.

The question is how to understand and overcome this challenge. One could turn to critiques of capitalism or leadership, focusing on the external structures, systems, or individuals that are responsible for power imbalances or exploitation. While such critiques are valuable, they might remain at the surface level. Jungian psychology, however, invites us to look inward and understand how these external manifestations may be linked to unconscious, repressed aspects of the self or collective Stein, 1998. The objective is to move beyond just identifying what is wrong and instead ask why these problems persist at a deeper level. By understanding the shadow—the parts of ourselves or organizations that we refuse to acknowledge—we can engage in a more holistic process of transformation.

2. The Jungian Shadow

The shadow exists at personal and collective levels. At the personal level, it is “the thing a person has no wish to be” Jung, 1954, para. 470. This lies in contrast to the persona or “what oneself as well as others thinks one is” Jung, 1959a, para. 221. Jung speaks of a “repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality”, that rather than consisting of “evil” or “morally reprehensible tendencies”, also “displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, creative impulses etc.” Jung, 1959b, paras. 422–423. In other words, the shadow holds valuable elements of the psyche that can be recovered and integrated. Becoming familiar with the shadow thus allows one to become more rounded and whole Perry, 2015.

The shadow is also a collective phenomenon, manifesting in the “social and political structures of a culture” through mass movements, nations, and collective values, often leading to projection and conflict Jung, 1957. The collective shadow includes those elements of a culture that we are reluctant to acknowledge—whether they be social injustices, outdated traditions, or inconvenient truths. Just as with the personal shadow, integrating the collective shadow is essential for societal evolution Jung, 1959b.

In organizational settings, the shadow can be understood as those elements that are repressed or ignored in favour of more visible, “acceptable” aspects of culture. When an organization fails to address these neglected elements, it can lead to dysfunction, as crucial components become undervalued or misrepresented. In such cases, the failure to confront the shadow results in missed opportunities for growth and improvement.

The question is how to identify and integrate the shadow. The shadow often manifests as projection onto some other. Positive and negatives feelings are projected onto those around them, and this projection clouds the capacity to think clearly about situations and relationships Perry, 2015.

2.1 Tech’s Shadow

We might think of the tech sector as having a persona or self-image, reflecting broader cultural or collective movements. This sector’s persona, perhaps first articulated in the 1990s as “The Californian Ideology” Barbrook and Cameron, 1996, emphasizes freedom, entrepreneurship, decentralization, and progress. It embodies a narrative of disruptive innovation Christensen et al., 2015 and an almost utopian vision of technology

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providing idealized solutions Morozov, 2013. This mirrors earlier critiques of industrialization, which idealized values such as progress, productivity, and profitability, while masking its negative effects, including alienation, environmental damage, and exploitation Marcuse, 1964. Additionally, we can draw parallels to colonizing epistemologies and ideologies, which perpetuate themselves through self-legitimating, mythic structures Boscaljon, 2024.

The shadow of this sector persona, however, might include mass surveillance Zuboff, 2019, monopolistic or feudalistic power structures Varoufakis, 2023, toxic work cultures TalentLMS, 2023, and the ongoing question of whether the significant investments in computing and AI are truly driving productivity improvements Brynjolfsson, 2017.

For the present discussion, we can focus on how the shadow manifests at the organizational or firm level. It is at this level where contradictions are most apparent, and where there is a greater opportunity to influence change. My own experience in the field echoes others who have noted how technical writers are underappreciated Hackos and Wood, 1998, seen as secondary to “core” engineering and development roles Miller, 2006; Clements, 2009. Automation, outsourcing, and the increasing reliance on AI tools has contributed to the devaluation of technical writing Hackos, 2012.

The shadow of the tech sector persona is not only seen in large-scale issues like surveillance and monopolistic power but also in the undervaluing of roles that are essential for knowledge transfer and communication—such as technical writing. These roles challenge the sector’s myth of efficiency by confronting the complexities of the technology with clarity and accessibility.

We might draw parallels to the devaluation of caring professions, the humanities in academia, or manual labor. As with the individual shadow, perhaps certain roles get stigmatized and devalued because they embody cognitions and complexities that many are not ready to come to terms with. When developer co-workers referred to my job as “bitch work” I gained a heightened sensitivity to gendered aspects of this type of labor devaluation Federici, 2004. The devaluation of technical writing, like the stigma surrounding other marginalized professions, occurs because these roles confront aspects of work that the sector is uncomfortable with and which challenge the lone genius or “rockstar” persona—collaboration, imperfection, and interdependence—leading to their relegation to the shadow. Consistent with the phenomena of “bullshit jobs” Graeber, 2018, it is often precisely those jobs that are productive that get devalued.

For instance, tech organizations operate with fragmentation of knowledge. Engineers often focus on specific parts of a system, becoming experts in one small area. This deep knowledge of one aspect of a system can foster a sense of confidence and pride, but it may also breed ignorance or a lack of awareness about the larger system or product Brooks, 1995. As a technical writer, one quickly sees that many engineers simply don’t understand how the pieces of a system fit together. The shadow here is the uncomfortable reality that no single individual or team fully understands a complex system. Technical writers, as outsiders to the engineering process, often see these gaps clearly, which can make them uncomfortable to the engineer’s ego.

Just as the individual shadow can be projected onto others, the shadow of engineering work is often projected onto technical writers—who are blamed for perceived shortcomings in clarity or coherence. This projection allows engineers and teams to avoid confronting their own blind spots in understanding complex systems. Technical writing forces engineers to confront the imperfections and complexities of their

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own work DeMarco and Lister, 1999. This discomfort can lead to the projection of frustration or even resentment onto technical writers, who are often blamed for a perceived lack of clarity or coherence, despite the fact that these issues might arise from incomplete or unclear product or engineering work.

3. Integrating the Shadow

It is essential to the health of individuals and groups to acknowledge and integrate the shadow. Recognizing and working with the shadow involves engaging with paradox, experiencing anxiety, and reclaiming projections Kahn, 2003. Technical writers are shadow confronters—the bearers of clarity in environments that thrive on complexity and abstraction. Their role requires not only documenting processes but also uncovering and articulating knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden Winsor, 2003.

In addition to fostering healthier organizations, shadow work is a key driver in addressing the tech industry's growing mental health crisis. A frequently under-discussed aspect of mental health within these organizations is the fragmentation of knowledge and information. When knowledge is disjointed or individuals are blocked from understanding how their work fits into a larger, coherent system, it leads to cognitive overload, stress, and burnout. The inability to see the bigger picture or connect individual efforts to overarching goals compounds these issues, often resulting in disengagement and frustration. Thus, shadow work in this context is not only about individual growth—it's about restoring organizational health and creating more sustainable, empathetic workplaces.

The following explores some aspects of shadow work and their applications in technical communication and organizational knowledge management.

3.1 Acknowledgment

Just as individuals must first acknowledge their shadow, organizations must recognize the existence of their shadow Bowles, 1991. This can involve facing uncomfortable truths, recognizing blind spots, or confronting destructive patterns. In practice, this might involve conducting retrospectives or post-mortems that address not just technical failures but also communication breakdowns and documentation gaps; or, using anonymous surveys to capture honest feedback about documentation culture and knowledge silos.

In the same way that individuals can learn to acknowledge irrational impulses, organizations can recognize the "insanity of reason" that can arise when rigid, overly rational structures dominate. Relying solely on what a group defines as "rational" e.g., metrics, KPIs, etc. can lead to absurd outcomes that stifle creativity, diminish the human spirit and, potentially, unleash destructive forces. Just as Jung's *Red Book* 2009 illustrates the dangers of repressing the unconscious in favour of purely rational thought, organizations that ignore emotional dynamics, creativity, or the irrational aspects of culture risk creating a fragmented, one-sided environment.

3.2 Dialogue and Reflection

Jung emphasized the significance of dialogue—both internal with the unconscious and external with others—as a path toward psychological integration. For Jung, genuine dialogue is not just an exchange of information but a confrontation with difference, with

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otherness—whether that be another person, a conflicting idea, or a repressed aspect of the self.

In organizations, meaningful dialogue paired with reflective practice allows for the surfacing of unconscious dynamics—assumptions, blind spots, power imbalances, and emotional undercurrents—that may otherwise derail collaboration or stifle innovation. Reflection becomes a tool not only for individuals but for the collective psyche of the organization.

Jung observed that his family and professional life served as anchors that kept him grounded during intense inner work. Similarly, organizations must cultivate a strong sense of shared purpose and psychological safety if they are to engage in honest reflection. Without this anchor, reflection can devolve into blame, paralysis, or fragmentation.

In practice, dialogue and reflection involve establishing cross-functional discussions between writers, engineers, and product managers helps examine where knowledge is being lost or siloed. Also, encouraging blameless inquiry when documentation is found lacking, shifting the focus from fault-finding to systemic improvement.

3.3 Creative Expression

Jung saw art and culture as vital avenues for integrating the shadow, both personally and collectively. In technical settings, this may involve space for undisciplined playfulness and embodied experimentation—what Sutton-Smith 1997 called the "rhetorics of play." Far from being frivolous, such creative expression can reveal deep truths, often hidden beneath the surface of logic or convention Boscaljon, 2024.

Drawing from Jung's concept of the *Transcendent Function* 1960, creative expression bridges conscious analysis and unconscious insight. In technical writing, this might manifest in metaphor, visual storytelling, and the use of diagrams—not simply as explanatory tools but as means of exploring the *unseen* layers of meaning. Just as automatic writing or physical movement can uncover the psyche's hidden tensions, rich visual and narrative strategies can surface contradictions or conceptual blind spots within technical domains.

This repositions technical writers as more than conveyors of information: they become torchbearers of clarity in an age of accelerating complexity and fragmentation. Their work mirrors the ancient role of myth-keepers and scribes—those who preserved and transmitted complexity across generations. As Jung explored in *Man and His Symbols* 1964, and as Walter Ong 1982 and Lewis Mumford 1934 have shown in their respective studies of media and civilization, language and technology co-evolve with culture.

This perspective crystallized for me during a visit to the *Kotsanas Museum of Ancient Greek Technology* in Athens. There, I saw how ancient notes, models, and diagrams—often humble and handmade—preserved and transmitted complex technical knowledge across time and cultures. Their clarity, embedded in tangible form, offered a model of how documentation can be both precise and poetic.

Organizations might take inspiration from this by valuing documentation not just as output, but as creative knowledge work. This could include alternative formats such as diagrams, animations, and interactive walkthroughs—or even more playful, embodied approaches like escape rooms or documentation quests. These practices honor the idea that understanding is not just cognitive but *felt*, embodied, and expressed.

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3.4 Building Empathy and Understanding

By acknowledging and integrating its shadow, an organization becomes less prone to fragmentation and more capable of embracing diverse perspectives. Empathy in this context involves not just interpersonal understanding, but a shift in how technical work itself is valued and communicated. When documentation is perceived as a burdensome task or mere afterthought, vital knowledge is often lost or siloed. Reframing documentation as a strategic, creative, and collaborative practice can reveal its deeper role in shaping how teams function and evolve.

Jung's archetype of the *anima*—the inner figure of relatedness, receptivity, and creative harmony—offers a powerful metaphor for this transformation. In organizations, the anima represents not vulnerability as weakness, but as the gateway to genuine connection. When technical writing is approached through this lens, it becomes more than an operational tool—it becomes a mode of expressing inner coherence, beauty, and even a sense of cosmic order. Diagrams, clear explanations, and accessible formats do not just inform; they can soothe confusion, integrate complexity, and make the invisible visible.

This vision expands when viewed through the concept of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world. Just as the anima reflects individual psychic depth, the anima mundi speaks to our shared interdependence. In an organizational setting, this invites a move away from isolated departments or rigid hierarchies toward a more holistic culture—one grounded in shared mission, care, and collaboration. Jung touched on this mystery when he wrote:

> "Whatever the learned interpretation may be of the sentence *'God is love,'* the words affirm the *complexio oppositorum* of the godhead... cosmogonic love… being a part, man cannot grasp the whole."
> — *Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961, p. 353)

In this light, integration is not a final destination, but an ongoing process—one that asks both individuals and organizations to hold tension, stay present with uncertainty, and continually return to the question: what knowledge are we neglecting, and why? Documentation, when approached with empathy and imagination, becomes a means of illuminating this shadow—bridging the rational with the relational, the technical with the mythic.

4. Conclusion

It is crises that compel individuals to therapy and psychology. Similarly, the tech industry is facing a crisis. This crisis is not only technical or financial but also cultural, ethical, and psychological. Just as individuals are urged to confront their shadow in therapy to heal and evolve, the tech industry must do the same. The repressed aspects of the industry—its blind spots, unethical practices, and disregard for worker well-being—are coming to light, creating a moment of reckoning.

This moment is an opportunity for growth and transformation. Just as Jungian shadow work calls for acknowledgment, dialogue, reflection, and creative expression, so too does the tech industry need to engage with its own shadow. Acknowledging uncomfortable truths, fostering critical conversations, and integrating diverse

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perspectives will not only improve organizational health but also address the industry's mental health crisis. The fragmentation of knowledge, disconnection between roles, and lack of meaningful communication all contribute to burnout and stress, which shadow work can help mitigate. By integrating its shadow, the tech sector can evolve into a more holistic entity—one that values empathy, creativity, and inclusivity alongside innovation.

Just as individuals who confront their shadow move toward wholeness, so too can the tech industry emerge stronger, more resilient, and healthy.

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