
Chapter XVII

International Digital Studies: A Research Approach for Examining International Online Interactions

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ABSTRACT

The constant diffusion of online communication technology increasingly allows individuals from different cultural backgrounds to communicate with each other directly and quickly. In its removal of more traditional communication obstacles, such as distance and time, these technologies may amplify cultural rhetorical differences. This situation might be particularly problematic as factors of both culture and media could confound the overall discourse situation. This chapter overviews a research approach—international digital studies—that offers a new method for exploring international online interactions (IOIs). The chapter also presents an argument for why it is crucial to begin studies of IOIs at this particular point in history.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and the World Wide Web are making it easier to overcome the barrier of distance and to interact directly with persons located in different countries. Although this barrier is removed, individuals must remember that, when online, they could be interacting with persons from different cultures. This potential oversight could cause problems as cultures can have different expectations of how information should be presented. Such rhetorical assumptions, in turn, could result in confusion, miscommunication or accidental offense in international online interactions (IOIs).

Further complicating this situation is the fact that more businesses are using online communication technologies to develop international production processes. These new processes, however, rely on quick and effective cross-cultural communication via an online medium. Researchers interested in online communication trends, therefore, need to begin examining potential areas of conflict related to international cyberspace now, in order to anticipate potential online cross-cultural misunderstandings before they lead to unforeseen mistakes. Such research, however, can be cumbersome and complex as individuals try to determine what cultural factors could affect discourse via online media. Thus, research involving culture and online communication requires a new approach that can help isolate topics or variables that can then become the focus of further examination.

This chapter addresses this need by proposing a new research approach—the international digital studies approach—that focuses on examining how cultures interact via online media. The key to the international digital studies approach involves researching and understanding what factors individuals from different cultures associate with a credible presentation, an idea best embodied by the rhetorical concept of *ethos*. To help the reader understand the importance of this *ethos*-based approach, the chapter begins with an overview of how factors of both technology and culture can affect the credibility of the communication process. The chapter then explains how the international digital studies approach offers a research method that addresses credibility/*ethos* expectations in relation to both culture and online communication.¹

CREDIBILITY, COMMUNICATION AND ETHOS CONDITIONS

Ethos, often defined as credibility, can be one of the most important aspects of a discourse situation. This credibility generally occurs at two levels: attention and acceptance. At the attention level, an audience must initially consider that presentation as credible—or worth listening to (it must gain the audience's attention), if that presentation is to be effective. At the acceptance level, presenters must prove that their ideas are credible—or worth considering, accepting or acting upon—once they have an audience's attention. If credibility is missing from either level of discourse, the presenter will be unable to achieve his or her overall objective for presenting information (e.g., to get the audience to consider, accept or do something they might not otherwise have done).

Because of these factors, *ethos* is perhaps the most important of the rhetorical concepts because it is only through *ethos* that other presentation factors become effective. If an audience does not find a presentation credible—or worth listening to/

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