

Chapter 4

Information and Communication Technologies and Intercultural Professional Communication

ABSTRACT

This chapter shows how definitions and assumptions about information and communication technology must be grounded in prevailing rhetorical and cultural traditions. It shows how much media research in the United States presupposes strong U.S. cultural values, including its legal traditions, the English language, and eight common human thresholds of interaction. It also show how each rhetoric and cultural tradition fit, remediate, and have distinct uses and timing for the information and communication technologies. Its purpose it to help professional communicators understand the use and forms of communication media appropriately around the world.

INTRODUCTION

As explained in Chapter Three, contrastive rhetoric examines the relations of L2 textual patterns and the rhetorical and cultural traditions of authors and audiences (see, for example, Kaplan 1966). This focus is based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that one's native language determines (strong hypothesis) or encourages (weak hypothesis) one's thought—and therefore—writing patterns. Accordingly, as first argued by Kaplan (1966), many L2 students of English composition bring their textual organizing strategies from their L1

into their English compositions. As explored thoroughly in Chapter Three, contrastive rhetoric has moved beyond the simple one-to-one correspondences between writing patterns and culture. These developments look at a variety of cultural, linguistic, historical, and social factors that influence the complex acts of acquiring and demonstrating L2 writing competencies. In addition, other studies have demonstrated that L2 writing scholars and teachers need to understand not only the cultural background of their students, but also the specific context and audience-author relations to understand fully the textual patterns of the L2 writer (Thatcher 2000; 1999).

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These developments are important, but in this Chapter, I push contrastive rhetoric and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis even further and suggest that the focus on the verbal medium as evidence for—and a reinforcer of—cultural and rhetorical patterns is too narrow and debilitating. In addition to language, a growing number of researchers (see, for example, Bolter & Grusin 1999) argue that communication media, such as orality, writing, e-mail, and hypertext, can similarly determine (strong hypothesis) or predispose (weak hypothesis) our mental and corresponding rhetorical patterns. Just like languages, communication media are not neutral devices that correspond equally and favorably to all rhetorical and cultural traditions. Instead, communication media restrain and reinforce certain communication possibilities and corresponding rhetorical and cultural patterns, thus developing complexly different relations to each cultural/rhetorical tradition across the globe. Consequently, each rhetorical tradition develops with each communication media a sense of purpose, audience-author relations, information needs, organizational patterns, and stylistic preferences. Researchers, practitioners, and teachers of intercultural rhetoric and professional communication, therefore, need to understand how professional communication is situated with communication media and cultures across the globe; otherwise, they might use one of these media assuming a rhetorical purpose that is not suited to the cultural context.

This connection between communication media and cultural patterns is a critical aspect of intercultural professional communication, but it is often ignored by many information and communication technology scholars. For example, in his *The World is Flat*, Friedman argues that newer information and communication media might be flattening hierarchies and democratizing relations. Friedman specifically identifies the role of the web in this influence, arguing that the web creates a triple convergence that will flatten the world: information access, more horizontal ways

to collaborate, and opening up of new cultures (pp. 176-181). However, this triple convergence presupposes or is based on mostly U.S. and Western cultural values such as individualism, achievement orientation, low power distance communication patterns, and universalism, all of which are strongly rooted in the United States but not elsewhere. Similar arguments have been developed (and critiqued) about email and hypertext for a decade or so (see, for example, Hawisher & Selfe, 2000). However, a long history of media scholarship in Latin America shows how supposed democratizing media can actually strengthen status-quo oligarchies (Martin Barbero, 1993).

In other words, despite the huge movement towards situating new communication technologies rhetorically, most U.S. scholars fail situate how they situate their own theories. Consequently, many U.S. scholars commit the same kinds of ethnocentric theorizing about the new media that have occurred with other media-culture theories, especially those applied outside the United States. For example, in the early 19th-century, a large number scholars hypothesized that written constitutions would have a similar effect on Latin American countries as the U.S. Constitution did on the United States. And thus, there was a great push for developing written constitutions in Latin America. However, according to many comparative legal scholars (Rosenn, 1991), the signers of U.S. Declaration and Constitution were able to rely on a cultural and rhetorical context that encouraged or allowed such uses of written communication. In the U.S. tradition, writing correlated very strongly with the distance, isolation, and personal space of individualism and the backbone of the laws, rules, and regulations of universalism (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Thatcher, 1999; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). In a collective culture such as Ecuador, writing will not have the same influence because orality is the preferred medium for regulating behavior (Thatcher, 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that documents like the U.S. Constitution have had

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