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Introduction

THINKING GLOBALLY, COMPOSING LOCALLY

Re-thinking Online Writing in the Age of the Global Internet

Rich Rice and Kirk St.Amant

Audience—it is one of the central components of the writing process. We consider audience carefully, first, to meet a group's reading expectations. In some cases, the audience is created in our minds. It's imagined, and we address presumed reading preferences the best we can (consider Ong, 1975). In other cases, we conduct specific sorts of research (e.g., rhetorical or audience analyses) to learn more about a group's background and communication needs. Using this information as a guide we attempt to craft targeted messages (such as St.Amant, 2015). Regardless of the process, one key tenant remains the same: when we write, it is to convey information to a group in a way that recognizes the communication needs of group members (Caroll, 2010).

Online environments add new levels of complexity to understanding audience because the notion of group changes. In such environments, audience is always more diverse, varied, and in many cases global in scale. We must adapt, and we must do so quickly. To successfully invoke online audiences that are global in nature, the writing process requires a *kairotic* approach of working to contact participants in just the right way, to convey just the right information, and to connect with readers at just the right time in a sustained or even transactional process. Thus, communicating online involves moving beyond traditional borders or notions of groups, exploring functional more so than political geographies, and valuing economic, social, and cultural ties rather than only territorial group tensions (Getto & St.Amant, 2014).

THE GLOBAL NATURE OF ONLINE AUDIENCES

Online media often give us a means to bypass such boundaries of space and time. That is, information communication technologies allow us

to almost instantly share information and ideas with individuals half a world away. Thus, when we write online, our audience theoretically becomes anyone who has is interested in our topic and who has online access. Moreover, the global spread and distribution of online access also allows an audience to quickly and directly respond to our ideas. As a result, the rhetoric triangle—which traditionally includes reader, writer, and text—must expand to include location and modality. Where and who our audience is, in addition to what tool they’re using to access our content, must be considered carefully. Audiences today are often large and diverse; they also have the potential to be relatively interactive. All of these factors come to bear when we consider the question “Who is our audience in the age of global online access?”

Let’s examine this question further. As of this writing, the potential international audience for our online work is huge: some 3.7 billion persons worldwide, and growing rapidly. It is also a culturally diverse one, comprised of some 353 million with online access in Africa, roughly 385 million persons online in Latin American and the Caribbean, 637 million in Europe, 142 million in the Middle East, 28 million in Oceania/Australia, and almost 1.9 billion individuals who have online access in Asia. (For the most current statistics on international online access, see “The Internet Big Picture” [2017] through *Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics* [2017] at <http://www.internetworldstats.com>.) Such a degree of diversity in global cyberspace, moreover, is a relatively recent development.

At the turn of the millennium, only 361 million persons worldwide were connected to online environments (The Internet big picture, 2017). In addition, most of these individuals were located in North America—particularly the United States and Canada (almost 1/3 of all individuals with online access) or in Western Europe (almost another 1/3 of all individuals with access) (Internet users in the Americas, 2017; Internet penetration in North America, 2017; Internet in Europe stats, 2017). The majority of today’s Internet users, by contrast, represent not only a greater percentage of individuals from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but also an increase in the number of online participants from emerging economies. For example, as of this writing, the number of individuals with online access in China alone (some 722 million persons) is almost twice that of the number of Internet users in the United States and Canada combined (roughly 363 million persons). Similarly, India’s 465 million persons with online access constitutes over half the entire population of Europe (roughly 739 million persons). Moreover, it is in these emerging economies of the world where the prospects for

markedly increasingly online access are the greatest. China, for example, saw the number of individuals with online access within its borders grow from 22.5 million persons in 2000 to over 700 million by 2017—and this number accounts for only half its total population (Internet penetration in Asia, 2017). Thus, as global access to online environments continues to expand, it will likely be non-Western cultures and the citizens of emerging economies that account for a large percentage of this growth. While not everyone is reading what we write, of course, this gives significant cause for rethinking contexts surrounding audience.

RETHINKING WRITING CONTEXTS FOR ONLINE AUDIENCES

Scholars around the world are calling for changes in education to focus on preparing students for becoming global citizens (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Such change must equip students with twenty-first century technology skills needed to become employable, prepare individuals who live and work with diverse cultures, and focus on solving complex world issues (Zhao, 2009, 2010).¹ Given all of these complexities, those of us who teach or research writing or communication studies must consider what these factors mean in terms of writing online and intercultural communication competence. For example, who is our intended, actual, and inadvertent audience? Who can we communicate with via writing through these environments, and how do we do so effectively? How can we use online writing to engage in greater international discussions as well as to create greater international communities? What sorts of intercultural communication competencies must we develop and foster? These are but a few of the questions for which we must consistently rethink our answers.

In truth, this situation can seem overwhelming. The challenge becomes determining the best initial step or framework to consider in trying to address these questions. The purpose of this collection is not to answer every nuanced question related to writing online in global contexts. (Online writing is forever evolving.) Indeed, we want to suggest that new answers must be developed for each unique context, ingroup/outgroup relationship, and audience. Rather, the overarching objective of this volume is to identify areas that can serve as starting points for fields within technical communication and writing studies and can help individuals focus on and approach frameworks they can use to begin to understand varied and diverse contexts for online writing. Central to this objective is creating a model or approach that can guide how we think about, examine, and address online writing

situations in terms of composition and rhetoric when borders or boundaries are more fluid and ever-changing, even hyperconnected.

RETHINKING PERCEPTIONS OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

Most of us have encountered the concept of the “borderless world.” The central notion is that online media have leveled many of the conventional limitations of space and time by providing near instantaneous access to people around the world. So prevalent has this notion of open international online access become that a relatively new metaphor of the “flat earth” has entered the public consciousness. Popularized by *New York Times* journalist and writer Thomas L. Friedman, the flat earth perspective represents the idea of a world free of boundaries and barriers. It is a world in which a convergence of online access, geopolitical developments, and economic approaches allows for information, ideas, and digital goods and web-based services to move across the globe as easily as a hockey puck seems to slide across the flat surface of an ice rink. We know this to be a less than perfectly true framework.

The paradigm, in fact, can be misleading. Consider extending the metaphor. As anyone who has traversed an ice rink can attest, just because the surface of the rink appears to be flat and open does not necessarily mean that surface is smooth or even. Rather, such surfaces tend to be covered by a wide array of dips and divots and cracks and bumps that create a certain degree of pull or drag or friction on any object that tries to move across. In much the same way, an array of technological, political, economic, cultural, and linguistic factors can exist and create a similar kind of pull or drag or friction that affects how smoothly or quickly or directly information can move from point to point in global cyberspace. Thus, while the earth might appear to be increasingly flat from the perspective of international online communication, it is far from frictionless.

These aspects slow, shift, or impede movement, affecting the supposedly smooth travels of ideas, information, goods, and services across the seemingly flattened realm of international online spaces. As with an ice rink, these friction points in global cyberspace can vary from the easily observed to the seemingly imperceptible. In every case, such friction points affect the free flow of information across the globe. Thus, a key to navigating international online writing contexts is to first identify friction points, attempt to understand them, and then devise writing approaches for specific audiences that allow us to account for or address friction points through effective communication practices.

This collection approaches the study of online writing in global cyberspace by keeping friction points in mind. The idea is to identify areas that appear to add to friction points or obstruct the effective flow of information when trying to share our online writing with greater global audiences. Doing so provides those of us engaged in technical communication and writing studies with a mechanism for identifying friction points associated with such writing contexts. We can then examine ideas of context and audience in further detail in the hopes of developing online writing strategies or approaches that effectively account for and address them. How do we proceed?

RECONSIDERING APPROACHES TO WRITING ONLINE

Friction points and the flat earth concept clearly relate to the notion of audience. With the hockey metaphor of flattened spaces, the “puck” we wish to slide across the ice is content or what we have written, texts we compose when we use writing to share our ideas with others. When we use online media to connect to or write for greater, global audiences, our goal is to use texts to convey information to that audience in ways that are easy to access or to be coherent or understandable and well considered or usable. To do so, we must account for friction points that could affect aspects of access, comprehension, and usability across a range of globally distributed readers. In this way, there are three main kinds of friction points: those that affect *access* (can your audience get to what you have composed), those that affect *comprehension* (can your audience understand what you have composed as you intended it), and those that affect *action* (can your audience make use of or act upon the information provided as intended).

While these factors are very broad in scope, they can be examined, understood, and addressed in terms of three sorts of variables: (1) *technology*, or what technologies (e.g., hardware, software, and networking) are used to compose and to access online texts; (2) *culture*, or what aspects of language, rhetoric, and culture need to be considered when creating texts to share ideas with international online audiences, and (3) *laws*, or what legal aspects (e.g., censorship, data disclosure, and copyright law) affect sorts of texts individuals can create, share, and access via international cyberspace (see St.Amant, 2013; St.Amant & Rife, 2014; Sun, 2012). These categories are broad, but they represent starting points for identifying where friction points can occur. For those of us in technical communication and writing studies, the question becomes what kinds of friction points must we identify, examine, and

attempt to address to work effectively within and when preparing our students for writing online in larger global contexts (see Internet world users by language, 2017; and Most common languages used on the Internet as of June 2015, 2015, to help consider the complexity).

To address this question, we propose the “3Cs of writing in global online contexts.” The objective of this approach is to isolate the study of writing-related friction points into three central, overarching realms connected to using online media in order to compose for globally distributed readers. When writing online for broader, international audiences, individuals attempt to accomplish three, interconnected general and overarching processes—contacting, conveying, and connecting:

- *Contacting*: To share ideas and information effectively with a global audience, the writer must be able to access or make contact with that audience. To this end, the first and perhaps most important step of writing online for greater global audiences involves selecting the online medium or media that allow one to contact the targeted audience effectively. Section I: Contacting contains chapters spanning the use of digital notebooks (Josephine Walwema); experience mapping (Minh-Tam Nguyen, Heather Turner, and Benjamin Lauren); literacy development in international public forums (J. C. Lee); ePortfolios and blogfolios (Cynthia Davidson); and 4C4Equality and usability as networked engagement (Liz Lane and Don Unger).
- *Conveying*: Just because one can contact a given audience to share a composition does not inherently mean that audience will understand the ideas conveyed or the writer’s purpose for sharing that information. Conveying becomes readily apparent if a given international audience responds to or acts upon a given composition in the manner intended *or* unintended by the author. Thus, this friction point involves factors that can affect an international audience’s ability to comprehend conveyed ideas and desired responses or actions intended by the author. Section II: Conveying contains chapters spanning connections in Internet-mediated learning environments (Suzanne Blum Malley); massive open online courses (MOOCs) and world Englishes (Kaitlin Clinnin, Kay Halasek, Ben McCorkle, Susan Delagrang, Scott Lloyd Dewitt, Jen Michaels, and Cynthia L. Selfe); writing resources across the global information divide (Amber Engelson); activity and actor-network theory (Beau S. Pihlaja); and digital composing practices in Turkey (M^a Pilar Milagros).
- *Connecting*: It is one thing to share information globally via an online medium. It is a far different exercise to use online media to create a system of interaction whereby author and reader continually shift roles and exchange information to engage in a greater discussion. Thus, maximizing the potential of writing online in global contexts involves connecting in ways that build a continually interacting community around a shared area of interest. Section III: Connecting

contains chapters spanning writing centers and online feedback (Vassiliki Kourbani); distributed agency in digital environments (Lavinia Hirsu); transnational activism (Katherine Bridgman); multimodal literacies among Bhutanese refugees in the United States (Tika Lamsal); and glocalization through Google Apps for Education (Daniel Hocutt and Maury Brown).

The central notion of the 3Cs approach (contacting, conveying, connecting) is that composing through text and other media is a powerful mechanism for creating and maintaining communities in international contexts. Consider what global strategist Parag Khanna (2016) calls “connectography,” which is how connectivity has enabled us to build a global network civilization and work toward overcoming some geopolitical problems. When done effectively, online composing is ideally suited for creating greater global communities around shared interests and objectives.

In technical communication and writing studies, we can use this 3Cs approach to identify, understand, and address various friction points that can affect the success or effectiveness of writing in online global contexts. Doing so allows us to achieve central objectives related to connecting with global audiences, in order to do the following:

- Identify potential friction points that could impede the exchange of ideas when writing in international, online contexts;
- Understand how an item creates friction or affects aspects of contact, conveying, and/or connecting when writing in global online contexts; and
- Develop approaches for addressing or mitigating friction points when writing online to ensure participants meet the objective of effectively engaging with global audiences.

In technical communication and writing studies, we must focus more on the expanded rhetorical triangle to better understand complexities of audience and purpose.

By using this 3Cs approach to guide our research and teaching practices to address these factors, those of us in technical communication and writing studies can better understand and better prepare our students to compose online in the age of global cyberspace. Of course, these areas are broad and in scope, and vary significantly with each context, as the contributors in this collection demonstrate. We offer a polyvocal perspective in this collection, with views from a variety of scholars, positions, and approaches. As such, this collection builds on the work and approach of Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Kathy Wills’s (2007) *Critical Power Tools: Cultural Studies Approaches to Technical Communication*. Our text explores ways in which we can understand embodiment

(Fleckenstein, 2003, 2009; Fleckenstein, Hum, & Calendrillo, 2007), as well as technological ecologies and sustainability (DeVoss, McKee, & Selfe, 2009). That is, with diverse genres and voices within this collection we work to (inter)connect a representative picture of writing research related to global contexts.

Specifically, entries in this collection represent examples that explore these 3Cs areas to overview how a particular friction point can affect composing online for globally distributed audiences. There are five chapters in each of three sections. Each chapter provides insights for better identifying and understanding friction points, and models how we in technical communication and writing studies might approach this idea of friction points in our research and teaching practices. Thus, chapters contained here are informational (they provide an overview of a given idea), exemplary (they provide a model for how to approach the idea of friction points in teaching and research), and foundational (they offer starting points from which others can launch further inquiry into a given friction point area). It is the hope of the editors that readers will view these collected entries as an invitation to engage in a greater discussion of and debate of these friction point issues and overall practices related to writing online for global contexts.

Note

1. See, for instance, the Global Learning, Information Literacy, and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence rubrics from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) VALUE Rubric Development Project (AACU, 2017).

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