

International Digital Studies Approach for Examining International Online Interactions

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INTRODUCTION

As global access to the Internet increases, so does the potential for miscommunication in international online interactions (IOIs). Unfortunately, many models for examining cross-cultural communication focus on conventional (offline) interactions or settings. As a result, researchers lack a mechanism for examining how cultural factors could affect online discourse.

This article presents an approach—international digital studies—for examining how cultural factors could affect IOIs. The purpose of this approach is to identify points of contention or areas where online media can create conflicts in cultural expectations associated with credibility. Once identified, these points of contention can serve as the subject of future research related to culture and communication.

BACKGROUND

Creating credibility, or *ethos*, is not a random process. Rather, audiences use certain factors, or *ethos conditions*, to develop a checklist for determining if a presentation is credible (worthy of attention). That is, audiences come to a particular presentation situation thinking, “This individual must do x, y, and z if I am to consider him or her credible/worth listening to.” If all of these expectations are met (can be “checked off”), then the presenter and his or her ideas will be considered credible. If one or more *ethos conditions* are not met, then audiences will be less likely to view a presenter as credible (see St. Amant, 2002a, for a more in-depth discussion of this concept).

The *ethos conditions* one expects to encounter can vary from culture to culture, and such differences have been noted at a variety of levels (Campbell, 1998; Tebeau, 1999; Lewis, 2001). Persons from different cultures, for example, often use different organizational structures (e.g., stated vs. implied conclusions) and different methods of citing sources to establish the credibility of a presentation (Woolever, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Hofstede, 1997). Cultures can also associate different credibility expectations with sentence length. Southern Europeans, for example, associate longer sentences with credible

presentations, while Americans view shorter and more direct sentences as being more credible (Ulijn & Strother, 1995). Additionally, the kind of relationship associated with the use of a particular word can cause cross-cultural credibility problems (Li & Koole, 1998; Li, 1999).

Online media complicate cross-cultural interactions by creating conditions that affect credibility expectations. In many cases, online media reduce human interaction to typed words. Typed online messages, however, tend to follow patterns related to spoken discourse. This mix of written and spoken communication creates a new and interesting situation, for recipients of online text messages do not obtain nonverbal identity cues key to communicating in spoken exchanges. The sender of an online message therefore seems faceless and anonymous (Gauntlett, 2000; St. Amant, 2002b).

As a result, notions of authority, identity, and credibility take on new forms in cyberspace. As Fernback (1999) notes, in online exchanges, the markers of credibility—marks that draw others to listen to you—are not, “brawn, money, or political clout,” but are rather “wit, and tenacity, and intelligence” (p. 213). Thus, wit, tenacity, and intelligence become *ethos conditions* individuals can use to appear more authoritative or more credible than other participants in an online exchange. These factors therefore become *digital ethos conditions*, for individuals come to expect them when assessing the credibility of online presentations. These digital *ethos conditions*, however, can conflict with the communication expectations of different cultural groups.

Understanding how cultural factors can affect online exchanges can be a complicated and seemingly overwhelming process. Yet, now that more of the world is getting online, it is becoming increasingly important to understand IOI situations so that miscommunications and mistakes can be avoided. (Such culture-related mistakes, moreover, could affect everything from online social exchanges to international outsourcing and international e-commerce activities.) For this reason, researchers can benefit from an approach that helps them focus their analysis of IOIs on a more manageable set of topics. The international digital studies approach is designed to establish such a focus.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

International digital studies is a research approach used to examine how cultural groups differ in their responses to digital ethos conditions. According to this perspective, the objective of the researcher is two-fold:

- First, the researcher must identify *actual* digital ethos conditions—presentation factors that actually contribute to a presenter's credibility in online exchanges. Once isolated, these digital ethos conditions can become variables used to evaluate how different cultures communicate online.
- Second, the researcher must determine if a digital ethos condition is also a factor that varies in relation to cultural communication expectations. That is, researchers need to determine if cultures would differ observably in how they responded to a particular digital ethos condition.

The key to this line of research becomes identifying variables that could affect communication in IOIs. To achieve this objective, researchers must use a two-part literature review involving the fields of Internet studies and intercultural communication.

The purpose of the dual-field literature review is to determine how factors of medium and of culture might create conflicting expectations of ethos conditions in IOIs. To identify these situations, individuals must first survey the research literature in Internet studies in order to identify digital ethos conditions in direct, two-way interactions online. The focus of this review is to isolate behavior resulting from online communication conditions vs. the transfer of communication patterns from more traditional media to an online setting. Name-dropping, for example, can be used to create credibility in both print and online media; the use of emoticons to create credibility, however, is more restricted to online communication.

After researchers identify digital ethos conditions, they must determine if these factors could cause confusion or conflict in cross-cultural exchanges. The goal then becomes evaluating if a particular digital ethos condition is also a *point of contention*—or a situation in which the communication patterns documented in the literature of one field (Internet studies) conflict with patterns noted in the literature of another field (intercultural communication).

To identify points of contention, the second part of the international digital studies process involves a review of the research literature in intercultural communication. In this second review, the researcher would look specifically for indications that digital ethos conditions identified in the initial (Internet studies) literature review relate to findings reported in the intercultural communication

literature. If little or no mention of this factor is made, or if this variable appears to cause no real conflict in cross-cultural exchanges, then that variable would be a *weak* point of contention. If, for example, different cultural groups did not react differently to uses of wit (a key ethos condition noted in Internet studies), then uses of wit would be a weak point of contention, for there is little evidence of different cultural behavior related to this digital ethos condition. If, however, the intercultural literature review reports that the ethos condition noted in the Internet studies literature can cause problems in cross-cultural interactions, then that factor would be a *strong* point of contention that could affect IOIs.

Researchers must next determine if a strong point of contention could actually cause problems in IOIs. That is, just because the two-part literature review indicates a particular ethos condition could be a point of contention.

- Does that ethos condition actually affect discourse in IOIs?
- Do reactions to that ethos condition vary along cultural lines in IOI? (e.g., Do some cultures use it more than others? Are some cultures more confused by its use than others?)
- Can researchers develop a ranking system to compare how specific cultural groups vary in relation to uses of and responses to a particular ethos condition?

To answer these questions, researchers must use strong points of contention as the foundation for experiments that test if and how a strong point of contention can affect IOIs. In this way, the international digital studies approach helps researchers identify suitable topics for conducting further research into IOIs.

FUTURE TRENDS

An application of international digital studies indicates that the concept of identity could be a key problem area in future IOIs. For this reason, it is important that researchers understand how aspects and perceptions of identity could cause problems in online exchanges involving individuals from different cultures.

A review of the Internet studies literature reveals identity is a factor that affects discourse in online forums. Many researchers note that, in cyberspace exchanges, identity is neither fixed nor stable; rather, it can easily change because of online media that reduce interactions to typing words (Gauntlett, 2000; St. Amant, 2002b). By reducing identity to texts, online media allow individuals to create their online identity on their own terms (Arnold & Plymire, 2000).

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