

How to Smile When They Can't See Your Face: Rhetorical Listening Strategies for IM and SMS Reference

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests IM (instant message) and SMS (short message service) reference strategies based on the stance of rhetorical listening in an attempt to create in digital communication environments in which both patrons and reference librarians can utilize similar affordances that they might encounter in a face-to-face interactions, for instance, especially nonverbal communication. Drawing upon research in computer-mediated communication, the social sciences, and library studies, the author suggests four specific strategies for beginning implementation of rhetorical listening into IM and SMS reference: material sensitivity, syntactic mirroring, emoticon use, and professional ethos awareness.

Keywords: Computer-mediated Communication, Digital Writing, Ethos, IM, Rhetoric, Rhetorical Listening, Semantic, SMS, Syntax, Textual Strategy

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, libraries relied upon physical presence, differentiating themselves from other information-seeking experiences and institutions of learning through distinctive architecture, particular smells and sounds, and the singular subset of professional human bodies inhabiting and maintaining that environment: librarians. However, as digital communication technology nudges librarians' work into non-physical spaces, tactilely sterile spaces that rely almost exclusively upon written words and visual images, significant change is underway in how librarians navigate activities that have been shaped by face-to-face, physical interactions with people and texts.

As physical bodies, with their subtle communicative signals, depart from the environment where librarians are working, the richness that physical interactions lend to human communication become evident through their absence. When a librarian cannot smile at a tentative patron, when she cannot provide alternate explanations when she sees confusion on the face of the person sitting next to her, when frustration cannot be felt in the tension of a questioner's voice, one of the major strengths of the physical reference desk within the space of the library where human beings can communicate with one another face-to-face, seems lost. And yet, the sense

DOI: 10.4018/IJDL.S.2015010104

of place, the experience of human interaction, continues to differentiate libraries and librarians from algorithmic answer machines and the dizzying electronic accumulation of texts that make up the internet.

While some libraries with the resources and infrastructure are implementing live-stream audiovisual reference via services like Skype to recapture the affordances of face-to-face communication, this chapter will address the more ubiquitous text-based IM (instant message) and SMS (short message service) forms of virtual reference, which rely on synchronous, written-language-based exchanges devoid of other visual or audio messages. In an attempt to develop dialogue between and among librarians and researchers in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and digital writing (DW), the author will suggest how rhetorical listening, an approach being developed by scholars of rhetoric “signifying a stance of openness” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 1), can guide librarians engaging in SMS and IM reference. Rhetorical listening provides tools for interpreting and crafting digital language that suggests some of the same nonverbal acknowledgments and awareness of physical presence that face-to-face reference so readily affords.

Through a combination of practicable strategies and conscious attention to the stances of rhetorical listening, librarians might, in an environment seemingly confined to sterile, non-tactile exchanges of written words, infuse their IM and SMS transactions with the warmth and sense of place taken for granted in physical libraries. Specifically, the author will suggest how material sensitivity, syntactic mirroring, emoticons, and the maintenance of professional ethos through language use contribute to a thoughtful way of “listening” to patrons when they cannot be literally seen or heard.

BACKGROUND

A 2013 Pew Internet and American Life project report determined that 80% of surveyed Americans consider reference librarians “a very important” library service (Zickuhr, K., Rainie, L., & Purcell, K., 2013, p. 3). This finding about library values seems at odds with research into contemporary information-seeking behavior, which seem to regularly reveal that library patrons “value convenience and efficiency, often aided by technology, as among the most important factors in how they pursue an information need” (Barnhart & Pierce, 2011, p. 4). Search algorithms—Google, for one—unimpeded by the messiness of human interaction and potential miscommunications, might seem a shorter and smoother path than initiating a dialogue with a librarian. Yet, it may be that the very “inefficiency” of the reference interaction, the human connection with its inherent vulnerability and uncertainties, may be the quality that assures that reference librarians continue to be valued by library users.

IM and SMS “chat” reference services may seem the perfect bridge between the demand for convenience and the personal, professional skill of a reference librarian; indeed, IM and SMS platforms best facilitate an efficient, adjacency pair model of conversation, such as question-answer or complaint-remedy (Schwarz, 2011, p. 72). However, much of the research conducted thus far in library studies have focused on IM and SMS question types, staffing patterns, and the selection and marketing of a platform (Francour, 2001, Foley, 2002; Bell & DeVoe, 2008; Moyo, 2002; Coffman & Arret, 2004) only recently has interest emerged in exploring how meaningful interactions with users is facilitated (Luo, 2013; Radford, 2006; Fagan & Desai, 2003).

While their conclusions and suggestions may differ, researchers in this area seem to agree that establishing framework for ethical and human reference interactions becomes exponentially more difficult when librarians are not afforded the aural and visual cues that they encounter in telephone or face-to-face interactions, where the sounds and appearance of human bodies guides the direction and inflection of response. As Ruth Hodges observes, “There are no visual or audio

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