

Chapter 5

Using the Classical Rhetorical Concept of “Ethos” to Solve Online Collaboration Problems of Trust and Presence: The Case of Slack

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shows how ethos continues to play an important role in contemporary online collaboration and can be applied as a methodology to those leading or even engaging in such collaborative projects. First articulated by Aristotle as a combination of the traits of phronesis (practical wisdom), aretae (virtuous character), and eunoia (goodwill), the concept of ethos is a central aspect of public communication. This chapter discusses how applying this classical concept to one’s online communication in collaborative projects can solve the difficulties of presence and trust. Furthermore, the concept when applied to electronic communication goes a long way toward establishing an e-ethic. In order to accomplish this, this chapter specifically looks at the application Slack. Slack is an online collaborative tool that is built on top of the IRC framework. This chapter takes the concept of ethos and shows how it can be practically integrated into Slack communication.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a messy phenomenon even when operating at its simplest level, one person speaking face-to-face with one other person who shares a mother-tongue, a culture, and a history. For this reason, most relationships, “even good ones, are gratifying in some ways and frustrating in others” (Huston, 2009, p. 318). The emotions that occur in such communication are “multi-layered processes in which intra-individual processes are tightly coupled and often cannot be separated from inter-individual pro-

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cesses” (Arvid, 2013). Even within this relatively pristine communication environment communication can be “intentional or unintentional”, is “irreversible”, is unavoidable, is “unrepeatable,” and “has both content and relational dimensions” (Adler & Proctor, 2011, pp. 14-16). All of this makes communication complicated, difficult, and messy.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) often becomes “a more messy socially-mediated translation process that occurs across shifting scales (local, national, regional, and global), and a range of cultures (online, offline, local, global, networked)” (Crosby & Notley, 2014, p. 135). Referring specifically to CMC through the popular microblogging site, Twitter, researchers have described the difficulties that arise from CMC: “The invisible college formed on Twitter is messy, consisting of overlapping social contexts (professional, personal, and public), scholars with different habits of engagement, and both formal and informal ties” (Quan-Haas, Martin, & McCay-Peet, 2015, p. 10). According to a UCLA study most CMC users surveyed felt that the technology “allows users to communicate with people they normally could not, more than three-quarters (77 percent) agreed or strongly agreed” (Cole et al., 2013, p. 59). Nonetheless that communication carries “an increased risk. As users might be placed in different contexts or cultures, misunderstandings become more likely, and enforcement of agreements and regulations becomes more difficult. As risks increase and become more difficult to evaluate, users of collaborative technologies face more complex decisions” (Riegelsberegger & Sasse, 2003, p. 785).

That risk, or at least the perception of it, is exacerbated to the point of incivility by the alienation from the communication created by electronic media; “[m]edia today, particularly digital media, have both ecological and epistemological ramifications” (Friesen, 2011, p. 175). These epistemological ramifications inherently proceed to a lack of trust: “it is important for educators and academics to clearly understand the epistemological differences that will emerge in their students. We can expect an increase in skepticism that we have never before known. Inartistic proofs will be expected to be reproducible on demand with little or no preparatory warning” (Cline B., 2012, p. 10). Simply believing somebody becomes more difficult when one is physically separate from another person.

Some of the grounds for this apparent lack of trust comes from the inadequate sense of presence that arises from a nuanced communication that can come from face to face interactions: “Because of its lack of social and contextual cues, negative online interactions are likely to generate a stronger adverse effect on victims compared to traditional face-to-face or telephone encounters as individuals lack the opportunity to seek immediate clarification or obtain dynamic feedback” (Lim, Thompson, & Chin, 2008, p. 155). The lack of physical presence means that electronic “comments in an emotionally charged situation are often misinterpreted” (Denning, 1993, p. 170). That misinterpretation of emotional information can create chain reactions of incivility which have the potential to reverberate throughout an organization and ultimately to the whole of society: “Although the intent to harm may be ambiguous, the spillover effect of an uncivil interpersonal workplace encounter on others as well as the organization should not be underestimated” (Lim, Thompson, & Chin, 2008).

This chapter will show that CMC is a symbol system that is rhetorically constructed on top of language and using language. It will argue that the problems of trust and presence in CMC are the result of a divisive linguistic phenomenon that has been well identified in the rhetorical and philosophical literature. Because of this, CMC can be rhetorically manipulated to serve ends solving trust and presence (identification) despite being a cause of those problems (division). The paper will show that the basic rhetorical nature of CMC means that the various tools of rhetoric, many of which have been in use for millennia, can be used to solve certain problems that exist in CMC. The chapter will focus on Aristotelian concept of *ethos* in order to rhetorically construct trust and presence within the framework of CMC. The

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