South Korea has made a quick transition from a developing nation to one with a thriving and robust mix of internationally-recognized goods and services. As a result, the need for technical communication has risen sharply in the last decade. Although still in its infancy, the profession is organizing and growing rapidly to meet the needs of the massive electronics industry and establish the resources necessary to train a new generation of technical communicators.

**Public awareness of technical communication**

Due to the relatively young age of the profession in South Korea, public awareness of technical communication remains low. Technical writing is not a government-recognized profession at this point and it is difficult to find educated, trained technical writers due to the lack of specialized, authorized forms of education for technical writing in Korea.

Corporate awareness of the benefits and purposes of technical communication is still fairly low as well. It has been only 10 years or so since Korea began producing products for global markets. Prior to this period, most manufacturers needed only to focus on developing cost-competitive products and considered product manuals to be insignificant accessories. However, as manufacturers enter foreign markets, they are starting to realize the need for quality documentation to remain competitive and adhere to international regulations. Considering the increasing output of Korean manufacturers and rising global sales of Korean products, the production of high-quality user guidance and documentation will continue to be an important issue.

In order to raise awareness and set the stage for the development of credible educational programs, several companies and professionals came together in 2006 to form the Korea Technical Communication Association (KTCA). The KTCA is dedicated to laying the groundwork for the growth of technical communication within Korea by encouraging development of educational programs and research opportunities, educating businesses and the public about the need for technical communication, and supporting its members with educational and skill-building opportunities.

**Current documentation development**

Korea is home to numerous technology companies that produce a wide range of consumer electronics, mobile devices, computer hardware, and software. Among these manufacturers, several companies currently develop their documentation in-house and outsource only lesser tasks, such as desktop publishing. Although some manufacturers have invested in resources and personnel to develop their manuals in-house, many still have difficulty establishing efficient processes, controlling the quality of their text, and managing localization efforts. A company like mine (Hansem), with 20 years’ experience developing and maturing end-to-end documentation processes is still a rarity in Korea.

Throughout the 1990’s, QuarkXpress was a popular tool for document design and layout. In the last decade, FrameMaker emerged as the most viable tool—especially for manuals that required translation by outside vendors. Adobe’s InDesign is now gaining popularity as more high-end consumer electronics and appliances require additional graphics and visual elements.
Perceptions of technical documents

In the recent past, most Korean customers simply did not read user manuals. This is due, in part, to the compressed period of postwar reconstruction and the relatively short time that electronic devices have been available to the general public. Moreover, the electronic devices that were produced roughly 10 years ago had simple functions and few features, which made them easy to use without instruction. As Korean electronics have evolved, many manufacturers and consumers have relied heavily on call centers and customer service to answer questions and even provide operating instructions, so many customers are simply unfamiliar with turning to the product documentation for guidance.

As the technology rapidly develops in Korea, consumers’ perceptions about documentation are changing. Now, manufacturers are producing much more complicated, feature-rich products that are more difficult for consumers to use without instruction. As a result, customers are beginning to demand more documentation. In one instance, a consumer advocacy group launched a campaign promoting the idea that customers have a right to expect decent documentation to accompany complicated products.

Local preferences and issues

Documentation produced for the Korean market differs quite a bit from the documentation produced for international markets. Korea, like other Asian cultures, is a high context environment. Consumers here expect plenty of visual cues, illustrations, and even whimsy in their documents. As a result, technical documents produced for the local market often make use of full color, high-quality paper for covers, and lots of photos and illustrations (refer to the examples that follow). In some cases, essential information and installation or setup procedures are provided on plastic-coated, single-page quick start guides.

Localization is also an important issue for Korea, as most foreign firms simply attempt to provide a literal translation of their English source texts in Korean. This practice leads to many user guides of very low quality, due to the large differences in the structures of the two languages. Companies who create a large volume of content for the local market, such as Hansem, have found that the most successful way to adapt documents is to rewrite source texts to include terminologies and sentence structures that make sense to Koreans.

Fig 1: Sample page from Korean user manual produced by Hansem EZUserGuides, Inc.
Influence of the internet

Internet connectivity in Korea is among the highest in the world, with more than 70% of the population online as of September, 2008\(^1\). Consumers post questions and search for information on their products and often turn to message boards or chat rooms instead of printed documentation. Sometimes, this information can be inaccurate, as the sources are often unverified. However, this user-created content can also be helpful to technical communicators when updating manuals or seeking insight into consumers’ problems with a product. As this trend continues, manufacturers and technical communicators may find it increasingly useful to provide more web-based content and host or participate in internet forums to help their customers’ solve problems and learn to use products. Needless to say, the rise of the internet will have a definite impact on the future of user guidance in Korea.

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