

**Online Communication in the Digital Age**  
**Prof. Rashmi Gaur**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology**  
**Lecture – 26**  
**Professional Communication, Digital Rhetoric and Digital Literacy**

Good morning dear friends. In the previous week, we covered the topic of digital humanities. We started with the evolution of digital humanities, the practices associated with computational techniques like stylometric analysis, digital humanities and its intersection with feminism, post colonialism as well as the literary analysis using DH methods. In today's module, we shall be learning about professional communication in the digital age and its frameworks that will help individuals and organizations in effectively analyzing and producing meaningful communication. We shall examine how communication in the digital age has changed and shall reflect on the effective use of language and communication on digital platforms, the concept of digital rhetoric as well as digital literacy in the online age.

Communication has changed dramatically in the digital age and digital technologies, the developments therein have impacted and transformed almost all aspects of contemporary human society. These digital technologies have not only radically altered the processes and practices of communicative interactions but have also in fact reshaped our fundamental sense of the self, our culture and our very human reality. Now let us try to understand what exactly is professional communication and what difference it makes in terms how we create and encounter it and how we interact in professional settings in this digital age today.

## Professional Communication and Digital Age

- James E. Porter and Heidi A. Mckee in their book *Professional Communication and Network Interaction* (2017) defines professional communication as a workplace-based communication that can be oral, written, digital and multimodal.
- The digital age has changed how we communicate by placing the digital technologies, content and the creators in an interactive network.
- Luciano Floridi in his book *The 4<sup>th</sup> Revolution* (2014) identified the new digital age as information revolution that is not only changing how we communicate but is also changing us.



Heidi Mckee  
and  
Luciano Floridi

-The 4<sup>th</sup> Revolution  
Sources: [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)



I would begin this discussion by referring to a book by Heidi Mckee which came out in 2017, namely *Professional Communication and Network Interaction*.

It defines professional communication as a workplace based communication that can be oral, written, digital or multimodal. The digital age has effectively changed how we communicate by placing the digital technologies, content and the creators within an interactive network. The book which I refer to at this stage is 'The Fourth Revolution' published in 2014 by Luciano Floridi. Floridi has identified the new digital age as information revolution that is not only changing how we communicate but it is also somehow fundamentally changing us as human beings. Online professional communication now has become multimodal which means that communication is made through combinations of two or even more modes.

Communication in digital platforms are now multimodal because of the increased and continually increasing ease with which audio, video and textual elements can be merged into each other. This has increasingly blurred the boundaries between home and work, personal and professional, private and public. Now let us look at the features of online

communication in the digital age to understand the impact of digital technologies. In online communication spaces also, people can share, reframe and repurpose content. They can reach audiences quickly, almost simultaneously and widely.

Digital communication and its contents can be distributed but it can also be challenged, criticised, refuted, mocked and parodied. Let us say that the quickness and the capability to overcome spaces inherent in the digital communication is an asset as well as it can also equally, quickly and easily become a liability if as communicators we are not careful.

- Dyadic and interactive
  - It is a two way process between the communicator and the technology being used. People can share, reframe and repurpose content.
- Public and Archived
  - Communications can be made publicly and also be archived.
- Enabling Virtual Presence
  - Physical presence becomes less necessary through audio-visual technologies like video conferencing platforms and virtual reality.
- Radical Connectivity and Speed
  - Digital Technologies are changing the speed, mobility and timeliness of communications. There is an exponential growth rate in which communication is dispersed.



When we look at the features of online professional communication, we see that it can be dyadic and interactive, it can be public and archived, it can enable the virtual presence and it also generates radical connectivity and speed. Dyadic and interactive communication is as we can understand easily, a two-way process between the communicator and the technology which is being used. With the help of it, people can share, reframe and repurpose their content.

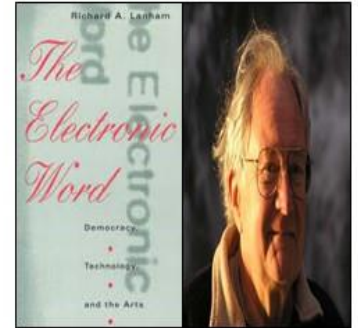
Communications can also be made publicly or also can be archived. With the help of the online communication, we feel that now physical presence is becoming less and less necessary with the help of audio-visual technologies like virtual reality and video conferencing platforms. They also provide us a radical connectivity and speed. The digital technologies are changing the speed, mobility and timeliness of communication and therefore, we find that there is an exponential growth rate in which communication is being dispersed now. Communication travels at an exponential growth rate rather than a steady and proportional one.

The picture which we have shown in the previous slide shows how the Kellogg company used the hashtag '3 billion better days' to share stories about its work for hunger relief and also shared information about ways people as well as corporations could help. This program exceeded its goal in 2016 of providing 1 billion breakfasts to hungry children around the globe. Interestingly, this could also mean that misinformation can also be distributed at an alarmingly high pace. Even though digital technologies and their networks have blurred the boundaries of public and private in many ways, professional communicators must always understand the nature of the communication, that is whether it should be public or archived because of the immediacy of its reach. Digital technologies change the nature of teamwork also as well as of collaboration by providing an online virtual space for collaborative work activity.

To be an effective communicator means not only crafting a well-written message but also knowing how to deliver it with the help of the use of the internet and also how it should be constructed and designed for digital delivery. In other words, we must understand its rhetoric clearly.

## Digital Rhetoric and Professional Communication

- Rhetoric involves using language effectively to adopt a particular point of view or take a particular action.
- Digital Rhetoric is a newer field that applies the principles of rhetoric to digital communication, including social media, websites, and other digital media platforms.
- The first use of the term 'Digital Rhetoric' was made by Richard Lanham in his lecture "Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Practice and Property" in October, 1989.
- It was used by Lanham to imply the connection between computer-mediated communication and rhetoric.



Richard Lanham-The Electronic Word  
Sources: [www.alchetrion.com](http://www.alchetrion.com),  
[www.themitpress.com](http://www.themitpress.com)

Lanham elaborated the concept of digital rhetoric further in his work *The Electronic Word* (1993).

So what do we mean by digital rhetoric? Rhetoric involves using language effectively to adopt a particular point of view or to take a particular type of action. Digital rhetoric is a newer field that applies the principles of rhetoric to digital communication, including social media, websites and other digital media platforms. The first use of the term digital rhetoric was made by Richard Lanham in his lecture in 1989.

The lecture was 'Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Practice and Property'. It was used by Lanham to imply the connection between computer mediated communication and rhetoric. This concept of digital rhetoric was further elaborated on by Lanham in his 1993 work, 'The Electronic Word'. Digital rhetoric considers how the use of digital technologies can shape the way we communicate and how we can use these technologies to create persuasive messages that resonate with digital audiences. Digital rhetoric can also involve analyzing how digital technologies affect the way we understand and also perceive information as well as the way we communicate with each other in an online mode.

It encompasses the social and cultural environment also, which we also shall be covering in our discussion.



- Rhetoric suited for digital communication is phatic, multimodal, global and intercultural, performative, networked and intertwined with ethics.
- A phatic model refers to the social function of language, popularly known as small talk; that can build rapport and trust among individuals which, in turn, could lead to meaningful interactions.
  - It implies that communication is not simply informing but also dialogic and mutually beneficial. Examples include body language, gestures, greetings, facial expressions etc.
- Digital rhetoric is performative: which means that it is both an 'expression' and an 'action'.
  - Individuals can create communication, also choose what aspects of their identity to highlight and what tone to use to persuade audience.



Digital Rhetoric as Phatic  
Sources: [www.TheForbes.com](http://www.TheForbes.com),  
[www.secondnature.com](http://www.secondnature.com)



Rhetoric suited for digital communication is phatic, multimodal, global and intercultural. Also it is performative, networked and intertwined with ethics. A phatic model refers to the social function of language, which is popularly known and understood as a small talk. Small talk or the phatic model can build rapport and trust among individuals, which in turn could lead to meaningful interactions.

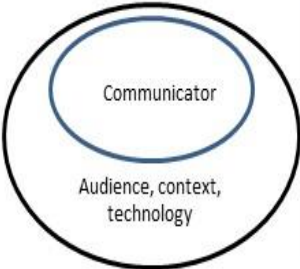
It also implies that the communication we are using is not simply informing us of certain matter, but it is also dialogic and mutually beneficial. Examples about it can be given in the context of body language, gestures, greeting, facial expressions, etc., which communicate a lot even within the digital world. Digital rhetoric is also performative, which means that it is both an expression and an action. Individuals can create communication, but also choose what aspects of their identity is to highlight and what tone they should use to persuade the audience.

Digital communication often demands a phatic model that keeps conversation open and establishes fruitful relationships. Glib or aggressive styles of conversation or sharp tongues are to be avoided in our communication, online or offline I would say. Instead

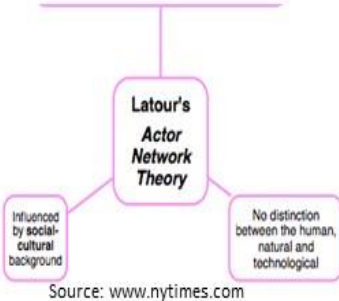

modesty and politeness are phatic symbols that build rhetorical credibility in professional digital communication too. Businesses use phatic functions in digital spaces in order to invite response from the public and also as a marketing strategy. As we have seen earlier, digital rhetoric is also performative as it is concerned with making and doing.

Making an object that is a communication message like a business presentation and with doing something such as having an effect, for example, imparting knowledge or creating certain value for the audience.

- Digital rhetoric as networked means that the communicator is a part of a network which also consists of the audience, context and technology.




The French Philosopher Bruno Latour explains this further in his Actor-Network theory. Technological artifacts are active participants in shaping our society, and their role should be considered in the broader network of actors including humans, non-humans as well as the social and cultural context.



- Digital rhetoric as multimodal means that it can include videos, visual designs, algorithms, interfaces etc. that shape digital communication.
  - This can shape the understandings and actions of people allowing for a greater degree of interactivity and enabling them to respond to and participate in the message in real-time.

Source: www.nytimes.com



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Digital rhetoric as networked means that the communicator is a part of a network which also consists of the audience, context and technology. It is multimodal, which means that it can include videos, visual designs, algorithms, interfaces etc. that shape digital communication. This can shape the understandings and actions of people allowing for a greater degree of interactivity and also enabling them to respond and participate in the message in real time.

In the previous slide, we have referred to the French philosopher, Latour. According to

him, everything in the world, including technology is made up of a network of interconnected actors that work together to shape the world we live in. This further facilitates communication, collaboration and the exchange of information and resources, regardless of their physical location and facilitating the exchange of knowledge, ideas and resources across borders and cultures. As we discussed earlier, digital rhetoric becomes multimodal because each mode of communication can be used in combination with others to create a rich and engaging message that can appeal to multiple senses and capture the attention of a diverse audience.

For example, a digital advertisement may combine text, images and video to create a compelling message that is more effective in comparison to a traditional print advertisement that relies solely on the text. Rhetoric theory emphasizes the importance of cultural and identity difference. Difference and not similarity is in fact the basis of most situations in professional communication we are likely to find ourselves in.

- Digital rhetoric on the internet encounters difference, because of its global and multicultural aspects.
  - Understanding the importance of differences in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, linguistics etc. is key to professional communicators.
  - Creates ‘Mestiza’ Rhetoric which means mixing or blending cultural differences to create a third space that allows for communication across difference.
  - This concept is derived from the American scholar Gloria Anzaldua’s semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).
- Digital rhetoric and ethics are intertwined and overlapping in Professional Communication.
  - Digital rhetoric can also be used to create persuasive messages that may not accurately represent the truth.



Gloria Anzaldua (1942-2004)

Global and Cultural Differences  
Sources: Harvard Business Review



swajani



Digital rhetoric on the internet encounters difference because of its global and multicultural aspects which are inherent in the very nature of communication.



Understanding the importance of differences in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, linguistics etc. is the key to the success of professional communicators. It also creates what is known as 'mestiza' rhetoric which means mixing or blending cultural differences to create a third space that allows for communication across differences. This concept is derived from the American scholar Gloria Anzaldua's work which is semi-autobiographical in nature and came out in 1987. The title of this work is 'Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza'. Digital rhetoric and ethics are also intertwined and overlapping in the context of professional communication.

Digital rhetoric can also be used to create persuasive messages that may not accurately represent the truth. Anzaldua challenges the concept of border. She uses the term borderlands to suggest the area that is most susceptible to what she has termed as 'la mezcla' which is a Spanish word for hybridity. The concept can relate to geographical areas also to the invisible borders of cultural or social identities. It also suggests that we should learn to live with expectations of different worlds simultaneously.

Online communications are global in the respect that they cross national boundaries to the extent that they mix or blend cultural differences creating a space that allows for communication across differences. We can give the example of profound cultural differences which are there as far as their interpretation of silence in a communicative situation is concerned. In Chinese culture silence is viewed as a sign of respect and attention and not apathy or disengagement. Similarly, glib or small talk is often used as an ice breaking strategy in US business meetings which is distrusted by several other cultures. Also it is important for speakers to be mindful of ethical considerations in their digital communication practices and to use a suitable digital rhetoric to promote ethical communication and engagement.

Digital ethics will be explained further in other modules later on.

- Rhetoric emerges as a condition for humanizing the effect of machines by using multimedia tools, manipulating digital media and the linking of separate media elements to one another creating hypermedia.
- James P. Zappen in his article “Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory” identifies digital rhetoric as focusing on four major areas:
  - The use of rhetorical strategies in production and analysis of digital texts like e-mails, blogs, social media posts etc.
  - Identifying characteristics, affordances and constraints of digital media and technology.
  - Formation of digital identities.
  - Understanding the potential for building social communities.



**James P.Zappen's Article**  
Source: [homepages.rpi.edu](http://homepages.rpi.edu)



Rhetoric emerges as a condition for humanizing the effect of machines with the help of the use of multimedia tools manipulating digital media and the linking of separate media elements to one another creating hypermedia. James Zappen in his article, ‘Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory’ has identified digital rhetoric as focusing on four major areas and he lists them as the use of rhetorical strategy in production and analysis of digital texts like emails, blogs, social media posts, etc. The second area which has been highlighted by Zappen is identifying characteristics, affordances and constraints of digital media and technology. The third is the formation of digital identities and the fourth which Zappen has referred to is our understanding of the potential for building social communities in the context of digital provisional communication.

In short, we can say that digital rhetoric is the study of meaning making, persuasion or identification as expressed through language, bodies, machines and texts that are created, circulated or experienced through digital technologies. This underscores the social and communicative elements of technology also. We shall look at digital rhetoric as employed in the production of a range of digital texts including websites and videos, etc. We will primarily be looking at two key texts in this reference. The first is Barbara

Warnick's Rhetoric Online and the second is Virtual Politik by Elizabeth Losh.

So, in this module today, we have looked at the frameworks of professional communication in the digital age as well as digital rhetoric. In the next module, we shall look closely at the works of Barbara Warnick and Elizabeth Losh. In Rhetoric Online which was published in 2007, Barbara Warnick has used theories of intertextuality. Intertextuality as we know is a concept that recognizes how texts are interconnected and influenced by other texts. In my other course which is also run by NPTEL Swayam on Literature, Culture and Media, I have discussed this theory in detail. Thank you very much.